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SUBJECT:
Safety Assessment and Planning Process

BY:

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SCOPE:

COUNTY CHILDREN AND YOUTH SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES
COUNTY CHILDREN AND YOUTH ADVISORY COMMITTEES
PRIVATE CHILDREN AND YOUTH SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES
HUMAN SERVICES DIRECTORS
COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
JUVENILE COURT JUDGES' COMMISSION
DISTRICT ATTORNEYS
CHIEF JUVENILE PROBATION OFFICERS

PURPOSE:

This bulletin rescinds and replaces Bulletin 3490-00-02 entitled "Safety Assessment and Safety Planning Protocol and Format." The original bulletin provided a protocol and format for the implementation of safety assessments and safety planning to conform to the requirements of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). The information provided in this bulletin identifies a safety assessment process to be completed for each child within the child's current living situation. Use of this safety assessment process will allow for a more systematic and consistent statewide process of conducting safety assessments and safety planning. Agencies, however, will retain the flexibility to document the safety information in the case record as specified by the county policy. To facilitate implementation of the new safety assessment process, a safety assessment worksheet has been incorporated into this bulletin.

BACKGROUND:

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was signed and became federal law on November 19, 1997. The law is tied to federal Title IV-B and Title IV-E funding, building on and amending the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980. ASFA refocuses requirements to the issues of child safety, well-being, permanence and timeliness. In the interim time period since ASFA went into effect, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has worked toward achieving the outcomes set forth by ASFA with safety maintaining its paramount status.

During this time, counties were required to develop their own policies and procedures to assess for and assure child safety. When Pennsylvania participated in the Federal Child and Family Services Review in 2002, safety was determined to be an area that would benefit from further study and improvement. As a result, the Risk Assessment Task Force reconvened and formed a sub-committee dedicated to conducting a local and national review of safety assessment instruments. This work resulted in the development of a standardized safety process to assess and assure child safety. Additionally, a safety worksheet was developed as the vehicle to implement the sixteen safety threats into practice. To develop these worksheets, the Task Force completed a survey of available research on existing safety assessment processes and selected, based on results of the survey, elements from Illinois' Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol (CERAP), and Safety Assessments from Maryland, Michigan, North Carolina, Virginia and Philadelphia, PA.

DEFINITIONS

The definitions of the words and phrases below should be used when referenced in this Bulletin and within the context of Safety Assessments and Safety Plans.

Safety: The condition of being free from immediate physical or emotional harm.

Safety Assessment Process: The on-going method of determining the immediate safety of the child based on the presence of any of the sixteen safety threats. There are three phases to this process: Safety Assessment, Safety Decision and Safety Plan:

- **Safety Assessment**: The process by which a social service professional systematically evaluates, at every contact, the conditions in which a child resides in order to determine whether or not it is safe for the child to remain in those current conditions. When conducting a safety assessment, the assessor will determine the presence of safety threats and/or protective factors currently in operation within the current living situation.
 - **Safety Threats**: The conditions or actions within the child's current living situation that represent the likelihood of immediate physical or emotional harm to the children.
 - **Protective Factors**: Factors or resources within the child's current living situation that promote children's safety by directly mitigating the threat to safety. In order for protective factors to be effective, the person responsible must be willing and able to act to ensure the safety of the children.
- **Safety Decision**: A determination that is made as to whether a child is safe, conditionally safe or unsafe in their current living environment.
 - **Safe**: A determination that is made when there are no apparent threats of immediate harm present to the child at this time. No safety plan is required.

COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS REGARDING THIS BULLETIN SHOULD BE DIRECTED TO:

Regional Children and Youth Program Representatives

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- **Conditionally Safe:** A determination that is made when there are protective factors identified and in operation for each safety threat present. When a child is determined to be conditionally safe, a safety plan must be developed that is specific, measurable and agreed upon by all parties with a role in assuring the child's safety.
- **Unsafe:** A determination that is made when there are safety threats present that cannot be mitigated by protective factors. Arrangements for substitute care must be made immediately.
- **Safety Plan:** The written document that identifies the immediate steps that must be undertaken in order for a child to remain safe in the current living situation (in home or out of home). A safety plan must be specific, measurable and agreed upon by all parties with a role in assuring the child's safety.
 - **Initial Safety Plan :** The first safety plan that is developed to ensure the safety of the child. The initial plan is amended as needed, based on any changes to the safety of the child. If changes are not needed, that plan may remain the same.
 - **Responsible Persons:** Any individual(s) who has a role and responsibility to assure the child's safety for compliance with the plan; types of responsible persons could include family, caregivers, kin, household members, service providers, resource families, agency staff, and/or any other identified resources. Action steps identified in the safety plan must be specific and measurable and agreed upon by all of the identified responsible persons prior to the plan going into effect.
 - **Effective Date:** A developed safety plan becomes effective when all responsible persons have agreed to the conditions outlined in the safety plan. This date should be included in documentation within the case record and on the safety assessment worksheet.

Other Applicable Definitions:

- **Contact:** The process by which the caseworker or supervisor interacts with children, families and/or collateral persons to receive and share information. Types of contact may include direct contacts with persons at school, home, office and court visits as well as indirect contacts such as phone calls, e-mails and written letters.
- **Risk Assessment:** The process by which the caseworker assesses the current level of risk to the children to determine the likelihood of future harm, abuse, or neglect as prescribed by the Pennsylvania Risk Assessment Model.
- **Placement:** Twenty-four hours out-of-home care and supervision of a child.

DISCUSSION

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SAFETY AND RISK:

Historically, Safety Assessment and Risk Assessment have been tied together in casework practice. As with most processes, Safety Assessment and Risk Assessment are intertwined and

dependent upon each other. To minimize one, the value and importance of both is diminished. Both are key elements in protecting children from harm.

Safety Assessment and Risk Assessment are processes that often ask the same questions to make different decisions. A **Safety Assessment** evaluates the issues impacting a child that suggest that there is an **immediate** threat of harm to the child. It asks the worker to devise a plan that will address the immediate threat by identifying and mobilizing the protective factors already existing within the child's current living situation that can protect the child from that threat, identify strengths that could evolve into protective factors, or by removing the child. A **Risk Assessment** evaluates **future** threats of harm to a child. It helps identify the individuals who need to be served and the factors that must be addressed to reduce future risk levels. In addition, safety assessments are to be done where the child is currently living and risk assessments are to be done as if the child is in the home. Both safety assessment and risk assessment are **continuous, ongoing processes** that a worker must undertake. Effective Safety Assessment neither can nor should be limited to those points in time during which a formal Risk Assessment Matrix is completed.

SAFETY PROCESS: ASSESSMENT, DECISION, AND PLANNING

Safety has always been a paramount concern in the child welfare system. Where child maltreatment or family conditions create an immediate threat of significant harm to the child, the system must act swiftly and decisively to assure the child's safety. Safety interventions must work to control the level of safety threat and/or to prevent the safety threat from having a significant impact on the child. Safety interventions must also be in place to assure safety throughout the case process, both for children who remain at home receiving services and for children who are in placement.

To help assure that ALL children residing in the home are safe i.e. free from immediate physical and/or emotional harm, it is necessary to consider safety at every contact and assess safety at every face-to-face contact. In order to accomplish this, the Pennsylvania Risk Assessment Task Force developed the Safety Assessment Process which is divided into three parts:

- **Safety Assessment,**
- **Safety Decision, and**
- **Safety Planning.**

SAFETY ASSESSMENT:

A **Safety Assessment** is the means by which a child welfare professional systematically evaluates at every contact, the conditions in which a child resides in order to determine whether or not it is safe for the child to remain in those current conditions. This is accomplished by assessing for the presence of Safety Factors. There are sixteen research-based safety factors that have been identified by the Risk Assessment Task Force as the key factors for determining whether or not a threat to safety exists and if it is immediate or future in nature. Deciding whether or not the safety threat is immediate versus future requires an assessment of the following:

- ◆ the presence of a threat;
- ◆ the extent to which the threat is uncontrolled;
- ◆ the presence and activity of the threat at that point in time; and
- ◆ the resulting effects on a vulnerable child.

To completely assess a child's living situation, it is important to consider the positive (strength-based) and the negative (deficit-based) aspects of the caregivers, household members and environment. To this end, the Task Force identified four safety threats and twelve protective factors. The deficit-based safety factors assess safety of a child relative to suspected maltreatment. The presence of any of these deficit-based safety threats may indicate a threat to safety. The strength-based safety factors assess safety relative to what is already occurring and supports safety. The absence of these strength-based protective factors may indicate a threat to safety.

It is important to remember that, in addition to identifying safety threats, a worker must always be assessing for the presence of operating protective factors. Protective factors are qualities or resources within the family that promote children's safety by directly mitigating the safety threat. In order for protective factors to be effective, persons responsible must be willing and able to act, taking the necessary steps to assure child safety. The information gathered during the assessment will guide the Safety Decision and Safety Plan. All information impacting safety obtained during this assessment must be documented in the case record.

When assessing child safety it is important to consider the impact of the child's current living arrangement. For instance when the child is:

In Home:

- The caseworker must consider **ALL** of the children residing in the home as well as all of the household members in addition to the alleged perpetrator(s).
- As part of the juvenile court process required by the Juvenile Act, the court determines whether or not the child may remain safely in their own home. This decision is based upon the evidence provided by the child welfare agency.
- To effectively assure safety, the county children and youth agency must work collaboratively with families and all other agencies, programs and service providers involved with the family. Communication with those providing services and conducting contacts with the families will reveal potential safety issues and maximize the ability to anticipate and address safety threats.
- Although the county children and youth agency has singular duty for all three components of the safety process (Safety Assessment, Safety Decision and Safety Plan), the county agency must rely on information from other service providers and agencies. The county agency's expectations regarding the roles and responsibilities of the private provider agency regarding the safety assessment process should be clearly defined.

In Placement:

- When a child is in placement, safety assessments must continue to take place.
- ASFA clearly mandates that safety must be assessed and managed for cases that involve placement. In a placement situation, the standards for safety do not change; however the criteria have to be considered and applied in a slightly different manner.
- To effectively assure safety, the county children and youth agency must work collaboratively with families and all other agencies, programs and service providers involved with the family. Communication with those providing services and conducting contacts with the families will reveal potential safety issues and maximize the ability to anticipate and address safety threats.

- Determining safety in placement involves:
 - Assessing the safety factors of the current caregivers,
 - Identifying sources of stress in the caregivers lives, and/or
 - Identifying safety threats within the current placement setting.
- As part of the permanency hearing required by the Juvenile Act, the court determines whether or not the child may remain safely in their current placement setting. This decision is based upon the evidence provided by the child welfare agency.
- The recommendation to return a child to his or her home must be based upon the county children and youth's agency's belief that the child can be safely maintained in that home.
- Although the county children and youth agency has singular duty for all three components of the safety process (Safety Assessment, Safety Decision and Safety Plan), the county agency must rely on information from other service providers and agencies. The county agency's expectations regarding the roles and responsibilities of the private provider agency regarding the safety assessment process should be clearly defined.

SAFETY DECISION:

A **Safety Decision** determines whether or not a child is safe, conditionally safe or unsafe in their current living arrangement (both in home and out of home). The determination must include the existing safety threats and any operating protective factors that reduce the level of threat.

If a child is determined to be **safe** from abuse/neglect:

- There are no apparent safety threats present to the child.
- This safety decision would indicate that the child may remain safely in the home.
- No safety plan is required at this time.

If a child is determined to be **conditionally safe** from abuse/neglect:

- They may remain safe in this setting and be safe from abuse only if protective factors can be established and maintained.
- When a child is determined to be conditionally safe, a safety plan must be developed.
- Without this safety plan, the child would be unsafe.

If a child is determined to be **unsafe** from abuse/neglect:

- One or more safety threats are present **and** protective factors cannot be determined or agreed upon to mitigate the identified safety threats.
- The child is not safe in the present setting and must be moved to an alternative setting.
- Arrangements for placement must be made immediately.

It is important to remember that, effective safety decision making must involve the caregivers, not only as a component of the assessment but as part of the decision making process. Additionally, while the county children and youth caseworker recommends safety plans, the caseworker is not the sole person responsible for safety decision making. The supervisor's role in the decision making process involves discussion with the worker regarding his or her assessment and recommendations, as well as the final approval to agree with, alter, endorse, and/or collaborate on the caseworker's recommendation and implementation of a safety plan.

SAFETY PLAN:

When immediate threats to the child exist, a plan of safety must be put in place to ensure the child's safety. A **Safety Plan** is the written document that identifies under what conditions a child will remain safe in the situation in which they are currently residing (in-home or out-of-home) and a method for monitoring compliance with the plan. The safety plan is developed based on the results of the safety assessment and safety decision.

- If the safety decision is Safe, no safety plan is necessary.
- If the safety decision is Conditionally Safe, then a safety plan describing the conditions necessary to assure the safety of the child in the current living situation is necessary.
- If the safety decision is Unsafe, the child must be moved from the present setting to a safe alternative setting.

A Safety Plan addresses the step-by-step actions needed to assure the safety of the child. Action steps identified in the safety plan must be specific and measurable and must have an immediate positive impact on ameliorating the safety threat to the child. To identify action steps, the caseworker should consider any and all protective factors in operation within the family and their support system. Whenever possible the identified protective factors should be used to mitigate safety threats. If there are no discernable protective factors, or if the safety threats have overwhelmed the available protective factors, the caregiver is no longer able to provide the child with a safe living environment without agency intervention. When this occurs, it is necessary to supplement the caregiver's protective capabilities in order to maintain the child's safety. Safety interventions should always be viewed on the continuum of response alternatives, from least to most intrusive with the most severe safety intervention being placement of the child.

A Safety Plan provides "conditional" safety for children in that it is contingent upon the plan being followed as outlined and agreed upon by all responsible persons. A responsible person is any individual(s) who has/have a role and responsibility to assure the child's safety for compliance with the plan; types of responsible persons could include caregivers, kin, household members, service providers, resource families, agency staff, and/or other identified resources. All responsible persons identified in the safety plan must be actively and effectively engaged in safety assessment and safety planning. Obtaining agreement from the caregivers, family members, and/or other persons involved with the child to act as responsible persons for the actions that will be taken as a part of a safety plan is a critical component of safety planning. It is also an opportunity to engage the family to act on their own behalf to assure the safety of their children.

A developed safety plan becomes effective when all responsible persons have agreed to the conditions outlined in the safety plan. This effective date should be included in documentation within the case record and on the safety assessment worksheet.

Characteristics of an effective safety plan are usually dependent on one or more of the variables listed below:

- Responsiveness of intervention to safety needs;
- Intervention based on the family's input;
- Willingness of the family to implement intervention;
- History of past behavior and/or effectiveness of similar interventions;
- Effectiveness of intervention to mitigate safety threat;
- Selection, availability and accessibility of interventions;

- Immediate implementation of intervention;
- Required frequency of intervention; or
- Intensity of intervention required to mitigate safety.

Developing and maintaining a safety plan is the primary responsibility of the county children and youth agency which is informed by the family, any and all private providers, and collaterals involved with the child.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SAFETY PLANNING AND SERVICE PLANNING

A Safety Plan is comprised of action steps or interventions that are intended to address the immediate safety threats to the child. It requires immediate implementation and therefore all safety interventions identified in the safety plan must be able to be implemented within a 24 hour time frame. Moreover, the caseworker must obtain supervisory approval of a safety plan that was implemented by the next business day.

Service Planning, on the other hand, is directly connected to the risk assessment and is intended to address the underlying conditions and contributing factors in a family to help prevent future abuse and/or neglect to the child. A Service Plan is the agreement, plan or contract that one makes collaboratively with a family that is designed to meet the goals and objectives determined to address the central issues, which caused the case to be opened. A Service Plan is designed to meet the needs of the children and family as they relate to the program/service area.

An example of these types of services might include mental health or substance abuse counseling, etc. These treatment services would not be appropriate to include in the safety plan as they do not exert an external control to mitigate the immediate safety threat. However, the parent's participation in such services may result in the parent internalizing changes that would mitigate future risks of harm. Ultimately, these services will have a greater long term impact on the safety and well-being of the child, but would not assure the child's immediate safety.

SAFETY ASSESSMENT WORKSHEETS:

The Pennsylvania's Risk Assessment Task Force has developed a safety assessment worksheet. To completely assess a child's living situation, it is important to consider the positive (strength-based) and negative (deficit-based) aspects of the family, caregivers, household members, and living environment. To accomplish this, the Task Force identified criteria to help guide the safety assessment process. When considering the Safety Assessment Worksheets, it is important to realize that, while they are formatted differently, they are divided into three distinct parts: Safety Assessment, Decision and Plan.

- Part 1, Safety Assessment - contains the sixteen safety factors and indicators. This includes four safety threats, twelve protective factors. The indicators also contain space to document any additional information pertaining to each factor. For instance, if any of the four safety threats are present, this space would be used to identify an operating protective factor. Conversely, if any of the twelve protective factors are not present, the space would be used to document the specific safety threat.

- Part 2, Safety Decision - contains the safety determination -- Safe, Conditionally Safe, or Unsafe -- and provides space to indicate what the safety decision is and the rationale for that decision.
- Part 3, Safety Plan - contains space to identify the specific, measurable steps that must take place in order for the child to remain safe in their current living situation. Space is also provided for the responsible person(s) to indicate their agreement either by initialing or signing the plan.

Note: Counties may select to use the safety worksheet as a safety decision-making guide or incorporate all of the elements listed in the safety worksheet into their own processes, e.g. the identified safety threats, protective factors, safety decision and safety plan.

DOCUMENTATION:

County agencies may continue use current practice to document the safety process. All of the identified elements from the safety assessment worksheet must be incorporated into the documentation of the safety process. The elements are:

- Any or all of the sixteen safety factors present within the child's living situation that threaten a child's safety;
- Any or all protective factors which operate to mitigate the identified safety threat;
- The safety decision and rationale for that decision; and
- The safety plan to include which person is responsible for each action step/safety intervention.

All changes to a child's safety assessment, safety decision and safety plan must also be documented with the rationale. If a county chooses the worksheet, may also be used to document safety and incorporated into the case record. Private agencies providing services on behalf of the county children and youth agency must document their assessment of the sixteen safety factors and communicate any changes to the child's safety to the county children and youth agency.

POLICY:

- The safety assessment process is a method of decision making used to identify the presence of immediate safety threats or changes to the child's safety and must be completed at:
 - Every face-to-face contact with the caregiver and/or child; and/or
 - During other contacts that provide information that suggests a change in the child's safety or a change in a responsible person(s) compliance with the safety plan.
- All sixteen Safety Factors must be given consideration at each and every contact.

- Documentation of the safety process must exist within the record for every face-to-face contact and other contacts when there is enough meaningful information to suggest a change in the child's safety or compliance with the plan.
- A new safety plan must be developed whenever information gathered suggests a change in the child's safety or compliance with the safety plan.
- A Caseworker must obtain supervisory approval on a safety plan that was implemented by the next business day.
- Developing and maintaining a safety plan is the primary responsibility of the county children and youth agency which is informed by any and all private providers and collaterals involved with the child.
- Each child has only one active Safety Plan that addresses the child's needs in their current living arrangement.
- County children and youth agencies may select to either use the safety assessment worksheet or incorporate all of the identified elements from the safety assessment worksheet into their own documentation of safety. The elements are:
 - Any or all of the sixteen safety factors present within the child's living arrangement;
 - Any or all protective factors which operate to mitigate the identified safety threat;
 - The safety decision and rationale for that decision; and
 - The safety plan to include which person is responsible for each action step/safety intervention.
- Private agencies providing services on behalf of the county children and youth agency must document their assessment of the sixteen safety factors and communicate any changes to the child's safety to the county children and youth agency.
- Steps identified in the safety plan must be immediate and should not take more than 24 hours to implement. In circumstances when implementing the steps in the safety plan within 24 hours is not possible, then the immediate safety of the child must be re-considered.
- For each step identified in the safety plan, a responsible person(s) must be identified. There must be documentation demonstrating that the responsible person(s) is willing and agrees to comply with the safety plan.
- A copy of the safety plan shall be provided to the family and any responsible person(s), including private providers, in a timely manner. If confidentiality is an issue, it is permissible to provide an individual with only his/her responsibilities in the safety plan.