The Challenge of Evaluating Child Safety In Out-of-Home Kin and Foster Placements

Confirming Safe Environments

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Introduction

Child welfare agencies across the country are faced with the challenge of protecting children who have been abused and neglected. Child removal is among the alternatives agencies employ to meet this responsibility. Daily, children are removed from their own homes and parents or caregivers because of threats to their safety. Children whose safety is in question are placed with relatives or foster families. While this action is the reasonable option in many cases, it regretfully creates for agencies an added responsibility – assuring that the child is safe with the placement family. Although not necessarily always an official standard, a prevailing opinion exists within the child welfare field that an agency’s responsibility for a child’s safety and well-being is higher once a child has been placed than in the child’s own home.

The responsibility for assuring a child’s safety while in placement is longstanding in child welfare. However, expectations and regulations concerning that responsibility have only more recently become pronounced and measured. Child welfare agencies across the nation are working vigorously to define what they will do to assess and address child safety in placement and how. Many early attempts aimed at this challenge rely on the application of safety assessment concepts and methods used during child protective services investigation. Some value has come from that process, including a growing recognition that sufficient differences exist between assessing safety in a child’s family and assessing safety in a placement family. This suggests the need for a method specifically designed for assessing safety in placement families.

Safety in All Placements

Community attitudes, media coverage and national laws and standards reinforce daily that safety in all placements is imperative and there is no tolerance for failure. When cases involving severe maltreatment of children in kin and foster homes comes to light in a community, there is outrage. Unlike other cases in which child welfare is involved, placement cases involving maltreated, unsafe children and victims are resulting in significant uproar including political fallout, agency reorganization, job losses, blame, system reform and civil litigation.

The state-of-the-art that requires safety in all placements is now effectively articulated at a national level for the first time in modern child welfare services. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997, which now exists in some form in all states’ legislation, specifically states that child safety will be considered at the onset of placement; routinely during placement; and formally every six months if a child remains in placement. The Federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) requires that all states maintain a standard allowing no more than .57% of all children in placement to be maltreated. The CFSR standard for children receiving child welfare services being re-maltreated in their own homes is 6.1%. A comparison of these standards is statement enough about the intolerance that prevails nationally for children being maltreated while in kin or foster placement.
Child maltreatment in kin and foster care is not a well-understood phenomenon. Child welfare agencies continue to operate with little or no consensus concerning concepts and definitions that specifically relate to this problem separate from child maltreatment in a child’s own home. The question of child safety as a prevention or intervention concern with kin and foster families remains unanswered. Similarities and differences among kin families and foster families with respect to potential for maltreatment are not clear. To date, it is not possible to create a profile for maltreating kin or foster caregivers or their families. Inconsistency or contradiction is more apparent among characteristics of those who maltreat than clarity. However, two variables within this area of concern are not vague or misleading: 1) the children who are placed in out-of-home care pose a tremendous challenge for those who agree to care for them; and 2) agencies are overwhelmed and under resourced with respect to the demand to effectively manage kin and foster care placements.

Authors and agencies identify many actions that show promise for influencing the quality and management of kin and foster care. However, the actions that are suggested lack a context that is embedded in some conceptual way of understanding maltreatment in out-of-home care or in a prevention, intervention or management strategy that would organize actions that an agency might choose to employ. It can be concluded that child maltreatment in out-of-home care and the response to it requires additional evolution.

Child welfare staff assessing for safety in out-of-home placement are faced with a challenge that current CPS investigation safety models cannot accommodate. Concerning a child’s safety in placement, the lack of certainty about cause and influence is perplexing. Yet, it seems reasonable to accept that this is a highly complex problem that generally results from the interaction of different variables. Perhaps the most challenging assessment question relates to whether the whole of the placement experience has a high potential of turning acceptable kin and foster care providers into maltreating ones.

What Many States are Doing and the Conceptual Challenge

The state-of-the-art in child welfare intervention concerned with safety in placement is well-articulated within the literature but not evenly implemented throughout child welfare. For twenty years, expectations related to child safety in placement have called for 1) rigorous assessment of care providers during the application process, at the time of placement and during placement; 2) assessments that include the specific placed child; and 3) timely assessments. Recently, general expectations for assessment of placement homes have been articulated to include a specific safety focus in assessment methodology including the use of group decision-making. While the notion of rigorous assessment has existed a long time and emphasis is now given to safety related assessments, no concept of safety that uniquely applies to placement families has been widely applied.

Current practice in this area may involve some application (often not well defined) of the CPS investigation oriented safety assessment:

1) The use of red flags for children who may be at higher risk for being maltreated which exists more as a folk practice than an organized, systematic method;
2) The use of the licensing process even though such studies and standards fail to effectively address safety issues or potential threats;

3) Consideration of information from central child abuse and neglect registries, CPS and other social service records, criminal checks and other records and registries. These admittedly have some value for judgments made at the onset of placement but are confounded by false positives (the problem of the meaning of failure to locate in existing records); and

4) Reliance on previous experience with kin and foster caregivers and referent opinion from workers who are, or have worked, with placement providers.

Much of what agencies are doing to address child safety in placement does not evaluate the potential threats to child safety but relies on the presence of activity and regulation to prevent threats from developing or becoming active. Examples of this kind of approach include: regulating the number and kinds of placements; investigating reports of maltreatment in placements; removing children suspected of being maltreated; conducting program audits to detect inappropriate or maltreating care; placement monitoring strategies and agreements; regulating worker contact; policies governing acceptable care behavior; regular, planned observations of and interviews with children who are placed; understanding and attending to the unique needs of kin and foster caregivers; attempts to select highly competent, emotionally healthy foster parents; provide training for kin and foster care providers; provide training for workers; and promulgating policies as high or higher than those for children living in their own homes.

There is merit in everything that agencies are doing to address maltreatment in out-of-home placement. However, a vacuum remains concerning the specific conceptual framework and practice method for assessing child safety in out-of-home placement.

**Confirming Safety Environments**

**A Child Safety Concept for Kin and Foster Families**

When CPS investigates a child’s situation in his or her family/home, the consideration of child safety is stimulated by a sort of reasonable cause principle. The reasonable cause to consider threats to safety is affected by a report of child maltreatment. CPS has a responsibility to reconcile the report by determining whether maltreatment exists and if the maltreatment or associated family conditions are sufficiently severe to threaten a child’s safety. When CPS evaluates a prospective kin or foster family/home at the point of placement, a positive recommendation has been provided by someone about the suitability of the family/home. At least on the surface of the situation, there is no reasonable cause to consider that safety threats exist.

In the former circumstance involving a child’s own home, the family is considered suspect by virtue of the report and the “search” includes an inquiry specifically into negatively reported
information that is, or could be, associated with threats to child safety. Safety assessment models used during investigation are formed for that purpose and contain criteria that are specific to confirming the presence of safety threats. In the latter circumstance involving a placement family, there are no grounds at the onset to seek out information that confirms threats to child safety. So the “search” or assessment related to safety in placement is not directed by reconciling something alleged against a person or family. Since kin and foster families are recommended because they are considered to be suitable by someone, the assessment challenge is to confirm that suitability. This may be the most important difference between assessing for safety in a child’s own home and assessing for safety in a placement home.

Kin and foster homes that keep children safe are safe environments. A safe environment is a family and home situation containing certain characteristics that contribute to the absence of threats: the presence of real refuge for family members; perceptions and feelings of security; and confidence among family members in consistency. A safe environment is not a static thing.

The quality of a safe environment can change as families face changes, stress, crisis and daily life pressures. This fact creates an assessment challenge because of the importance of knowing of any such changes in a timely way. For that reason, safety assessment of kin and foster families must exist within a process rather than being event-oriented such as through licensing studies and judgments.

The predisposition of safety assessment in out-of-home placement is positive rather than negative such as mentioned in investigation. The intent can be to look for and confirm attributes within a family that are consistent with a safe environment.

An additional difference in assessing kin and foster families is concerned with relationship. An effective approach to assessing safety in placement must address and evaluate the implications of the family relationships that exist between a child’s parents/caregivers and the kin family being considered for placement. Alternatively, safety assessment of foster families must evaluate the relationship of the foster family to the CPS agency including history, current interaction and involvement.

A safe environment is influenced and formed from attributes apparent in four areas of the kin and foster family system: child, caregiver, family and community.

- Child attributes include children who live in the kin or foster home who are openly assertive and feel free to speak their minds. These children are self-protective insofar as their age and capacity allow them to be. Children within safe environments have an accurate awareness of their environment and the people within it. In a safe environment where more than one child lives, there exist supportive relationships among the children. And, of course, there is no sign of child maltreatment.

- Kin and foster caregivers who engender and maintain a safe environment are open people. They generally show conscience and empathy to each other and, specifically, to children. These caregivers are closely bonded to their own children or children who’ve been with them for a time. Examples of protective behavior among kin and foster parents are evident and plentiful. Typically, such kin and foster caregivers are products of
nurturing environments themselves. They acknowledge and take responsibility for all aspects of family life including family home management and roles – in particular those related to parenting. These are highly motivated people and they enjoy personal support from within the family and from others with respect to their caregiving role.

- Safe environments exist as a result of families with good-to-excellent physical, emotional and cognitive capacity. These families are reality oriented. Clear roles for caregivers and children and positive relationships are obvious within the families that produce safe environments. The relationships and communication are characterized by honesty and openness. While these families are effective at coping, they usually also experience low stress. These families are integrated into the community and maintain reasonable and fulfilling social contacts. Within safe environments, families are available and accessible to protect all family members in practical ways such as sufficient transportation, medical resources and ways to meet unusual and specific needs of children. These families assure that the living conditions and arrangements are safe.

- Families that support safe environments are integrated into their communities. Family members have weekly contact with others in the community such as friends, neighbors, relatives or associates from clubs, organizations or churches. Correspondingly, those within the community provide support and assistance to the family. Often family members are involved with professionals or agencies through some formal means and contact is routine and frequent.

Attributes identified here exist within families in different degrees and measure. While the ideal placement family may possess all of these attributes to the fullest, acceptable placement families can possess most or many of these attributes. To provide a safe environment, placement families need not be perfect but safety assessments must assure that sufficient attributes of a safe environment are present to have confidence that a child will remain safe while placed.