CLEARINGHOUSE
FOR MILITARY FAMILY READINESS

Safety Assessment Screening Tools

Clearinghouse Technical Assistance Team

As of September 6, 2024

PennState

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Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State

Introduction

The Technical Assistance (TA) team at the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State (Clearinghouse) conducted a rapid literature review in response to a request from the Department of Defense's (DoD) Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP). In this request, MC&FP asked for assistance with gathering evidence-informed safety-screening measures or instruments that can be used to evaluate the level of an immediate threat to a child who has experienced abuse (e.g., physical, emotional, sexual, neglect) or been exposed to violence. The purpose of the tool is to help professionals make informed decisions about keeping a child safe, especially in locations outside of the continental United States (OCONUS) where access to Child and Youth Services (CYS) may be limited or unavailable. These findings represent a rapid, preliminary search of research literature and safety-screening measures that can be used to help determine if a child is facing an imminent threat in their home.

This report provides the following elements:
- Information on existing research on child safety assessment tools;
- Information on the three main frameworks used in CYS safety measurements;
- Information on specific measures that can be used to evaluate the level of an immediate threat to a child who has experienced abuse; and
- Additional online resources.

Research was identified by searching peer-reviewed journal articles and grey literature, emphasizing research published between 2014 and 2024. Search queries included various combinations of the following terms: *measure, assessment, questionnaire, screener, safety, welfare, child abuse, domestic violence, children, child, social work, danger, child protection, neglect, maltreatment, and sexual abuse*.

Note, given the brief timeline, this rapid literature review provides a preliminary examination of the research. Thus, this report is not intended to serve as a comprehensive review of the literature or available measures. The Clearinghouse does not endorse the resources offered. Rather, the resources provided are meant to help Clearinghouse partners make data-driven decisions that are suitable for their particular context and needs.

Child Safety Assessment Tools

Child safety assessment tools are a crucial component of child welfare systems, and they can be used to evaluate the risk and safety of children in potentially harmful environments. Safety tools may range from those used in clinical settings to assess pediatric patient safety to those employed by child protective services staff to determine the risk of maltreatment. Safety assessments help practitioners identify child maltreatment; assess risk and protective factors; and evaluate child outcomes, including traumatic stress reactions (Charak & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2021).

A safety assessment involves collecting detailed information that can be used to identify immediate (i.e., present) or potential (i.e., impending) dangers to a child and to determine the family's ability to protect the child against those dangers. Present danger can be defined as an immediate, observable threat that requires the use of a quick safety plan (e.g., unexplained injuries, child unsupervised). Impending danger involves identifying less obvious risks that could arise soon if circumstances are not addressed (e.g., lack of resources, home safety hazards). If the family has the capacity to manage the threats, no safety plan is needed. If not, a plan is developed with the caregiver to address the threats using external supports (e.g., community organizations) as necessary.

A risk assessment, on the other hand, evaluates the likelihood of future harm to the child by analyzing the overall family situation. This type of assessment helps identify factors that could lead to future abuse and considers actions that can be taken to reduce those risks. While all safety threats are also risk factors, not all risk factors are immediate safety threats (Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, 2019).

States and many counties use individual CYS safety manuals that explain their area's criteria for determining imminent threat or removal of a child from the home. If a child is in immediate danger and the family lacks protective resources, CYS may need to request emergency custody from the court to ensure the child's safety. Key factors for determining if a child should be removed from the home and/or is in immediate (or present) danger include the following:

- **Immediate Physical Danger:** Presence of ongoing abuse or severe neglect.
- **Sexual Abuse:** Evidence or suspicion of sexual exploitation.
- **Unsafe Living Conditions:** Hazardous environments, including evidence of substance abuse or domestic violence.
- **Inadequate Supervision:** Lack of proper care or supervision.

These decisions are guided by federal and state laws that intend to protect children in critical situations.

A review conducted by Vial et al. (2020) compared various child safety assessment instruments used in child welfare settings and focused on their reliability and validity in measuring immediate child safety. The study highlighted 11 instruments that were specifically developed for child welfare contexts and emphasized the necessity for creating and using tools that assist in making accurate safety decisions regarding children. This study and other research in the field of child safety assessment confirm a lack of validated instruments (e.g. the assessment tool has not yet been proven to accurately assesses the immediate safety of a child). However, the tools included in the above study were created by teams of subject matter experts and so were assigned some level of confidence in their validity. Although the content of safety assessments requires further study, Vial et al.'s comparison of the safety tools available to them uncovered a list of domains typically covered in most assessments of safety. These domains include "sexual abuse, neglect, physical abuse, domestic violence, refusing access to the child by caregivers, a caregiver's substance abuse impairing capacity to supervise, protect, or

care for the child, and describing and/or acting towards the child in a predominantly negative manner (p. 1)."

For this search, the TA team focused on reviewing brief, non-clinical, evidence-informed safety assessments, which have minimal or no cost and target maltreatment, neglect, and abuse in children and youth. Lengthy measures, measures that evaluate risk instead of immediate safety concerns, and measures with a known associated cost were eliminated. Although using many of these assessments is standard practice in the U.S. CYS process, Service members who are stationed in OCONUS locations may not have access to these standard practices.

This review revealed that safety measures with limited evidence are gathered from state CYS processes. The TA team did not identify any evidence-based, validated, stand-alone measures that were not already included in the U.S. CYS system. Although each state has its individual policy on determining imminent threat or removal of a child from a home, most do include some type of safety assessment. Three frameworks—Structured Decision Making (SDM), the ACTION for Child Protection Safety Assessment Family Evaluation (SAFE) model, and Signs of Safety—represent significant approaches in the field of child welfare for assessing safety and risk. Most states use one of these three frameworks as the basis for their child-safety policies. Some states use the same assessment but have made changes to the assessment which provides another barrier to providing and evaluating a standardized instrument.

Each framework offers unique methodologies and perspectives on critical concepts such as danger, safety, risk, and protective capacities. Understanding and including these concepts are essential for effective decision-making in child protection, so this review highlights the three safety assessment and risk-assessment frameworks, mentioned above, and provides some state-specific examples of assessments used with those models.

Child-Safety Frameworks and Models

Safety Assessment and Family Evaluation Model

Action for Child Protection is an initiative that focuses on enhancing the safety and well-being of children through the use of evidence-based practices and resources. The SAFE model provides tools, training, and consultation services that intend to help child welfare professionals effectively assess and manage safety concerns in families. The Action for Child Protection's SAFE model serves as a decision-making support tool that includes the evaluation of threats to a child's safety, the child's vulnerabilities, and the protective abilities of the caregivers. A key aspect of this model is that it makes a clear differentiation between "present danger," which refers to immediate and observable threats to a child, and "impending danger," which involves less obvious but potentially severe risks that could affect the child in the near future. This distinction helps caseworkers determine if a

child is currently unsafe and whether immediate action is necessary during their initial contact with the family. The model also establishes specific standards for collecting comprehensive information across six domains: child maltreatment, the context of the maltreatment, child functioning, general parenting practices, parenting discipline, and adult functioning. The SAFE model, or specific components of it, has/have been implemented in 45 states and territories over the past 30 years.

For more information and access to the tool, contact Action for Child Protection:

- Address: 8920 Lawyers Road, PO Box 691210, Charlotte, NC 28227
- Phone: 704-845-2121
- Website: https://action4cp.org/contact-us/

Structured Decision Making Model

The SDM model is a decision-support framework that offers standardized and customized assessments for critical moments in a case's progression. Its primary goal is to enhance the consistency and accuracy of decision-making. It includes structured assessments for intake, safety, risk, family strengths and needs, risk reassessment, and reunification. These tools help child welfare agencies reduce harm, expedite permanency, and ensure child safety. Organizations that utilize the SDM system focus their resources on families who are at the highest risk and those currently facing danger. The system intends to prevent future abuse or neglect by prioritizing services for these high-risk families. It includes several strategies to mitigate severe incidents, such as assessing response priorities when children are most at risk, clarifying danger thresholds, using checklists to identify unmentioned risks, recognizing children at a higher likelihood of future maltreatment, and evaluating reunification possibilities. The SDM model for safety assessments is utilized by child welfare services, in several states across the United States to enhance the consistency and reliability of decisions made in child-protection cases. Notably, states like California, Florida, Michigan, and New York have implemented the SDM model in their child welfare programs.

For more information and access to the tool, contact Evident Change:

- Address: 717 John Nolen Dr., Madison, WI 53713
- Address: 520 3rd St., Ste. 205, Oakland, CA 94607
- Phone:800-306-6223
- Website: https://evidentchange.org/connect/

Signs of Safety Model

Signs of Safety is a more recent model that intends to enhance child welfare practices by providing a comprehensive approach to change; integrating leadership, practice, and research to create strategies that align policy and practice; helping practitioners manage

the complexities of child protection, and improving the quality of support provided to children and families. The Signs of Safety framework is rooted in brief solution-focused casework and provides a structure for engaging all stakeholders in child-protection cases, including professionals, family members, and children. Its primary objective is to ensure child safety, which is viewed as a continuum. The Signs of Safety framework involves "mapping" four key elements with families: (1) identifying harm, danger, complicating factors, and concerns; (2) recognizing existing strengths and safety factors; (3) setting goals for future child safety; and (4) making a safety judgment. This mapping process is collaborative and ensures families understand the assessment. It serves as a tool for practitioners and families to use as a guide as they navigate situations that involve potential child maltreatment. Some regions combine this approach with the SDM model. The Signs of Safety framework is being utilized by child protection agencies and practitioners in at least 32 jurisdictions in 11 countries.

For more information and access to the tool, contact Elia International Ltd:

- Address: PO Box 6275, East Perth, WA 6892, Australia
- Website: https://www.elia.ngo/contact

Child Safety Assessment Measures

The table below provides examples of six child safety assessment measures. Each evidence-informed, state-specific assessment is categorized by one of the previously mentioned frameworks: SAFE Model, SDM, and Signs of Safety. You may access each assessment document by clicking on the title of the assessment. In addition, the table provides a brief summary{Citation}, the number of items, a few examples of items assessing immediate safety, and training considerations for the measures. The scales in this report were selected because they have some evidence of evaluation, are brief, and are generally easy to administer. However, because these assessments are used by individual states' Departments of Children and Family Services, obtaining permission to use them may be required by the copyright owner of the assessment or model. The cost of using these assessments was also not publicly available, so one would need to contact the developer to confirm cost information.

Table 1

Child Safety Assessment Measures

Title	Brief Description	# of Items related to safety	Sample Questions	Training
Safety Assessment and Family Evaluation (SAFE) Model				
ACTION for Child Protection In-home Safety Assessment and Management (Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, 2019) **(See p. 65 of the manual to view**	Evaluates the immediate safety of children in their living environments, and identifies specific safety threats, the severity of the threats, and if interventions are needed to manage	14	"Caregiver(s) intended to cause serious physical harm to the child." "Caregiver(s) are violent and/or acting dangerously." "Caregiver(s) in the home are not performing duties and responsibilities that assure child safety."	Training is required for Pennsylvania CYS caseworkers and is provided by ACTION for Child Protection.

the assessment.)	or mitigate these threats			
Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol (CERAP) Safety Determination Form (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 2013)	Assesses the safety of children who may be at risk of harm due to abuse or neglect. The tool guides caseworkers in determining whether immediate intervention is necessary to protect a child and assists in monitoring safety throughout the case.	16	"A caregiver, paramour or member of the household whose behavior is violent and out of control." "Child sex abuse is suspected, and circumstances suggest child safety may be an immediate concern." "Child is fearful of his/her home situation because of the people living in or frequenting the home."	Training is required for Illinois CYS caseworkers and is provided by ACTION for Child Protection.
Colorado Family Safety Assessment (Colorado Office of Children, Youth & Families, 2022)	Assess the safety and risk factors present in families in which there are concerns about child abuse or neglect. The assessment is designed to guide caseworkers in identifying	10	"Caregiver(s) are unwilling or unable to meet the child/youth's immediate needs for food, clothing, and shelter." "Caregiver(s) is unwilling or unable to take protective action in response to child/youth's inflicted or credible threat of moderate to severe harm to self."	Training is required for Colorado CYS caseworkers and is provided by ACTION for Child Protection.

	immediate safety threats and making decisions about the need for protective interventions.		"Caregiver(s) does not provide supervision necessary to protect the child/youth, based on the child/youth's age or development."	
Structured Decision Making (SDM) Model				
SDM Safety Assessment Tool (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2018) **(See p. 11 of the Resource Guide to view the assessment.)**	Evaluates a child's immediate risk of serious harm or maltreatment and identifies necessary safety interventions for protection.	13	"Physical living conditions are hazardous and immediately threatening to the health and/or safety of the child." "Caregiver's current substance abuse seriously impairs his/her ability to supervise, protect, or care for the child." "Family currently refuses access to or hides the child and/or seeks to hinder an investigation/AR case."	Training is required for Texas CYS caseworkers and is provided by Evident Change.
SDM Safety Assessment (California Department of Social Services, 2023) **(See p. B2 of the manual to view**	Evaluates the immediate safety of children in potentially harmful situations through a series of structured questions. These questions are used to identify safety	18	"The physical living conditions are hazardous and immediately threatening to the health and/or safety of the child." "The family refuses access to the child, or there is reason to believe that the family is about to flee."	Training is required for California CYS caseworkers and is provided by Evident Change.

the assessment.)	threats, assess risk factors, and determine whether a child can remain safely in their home or if protective actions are needed. It is designed to ensure consistent and objective decision-making in child-protection cases across California.		"Domestic violence exists in the household and poses an imminent danger of serious harm to the child."	
Signs of Safety Model				
Ohio Child Welfare Training Program (OCWTP) CAMPIS Safety Assessment Field Guide	Assesses immediate safety and risk of harm to children involved in child protective services cases.	15	"The behavior of any member of the family or other person having access to the child is violent and/or out of control." "Caretaker is unwilling or unable to meet the child's immediate needs for sufficient supervision, food, clothing, and/or shelter to protect child from immediate danger of serious harm."	Training is required for Ohio CYS caseworkers and is provided by Elia. However, the Elia website indicates materials and resources are available for use without the training.

			"Household environmental hazards place the child in immediate danger of serious harm."	

Additional Resources

Children's Bureau

- The Children's Bureau (CB) website within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) offers comprehensive information on child welfare programs and services. It focuses on improving the lives of children and families through preventing child abuse and neglect and offering foster care, adoption, and guardianship. The site includes resources, reports, and data on child welfare and information about federal funding opportunities, policy guidance, and technical assistance for state and local child welfare agencies. It also includes a page dedicated to child abuse and neglect and lists relevant programs, policies, and trainings.
- https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb

Minnesota's Best Practice Guide for the Co-Occurrence of Child Maltreatment and Domestic Violence

- This document is a comprehensive resource for child-protection caseworkers and other professionals who deal with cases in which child maltreatment and domestic violence intersect. It emphasizes the importance of ensuring the safety and well-being of children while also supporting the abused parent or caregiver. It includes references to various resources, guidelines, and best practices for effectively addressing the dual issues of child maltreatment and domestic violence.
Overall, the guide intends to provide information on protective strategies and empower families while ensuring children remain safe in home environments.
- https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:24b1aae5-6e9c-3a33-89ac-9a5e36821ced

Additional Assistance

The TA specialists at the Clearinghouse provide support to professionals as they examine and make informed decisions about which programs fit specific situations and are worth the investment. Whether connecting one with the resources and tools to conduct a needs assessment in a specific community, suggesting the best evidence-based program or practice for a certain situation, or developing an evaluation plan, the TA team of experts is a call or email away.

Please visit the Clearinghouse's website at www.militaryfamilies.psu.edu or call 1-877-382-9185 to speak with a TA specialist.

Suggested Citation

Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness. (2024). *Safety assessment screening tools* [Literature Review]. Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness.

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