



STRENGTHENING FAMILIES: COLLABORATING WITH FAMILIES OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN ASSESSMENT AND SAFETY PLANNING LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

**NOVEMBER 2025
HOME ENVIRONMENT, SAFE SLEEP,
AND SUPERVISION**

The early home environment is a child's first world – it's where they learn safety, trust, language, and self-regulation. When that environment is unsafe or chaotic, it can have a profound impact on development, even before a child reaches school age. Let's connect what 'chaotic' means to previous discussions regarding children from birth to five, as it doesn't mean busy or loud. Chaotic means a home or caregiver situation that is unpredictable, disorganized, or unstable – such as caregivers coming in and out of the home causing inconsistencies in care, chronic exposure to conflict and environment creating toxic stress in the home, irregular sleep, nutrition, and supervision. In summary, a chaotic environment is one where a child can't count on what will happen next or who will meet their needs.

Areas to Examine During Assessment and Safety Planning

A balanced assessment that includes **safety** and **support** builds trust and accuracy – it shows families that CPS is there to understand and help, not just judge.

Supervision and Caregiver Capacity

- Evaluate whether caregivers provide safe supervision for the child's age and developmental level.
- Other specific types of situations in which the unique child characteristics and parent caregiver protective capacities are connected are things like:
 - Assess caregiver responsiveness to physical health concerns, such as injuries or illnesses.
 - Determine whether caregivers have access to support systems, including family, friends, or community resources, to help maintain a safe environment.

Environmental Safety and Accidental Injuries

- The physical environment plays a critical role in child safety. Accidental injuries are the leading cause of death in young children, with firearm accidents being the deadliest. Other types of accidental injuries for assessment include falls, the most common, drownings, and burns.



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Safe Sleep and Sleep Hygiene

SIDs (Sudden Infant Death) as well as SUID (Sudden Unexpected Infant Death), which expands on SIDS to include accidental suffocation and strangulation in bed. Approximately 16% of infant deaths are categorized under SUID in WI.

CPS professionals assess safe sleep and sleep hygiene often to work with parents on harm reduction strategies for safer sleep for young children by evaluating various environmental, behavioral, and caregiver-related factors. CPS professionals should provide education and recommendations to parents/caregivers to ensure they are knowledgeable about safe sleep for infants. While safe sleep information is important, it must be accessible and culturally responsive to those in the community the education intends to serve.

Key Principles for CPS Home Environment Assessment

Safety First

- Look for immediate physical hazards that threaten a child's safety and/or well-being.
- Consider both visible risks (open outlets, broken glass) and situational risks (unlocked chemicals, firearms, medications).

Observe how the child functions in the space

- Are there safe places to play, eat, and sleep?
- Is the environment adapted to the child's developmental level (ex: toddler proofed, accessible supervision).

Balance strengths and safety concerns

- Identify Parent/Caregiver Protective Capacities to ensure they can shield from harm regarding any concerns.
- Are the parents/caregivers behaviorally, cognitively and emotionally protective in a way that they are aware of potential risks and have plans to shield the child and provide for their safety?



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Avoiding Bias

Culture and context matter when assessing both the physical and psychological safety of a child's environment, the predictability of caregiver duties and responsibilities, and how parents interact with small children. The role is CPS is to understand what life is like for the child – not to decide whether we would live that way ourselves

It's important when analyzing information to consider: Is this practice unsafe, or just unfamiliar to me?

Resources

Safe Sleep

- [Children's Health Alliance of Wisconsin](#)
- [Safe Sleep Practices WI Department of Health Services](#)

Firearm Safety

- [Safety Tips](#)
- [Free gun safety kits](#)

Breastfeeding Support for SUID Prevention

- [Wisconsin Department of Health Services](#)





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Reflection on Content

When entering a home, what assumptions might you carry about what a “good” or “safe” environment might look like? How can you pause to see the space through the child’s and caregiver’s lens?

Action Item

After a home visit to assess the child’s environment, take a few minutes to identify one potential bias that may be impacting what you’re thinking or feeling. Focus on describing what you see in an objective manner.