

COVID-19 Pandemic: A CHANGE IN CIRCUMSTANCE

This primer for Child Protective Services Professionals is intended to support the application of critical thinking skills in order to arrive at a professional judgement concerning COVID-19's impact on the safety assessment process- including questions to explore and information to gather for CPS decision-making.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our lives at multiple levels. In addition to concerns about health and medical needs, there is the potential loss of income, or the requirement to continue working. Parents and caregivers cannot delegate responsibilities to other adults in usual ways. Children and youth are not in school. It is no longer easy to send a child/youth to a friend's house. Put simply, adult and child functioning look different in a pandemic. Mental health symptoms may emerge or persist in more severe ways. Use of substances may increase while access to supportive services is complicated by physical distancing measures. Rates of domestic violence are on the rise and children are isolated from traditional support networks (i.e., teachers, coaches, therapists, doctors, friends, and other family). The current pandemic has created a universal change in circumstance. As a result of the outbreak, and related outcomes, experts, and the public wonder aloud if children are safe where they live.

No doubt, the magnitude of the pandemic has affected everyone. Now more than ever, Child Protective Services (CPS) must apply the Wisconsin Safety Model to understand how these changing circumstances play out in unique ways for each adult and child in the household. For the purposes of this primer, the term adult refers to the parent, caregiver, and in/formal provider. Child refers to anyone under 18 years of age. The term household refers to a child's family of origin and out-of-home care placement setting.

As mentioned, the change in circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic is global. It has been felt universally by all people. There are three reasons the CPS Professional is concerned with the current change in circumstance:

Uncontrolled or new danger: The change in circumstance may bring about a change in adult functioning that activates known or additional danger. Think about CPS cases that are currently open for Ongoing Services at your agency. These are children who are already classified as unsafe. How might the change in circumstances cause danger to become active (e.g., parent's drinking occurs at different times and under different circumstances due to changes in their schedule) or safety service provider's availability is no longer reliable (e.g., provider cuts back on hours to take care of their own children).



In these instances, the danger may no longer be controlled, and safety must be reassessed. What does the danger now look like? Are services still available as needed? Is the parent still able and willing? These answers will help the CPS Professional decide if the change in circumstance requires modification to the Safety Plan, and if so, in what ways.

In other instances, new danger may emerge because of the change in circumstances brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Take for example the adult who is employed at the local grocery store. Their work hours and childcare needs increased at the same time. There is no one to provide supervision for the child while the adult is at work. The adult leaves the child home alone, or with an adult who is dangerous. New danger can surface in biological and placement homes. In these cases, CPS needs to assess whether these dangers result in an unsafe child so they can take appropriate action (i.e., modify Safety Plan, develop Risk Plans, or placement).

The Assessment of Adult and Child Functioning: In addition to specific concerns about how the outbreak impacts children whom CPS has already classified as unsafe, CPS is interested in understanding how the outbreak is impacting families when taking a new CPS report or completing an Initial Assessment. This information helps CPS understand the impact to adult and child functioning. In the case of Initial Assessment, analysis of adult and child functioning will inform the assessment of safety. It is likely staff at Access and Initial Assessment will routinely hear how the pandemic has impacted families (e.g., loss of jobs, services, social connections). All this information is considered in the context of adult and child functioning and ultimately the technical definitions of Present and Impending danger are applied to determine if it is likely to result in severe harm to a child. For example, CPS notes an observable condition related to a parent's anxiety. The CPS Professional must apply the technical definitions and criteria for Present and Impending Danger to determine if the observable condition is likely to result in severe harm to the child.

It is critical the CPS Professional receives supervisory support when analyzing severity. Not every family impacted by COVID-19 needs CPS's intervention. The deciding factors come down to whether the child is likely to be harmed in a severe way AND whether the parent/caregiver can shield them from the identified danger. Determining whether the change in circumstances related to the COVID-19 outbreak is a safety concern requires you to ask yourself "What is the difference between the risk of something that could lead to harm, and severe harm being a likely result." Seemingly subtle, the difference is significant. Consider the 14-year-old who is left home alone unsupervised while the parent goes to work. Depending on what you know about the child's functioning it could result in harm to the child, but it is not likely to result in severe harm for most 14-year olds. This would be different if we were talking about a 3-year-old. The determination of whether something concerning in a family is risk OR something that results in a child being unsafe where CPS must take action to shield the child from the identified danger comes down to understanding ...safety. This is an important distinction because the CPS Professional is not required to intervene in the same ways.



Service Provision When the assessment results in a professional judgement that the child is safe, but could be at risk of potential harm, the CPS Professional shifts to keeping a watchful eye on the observable condition(s) for the remainder of the assessment period. For example, the observable condition that is not yet out-of-control. If the information indicates it could become uncontrollable, the CPS Professional may recommend voluntary, supportive services to the family. For example, an adult who is a relative provider may experience increased stress and fewer breaks from caregiving. As a result, they may benefit from supportive services to help reduce stress and increase breaks so that it does not negatively impact the placement later.

When keeping a watchful eye on an observable condition that poses a risk to the child, but does not yet meet the technical definition of a child who is unsafe, the CPS Professional seeks to answer “How might this condition escalate? What information or observations would require me to reassess whether this is likely to result in severe harm (i.e., could it become dangerous)? What services can I offer now to help prevent the observable condition from escalating?”

In this primer we will discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the CPS Professional’s assessment of child safety. This primer will discuss children who are unsafe and at risk of becoming unsafe. In both instances, it is paramount for the CPS Professional to acknowledge the change in circumstances due to COVID-19 and to ask relevant questions to determine its impact on adult and child functioning. Critical information about adult and child functioning is gathered at each stage in the CPS process: Access, Initial Assessment, and Ongoing Services.

At each phase of CPS involvement, information to relevant questions inform the CPS Professional’s answer to the question: how has the change in circumstances (i.e., pandemic) impacted this child and that adult’s functioning? As we know, people can experience similar changes in circumstances in very different ways. For example, two different adults may lose employment during the pandemic. One may be living on the fringes of poverty and the other well established. It is the CPS Professional’s job to determine how the loss of employment increases the risk of danger and the adult’s ability to shield the child from it. Will the adult who lost their job become depressed and unable to provide supervision? Or cope with substance abuse? Or, is the loss of job a welcome relief? In all instances, the adult’s functioning matters to the extent it answers: how does this impact the child? Read on for more support when assessing adult and child functioning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

