Confirming and Reconfirming Safe Environments Standards

From: Ongoing Services Standards

Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (October 2016)
Confirming a Safe Environment when Children are placed in Out of Home Care

A caseworker places a child in out-of-home care when 1) threats to child safety cannot be controlled in the child’s home or 2) a child requires either specific services or sanctions that cannot be met in the child’s home or community. One responsibility prior to placing a child is to assess and confirm the placement is safe for the child. This obligation exists for all placement settings whether the care is provided by family members, friends, neighbors, or professional providers such as foster families.

Assessing for a safe environment is distinctly different from licensing the placement home. Licensing occurs bi-annually and focuses on specific requirements for the provider and environment rather than the safety of a specific child in the placement. Therefore, assessing and confirming a safe environment in placement settings occurs every time a new placement is considered.

### Applicability

This procedure applies when a child is placed in an unlicensed home, foster care home, group home, or residential care center.

This procedure does not apply when a child is on a trial reunification, is missing from out-of-home care, or is placed in the following settings:

- Voluntary kinship care home
- Juvenile correctional institution
- Shelter care facility
- Adult correctional facility
- Secure detention facility
- Hospital
- Supervised independent living placement
| Confirming Safe Environments at the Initiation of a Child’s Placement in an Unlicensed Home |

Prior to placement the caseworker or designee must:

- Conduct a home visit to assess and evaluate the safety of the placement setting and assist the caregiver in obtaining provisions needed for the care of the child. This includes discussing expectations and clarifying the role of the out-of-home care provider, and providing information on any issues related to the care of the child.
- Complete a check of law enforcement records or conduct a CCAP check on all individuals seventeen years of age and older residing in the identified placement home.
- Conduct a reverse address Sex Offender Registry check.
- Conduct a check of eWiSACWIS records on all individuals seventeen years of age and older residing in the identified placement home.

If a home visit cannot be made prior to placement (e.g., an emergency), the caseworker or designee must have verbal contact at the time the child is placed to assess and evaluate the safety of the placement setting and assist the caregiver in obtaining provisions needed for the care of the child. In this circumstance, an initial home visit must occur within 24 hours of the child’s placement.

During the first encounter with an out-of-home care provider (considered for placement) the caseworker or designee gathers information to identify and understand placement danger threats. During initial and subsequent home visits, the caseworker interviews and observes family members and collects data from other sources to make determinations about placement danger threats and the appropriateness of the placement.

Within five working days following the initial home visit, the caseworker or designee must:

- Conduct a subsequent home visit (a second weekend cannot pass prior to the subsequent home visit).
- Continue to assess and evaluate safety in the placement setting.
- Confirm with the out-of-home care provider expectations and his/her role in the protective plan, as applicable.
- Discuss any issues related to the care of the child.

Additionally, the caseworker or designee must:

- Consider placement danger threats at first encounter and on an ongoing basis with out-of-home care providers to determine the safety of the placement home (See Placement Danger threats, Appendix V page 259). If a placement danger threat(s) is confirmed, the caseworker must locate and transition the child to a new placement immediately.
• Assess the out of home care provider’s motivation to provide care for the child, view of the child, and when a relationship currently exists between the out of home care provider and the child, an understanding of the need for the child to be placed in out of home care.

• Assess the child’s reaction to the placement home and the out of home care provider in cases where a relationship currently exists between the out of home care provider and the child.

All potential out of home care providers or other household members must be included in the assessment.

In unlicensed placement settings, “household member” means all individuals living together in the same dwelling. This includes individuals who live in the home full-time or part-time. Any adult who lives in the home regularly (full-time or part-time) is considered a household member. For additional information, refer to the “Primary Assessment Standard” of the “Child Protective Services Access and Initial Assessment Standards.”

Confirming Safe Environments In Placement Settings When Respite and Pre-Placement Visits Have Previously Been Approved in an Unlicensed Home

Wisconsin law requires that prior to making the decision to begin respite or pre-placement visits with an unlicensed provider, the caseworker or designee must:

• Conduct a CCAP check, reverse address Sex Offender Registry check and a CPS records check on all individuals seventeen years of age and older residing in the identified placement home.

• Conduct a home visit with the identified placement providers to assess and evaluate safety of the placement setting.

• Assist the caregiver in setting up whatever provisions are needed for the care of the child.

If the agency then decides to use the home for an out-of-home placement for the child, the caseworker or designee must:

• Conduct a home visit within three working days following the initiation of placement (a second weekend may not pass prior to the home visit).

• Continue to assess and evaluate safety in the placement environment.

• Confirm with the out-of-home care provider expectations and their role in the protective plan.

• Discuss any issues related to the care of the child.
Other records such as police reports may be useful in determining whether placement danger threats exist. The caseworker should analyze information from all available sources to help evaluate the environment of the placement home, and subsequently decide if the child can be placed in the home safely. To assist with this decision, the caseworker may consider the criteria in DHS 12.06, of the Administrative Code.

If a child is safe from immediate harm in an unlicensed placement home, the caseworker continues to collect information from the out-of-home care provider through additional contacts to confirm a safe placement. This assessment includes the out-of-home care provider’s ability to care for the longer-term needs, emotional development, and well-being of the child.
Confirming Safe Environments at the Initiation of a Child’s Placement in a Licensed Foster Home

Prior to placement the caseworker or designee must have verbal contact with the placement provider to assess and evaluate safety in the placement environment. The caseworker or designee must discuss expectations and clarify the role of the out-of-home care provider and provide information on any issues related to the care of the child.

Within 24 hours of placement the caseworker or designee must:

- Conduct a CCAP check on all individuals seventeen years of age and older residing in the identified placement home.
- Conduct a reverse address Sex Offender Registry check
- Conduct a check of eWiSACWIS records on all individuals seventeen years of age and older residing in the identified placement home.
- Assist the caregiver in setting up whatever provisions are needed for the care of the child.

A home visit must be made within three business days, not to exceed five calendar days. The purpose of the home visit is to assess and evaluate the safety of the placement setting and assist the caregiver in obtaining provisions needed for the care of the child. A second weekend may not pass prior to the initial home visit with the licensed provider.

During the first encounter with an out-of-home care provider, the caseworker or designee gathers information to identify and understand placement danger threats. During the initial and subsequent home visits and face-to-face monthly contacts, the caseworker interviews and observes household members and collects data from other sources to make determination about placement danger threats and the appropriateness of the placement.

Within seven business days following the initial home visit the caseworker or designee must:

- Conduct a home visit to assess and evaluate for a safe environment in the placement setting.
- Confirm with the out-of-home care provider expectations and his or her role in the protective plan.
- Discuss any issues related to the care of the child as well as continue to assist the out-of-home care provider in setting up whatever provisions are needed for the care of the child.
Additionally, the caseworker or designee must:

- Consider placement danger threats at first encounter and on an ongoing basis with out-of-home care providers to determine the safety of the placement home. If a placement danger threat(s) is confirmed, the caseworker must locate and transition the child to a new placement home immediately.
- Assess the out-of-home care provider’s ability to provide care for the child, view of the child; and when a relationship currently exists between the out-of-home care provider and the child, an understanding of the need for the child to be placed in out-of-home care.
- Assess the child’s reaction to the placement home and the out-of-home care provider in cases where a relationship currently exists between the out-of-home care provider and the child.

All potential out-of-home care providers and other household members in a care giving role must be included in the assessment. “Household member” means any person living in a foster home, whether or not related to the licensee as defined in Ch. DCF 56 Administrative Code.

When initiating a placement of the child in foster care, the caseworker must make face-to-face contact with the foster parent. This early face-to-face contact assists the child in transitioning to the foster home and supports the provider in caring for the child. If a child is safe from immediate harm in the foster care placement, the caseworker continues to collect information from the out-of-home care provider through continued contact to confirm a safe placement. This assessment includes the out-of-home care provider’s ability to care for the child’s long-term needs, emotional development, and well-being.

Assessing for a safe environment in a foster home is a shared responsibility between the licensing worker and the agency caseworker. Both caseworkers should work together and share information accordingly to ensure the child is safe in the placement setting.
Placement Danger Threats and Placement Decisions

Placement danger threats are severe in nature and indicate the unlicensed or foster care placement is an unsafe environment for the child (Appendix V, page 259).

- When a placement danger threat(s) is confirmed at the first encounter with the out-of-home care provider, the caseworker must immediately pursue an alternative placement for the child.
- When a placement danger threat(s) is confirmed for a child currently in placement, the caseworker must immediately begin the process of transitioning the child to an alternative placement.
- When a placement danger threat is confirmed for a specific child, the caseworker must immediately assess the safety of all children in the home. To accomplish this, the caseworker collaborates with other caseworkers with children placed in the home as well as the foster care coordinator. If a determination is made that the placement home is unsafe, the caseworker for each child must immediately transition the child to an alternative placement.

At times, the court may continue a placement despite a confirmed placement danger threat. In these situations, a plan should be made to ensure a safe environment for the child and should be recorded in the Confirming Safe Environments document in eWiSACWIS and the child’s Permanency Plan.

Use of the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths Assessment

The Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment process and tool is used to:

- Identify the needs and strengths of the child.
- Determine the ability of the provider to meet the child’s needs.
- Evaluate the stability of the placement.
When the caseworker rates any area a “3” on the CANS tool for the “Current Caregiver,” the caseworker must reassess placement danger threats for the child.

- If a placement danger threat(s) is confirmed, the caseworker must immediately transition the child to an alternative placement.
- When a placement danger threat is identified for a specific child, the caseworker must assess the safety of all children placed in the home. If an unsafe determination is made for other children in the home, the caseworker must immediately transition the child(ren) to an alternative placement.

Confirming Safe Environments in Group Homes or Residential Care Centers

One of the primary purposes of a group or residential care placement is to address the unique needs of children who require more intensive services than a family setting can provide. These placement settings offer specialized services in a structured environment for children and youth with special developmental, therapeutic, physical, or emotional needs. Services and supervision are provided by staff employed by the group or residential care setting. Therefore, evaluating safety of the environment in these settings is different from in placement homes where specific caregivers are licensed to provide care.

Prior to placement, the caseworker or designee must evaluate the safety of the group homes or residential care center by:

- Ensuring the facility has the capacity to meet the child’s needs based on their Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) score.
- Making a determination with the facility representative that the behaviors of other children, youth, or adults in the placement setting do not present a concern for the child’s safety.
- Addressing any additional needs to ensure the child is safe in the placement setting. Examples include additional or special training for agency staff, rearranging the living environment, etc.
At a minimum, the caseworker or designee must evaluate and confirm the safety of the environment in the group home or residential facility setting every six months while a child remains in this placement setting. The caseworker or designee must:

- Confirm the facility has the continued capacity to meet the child’s needs based on the current CANS score.
- Evaluate changes in the child’s CANS assessment to determine if this has any implications for the current facility to meet the child’s needs or the stability of the placement.
- Confirm with the facility representative that the behaviors of other children, youth, or adults in the placement setting do not present a concern for the child’s safety.
- Evaluate the child’s adjustment to and views about the current placement.

When a safety concern is identified for the placed child that involves or may impact the safety of other children in the placement setting, the worker must address it by reporting the information to the appropriate authority (e.g., CPS, child welfare licensing, law enforcement, etc.).

Risk Management in All Placement Setting Types

At times, the behaviors of other minors in the placement setting (e.g. birth or adoptive children of the placement providers, other children in the placement, children receiving day care services, etc.) or conditions of the physical environment may present risk to the child.

The caseworker or designee should assess and evaluate the behaviors of other minors within the home to determine the needs of the child and to assist the placement provider in meeting identified needs.
Risk Management Planning

The caseworker or designee collaborates with other caseworkers or facility staff to understand the behaviors of other children in the placement setting. The following behaviors must be considered to determine if there is a risk to the child:

- Aggressive behaviors - especially children known to have a history of violence.
- Sexually abusive behaviors, including children within the placement setting who victimize other children physically or sexually.
- Other behavior issues, including mental health, AODA, or other concerning behaviors such as fire setting, etc.

When risk is identified, a risk management plan must be created to mitigate the risk and ensure the environment is safe for the child. Considerations for a risk management plan include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Additional or special training for placement providers.
- Additional contact by agency or other providers.
- Re-arranging the living environment (changing sleeping arrangements, moving children to other units in a RCC, etc.).

The “Confirming Safe Environments” template in eWiSACWIS must be used to guide and document risk management.

Documentation

The caseworker must use the “Confirming Safe Environments” template in eWiSACWIS to guide and document decision-making related to assessing, evaluating, and confirming safety in all unlicensed and foster care placements, and in all group home and residential placements. Information regarding a safe environment must be documented in the family eWiSACWIS case record and approved by a supervisor or his/her designee fourteen calendar days from the date the placement was made by the supervisor and caseworker.
Reconfirming Safe Environments of Unlicensed Homes and Foster Care

While the child resides in out-of-home care the caseworker must, at a minimum, evaluate and confirm the safety of a specific placement every six months or at the review of the case plan, whichever comes first.

The caseworker, designee, or other individual identified by agency policy (e.g. foster care coordinator, paraprofessional staff, etc.) must:

- Conduct a CCAP records check on all individuals seventeen years of age and older residing in the identified placement home.
- Conduct a reverse address Sex Offender Registry check and a CPS records check on any individual seventeen years of age and older that has moved into the identified placement home since the previous confirmation or reconfirmation of safety in the placement environment.

Additionally, the caseworker or designee must:

- Have face-to-face contact with out-of-home care provider(s) to judge the safety of the placement home by assessing placement danger threats (see Appendix V, page 259, “Placement Danger Threats”). If a placement danger threat(s) is confirmed, the caseworker must locate another placement home for the child.
- Assess the out-of-home care provider’s ability to meet the combined needs of all the children and any other individuals requiring care in the home.
- Evaluate changes in the child’s CANS assessment to determine if there are implications regarding the current out-of-home care provider’s ability to meet the child’s needs or the stability of the placement.
- Evaluate changes in the current out-of-home care provider’s CANS assessment to determine if there are implications regarding provider’s ability to meet the child’s needs or the stability of the placement.
- Evaluate the child’s adjustment to and attitude about the current placement as well as the child’s overall integration into the placement family.
- Evaluate the current out-of-home care provider regarding the provider’s ability to support the permanence goal for the child; relationship with the identified permanent placement for the child (unless the current out-of-home care provider is also the identified permanent placement) and relationship with the caseworker/agency.

Agencies may designate the background check function to other individuals based on their agency policy. It is the responsibility of the caseworker or designee to utilize the background information to confirm safety in the placement environment for the child(ren).
Additional Situations When Reconfirming a Safe Environment is Required

The caseworker or designee must review and, if necessary, document changes to the Confirming Safe Environments in an Unlicensed or Foster Care Placement at each of the following points in the case:

- When conditions in the placement home that might affect a child’s safety change either positively or negatively (e.g., an adult moves in or out of the home);
- When the physical address of the placement changes (e.g., when a caregiver moves to a new home);
- When a report of alleged maltreatment is received; or
- When there is concern of a possible Placement Danger Threat (Appendix V, page 259).

Placement Danger Threats and Placement Decisions

Placement danger threats (see Appendix V, page 259, “Placement Danger Threats”) are severe in nature and indicate that the unlicensed or foster care placement is an unsafe environment for the child.

When a placement danger threat is confirmed for a specific child, the caseworker must immediately assess the safety of all children placed in the home. In order to accomplish this, the caseworker collaborates with other caseworkers that have children placed in the home as well as the foster care coordinator. If a determination is made that the placement home is an unsafe environment for other children in the home, the case manager for each child must immediately begin the process of transitioning the child to an alternative placement.

At times the court may continue a placement despite a confirmed placement danger threat. In these situations a plan should be made to ensure a safe environment for the child and recorded in the Confirming Safe Environments document in eWiSACWIS and the child’s Permanency Plan.
**Current Caregiver CANS Rating of “3”**

The caseworker uses the CANS tool to assist in identifying a child’s needs and strengths in order to meet his/her needs and make the best possible match with a placement home. This assessment process also identifies the current caregiver’s needs in order to support him/her in providing care for the child placed in the home.

- When the caseworker rates any area a “3” on the CANS tool for the “Current Caregiver”, the caseworker must reassess placement danger threats for the child.
- If a placement danger threat(s) is confirmed, the caseworker must immediately begin the process of transitioning the child to an alternative placement.
- When a placement danger threat is identified for a specific child, the caseworker must assess the safety of all children placed in the home. If a determination is made that this is an unsafe environment for other children in the home, the caseworker must immediately begin the process of transitioning the child(ren) to an alternative placement.

**Documentation**

The caseworker must use the “Reconfirming Safe Environments” template in eWiSACWIS to guide and document decision-making related to assessing, evaluating, and confirming safety in all unlicensed and foster care placements and in all group home and residential placements. Information regarding a safe environment must be documented in the family eWiSACWIS case record and approved by a supervisor or his/her designee.