

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES SDM® SAFETY ASSESSMENT POLICY AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of the safety assessment and plan is (1) to help assess whether any children are currently in *immediate* danger of serious physical harm that may require a protecting intervention, and (2) to determine what interventions should be maintained or initiated to provide appropriate protection.

Risk versus safety assessment: It is important to keep in mind the difference between safety and risk when completing this form. Safety assessment differs from risk assessment in that it assesses the child's *present* danger and the interventions currently needed to protect the child. In contrast, risk assessment looks at the likelihood of *future* maltreatment.

WHICH CASES

All cases that are assigned for Investigation/Family Assessment.

- New referrals on currently active cases.
- Any open cases in which changing circumstances require an assessment of safety due to the following.
 - » Change in family circumstances.
 - » Change in information known about the family.
 - » Change in ability of safety interventions to mitigate safety factors.

WHO

The Family Services Specialist who makes the initial response to the case. For open cases, the Family Services Specialist with responsibility for the case.

WHEN

Safety assessment is both a *process* and a *document*. Safety assessment is an ongoing *process* throughout the life of a case. A worker completes a safety assessment *process* before concluding each face-to-face contact. *Documentation* of the safety assessment using the SDM tool is created to reflect safety status at certain points:

- Within 24 hours of concluding the first face-to-face contact.
- Within 24 hours of any subsequent contact in which there was a change in safety status:

- » One or more safety factors previously present are no longer present;
 - » One or more safety factors not present before are present now;
 - » Changes to safety plan and/or safety decision.
- Prior to placing a child with a non-custodial parent, relative, or interested individual. (*Note:* These safety assessments should be clearly recorded as pertaining to a household other than the household under investigation.)
 - Prior to returning a child to a removal household. Use the safety assessment if considering return PRIOR to the preliminary removal hearing. AFTER the preliminary removal hearing, use the reunification review tool in Section VIII.
 - Prior to closing an ongoing case; children must be SAFE to close.

DECISIONS

The safety assessment provides structured information concerning the danger of immediate harm/maltreatment to a child. This information guides the decision about whether the child may remain in the home (or be returned to the home) with no intervention, may remain in the home (or be returned) with protecting safety interventions in place, or must be protectively placed (or remain in placement).

A safety intervention is required for all children when any safety factor has been identified.

APPROPRIATE COMPLETION

Workers should familiarize themselves with the items that are included in the safety assessment and accompanying definitions. Once a worker is familiar with the items on the safety assessment, the worker should conduct initial contact as normal, using good social work practice to collect information from the child, caretaker, and/or collateral sources.

Indicate (select) whether any child vulnerabilities are present. Consider these vulnerabilities when reviewing safety items. Note that these vulnerability issues provide a context for safety assessment. The presence of one or more vulnerabilities does not automatically mean that the child is unsafe.

All safety factor responses must have a written rationale and description if the response is "Yes." All rationales must be specific to the family situation (do not simply quote the definition).

All children who are household members are included in a safety assessment.

The safety assessment consists of three parts.

Section 1: Safety Factor Identification. This is a list of critical factors that must be assessed by every worker in every case. These factors cover the kinds of conditions that, if they exist, would render a child in danger of immediate harm. Because not every conceivable safety factor can be anticipated or listed on a form, an “other” category permits a worker to indicate that some other circumstance creates a safety factor; that is, there is something other than the listed categories that causes the worker to believe that the child is in danger of being harmed now.

For this section, rely on information available at the time of the assessment. Workers should make every effort to obtain sufficient information to assess these items prior to terminating their initial contact. However, it is not expected that all facts about a case can be known immediately. Some information may be inaccessible, and some may be deliberately hidden from the worker. Based on reasonable efforts to obtain information necessary to respond to each item, review each of the safety factors and accompanying definitions. For each item, consider the most vulnerable child. If the safety factor is present, based on available information, select “Yes.” If the safety factor is not present, select “No.” If there are circumstances the worker determines constitute a safety factor, and these circumstances are not described by one of the existing items, the worker should select “Yes” for “Other safety factors” and briefly describe the factor.

If it is suspected that there are safety issues in relation to a particular factor, but there is little/no evidence to support the suspicion, select “No,” but clearly specify the concerns in the narrative section.

Section 2: Safety Response—Planning Capacities and Protecting Interventions. This section is completed only if one or more safety factors were identified. *If one or more safety factors are present, it does not automatically follow that a child must be placed.* In many cases, it will be possible to initiate a temporary plan that will mitigate the safety factors sufficiently so that the child may remain in the home while the Investigation/Family Assessment continues. Consider the relative severity of the safety factor(s), the caretaker’s ability and willingness to work toward solutions, the availability of resources, and the vulnerability of the child.

The protecting safety interventions list is made up of general categories of interventions rather than specific programs. The worker should consider each potential category of intervention and determine whether that intervention is available and sufficient to mitigate the safety factor(s) and whether there is reason to believe the caretaker will follow through with a planned intervention. The simple existence of an intervention in the community does not mean it should be used in a particular case. The worker may determine that even with an intervention the child would be unsafe; or the worker may determine that an intervention would be satisfactory but has reason to believe the caretaker would not follow through. Also keep in mind that *the safety intervention is not the service plan*—it is not intended to “solve” the household’s problems or provide long-term answers. A safety intervention permits a child to remain home during the course of the Investigation/Family Assessment.

If one or more safety factors were identified and the worker determines that interventions are unavailable, insufficient, or may not be used, the final option is to indicate that child will be placed.

If one or more interventions will be implemented, select each category that will be used. If there is an intervention that will be implemented that does not fit the other categories, select intervention 8 (Other intervention to allow child to remain in the home) and briefly describe the intervention. Intervention 9 (Emergency removal was conducted to remove child from home due to immediate safety issues) is used only when a child is unsafe and only a placement can ensure safety.

Section 3: Safety Decision. In this section, the worker records the result of the safety assessment. There are three choices:

- a. Safe. Select this line if *no* safety factors were identified. The SDM system guides the worker to leave the child in the home.
- b. Conditionally safe. If one or more safety factors has been identified and the worker is able to identify sufficient protective interventions that lead the worker to believe the child may remain in the home for the present time, select this line. Attach safety plan.
- c. Unsafe. If the worker determines that one or more children cannot be safely kept in the home even after considering a complete range of interventions, select this line. It is possible that the worker will determine that interventions make it possible for one child to remain in the home while another must be removed. Select this line if ANY child is placed. Ensure that the court report or order is in the hard copy record.

Accurate completion of the safety assessment adheres to the following internal logic:

- If no safety factors are selected, no interventions should be selected, and the only possible safety decision is "1. Safe," and no

intervention is required.

- If one or more safety factors are selected, there must be at least one intervention selected, and the only possible safety decisions are "2. Conditionally safe," intervention is required, or "3. Unsafe," placement is required.
- If one or more interventions are selected, AND placement is not selected as an intervention, the safety decision that should be selected is "2. Conditionally safe," intervention is required. Placement should not be selected as an intervention if other interventions are selected.
- If placement is selected as an intervention, the safety decision must be "3. Unsafe," and placement is required