

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE BRIEF

CHILD SAFETY AND RISK ASSESSMENTS IN AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE COMMUNITIES

OPRE REPORT # 2016-48



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Child Safety and Risk Assessments in American Indian and Alaska Native Communities

Child welfare practitioners need effective tools to assess children's immediate safety and risk of future maltreatment. Factors such as poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy contribute to increased risk of child maltreatment in general (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015) and have been linked to increased risk of neglect in American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities (National Indian Child Welfare Association, 1999).

This brief is a resource for human service professionals on child safety and risk assessments in AI/AN communities. It is informed by the work of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) with tribal child welfare professionals and by concerns in the field about the effectiveness of standard assessments in tribal communities. A majority of the tribal organizations that received ACF grants in 2011 to coordinate Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and child welfare services (9 of 14 grantees) used safety and risk assessments in their practice (Ahonen et al., 2016). Efforts to develop or modify risk and safety assessments are part of broader efforts to develop models that are based on native values and address the disproportionate removal of AI/AN children and placement in out-of-home care by state child welfare agencies.

This brief provides background on safety and risk assessments in child welfare practice,¹ reviews the relevant literature, explores the importance of cultural appropriateness in assessments, and provides examples of tribes' adaptations of assessments to fit their communities.

Introduction

Overview of Child Safety and Risk Assessments in Child Welfare Practice

Safety and risk assessments are critical components of child welfare practice. Their purpose is to identify problems and concerns within a family and determine whether a case should be opened for further investigation (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006). The assessments are usually initiated early in the child protective services process following the identification of a child suspected to be maltreated, during intake and initial assessment and/or investigation of the allegations.

¹ Assessment of prospective foster or adoptive families includes domains beyond safety and risk and is not addressed in this brief.

The concepts of safety and risk are different but related. In the context of child welfare, safety refers to immediate and/or imminent threat of maltreatment, while risk concerns the likelihood or probability of future harm.

Safety assessment is the collection and analysis of information on threatening family conditions and current, observable threats to the safety of a child or youth (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). The assessment tools are designed to support timely decision making and short-term safety planning for children found to be unsafe. They have focused criteria that can be responded to in yes/no or checklist fashion to determine whether a case requires further investigation. The results are used to make one of three decisions: the child is safe, conditionally safe (i.e., safe in the home with limited interventions), or unsafe. Most safety assessments address three critical questions (Hughes & Rycus, 2007):

- Has the child been recently maltreated, is the child currently being maltreated, or is the child at risk of imminent harm?
- What additional family and environmental factors may increase the likelihood of harm in the near term?
- Are there strengths and protective factors in the family that can mitigate maltreatment and be used to enhance the child's safety?

Safety assessment is the collection and analysis of information on threatening family conditions and current, observable threats to the safety of a child or youth...Risk assessment is the collection and analysis of information to determine the likelihood of future maltreatment.

Risk assessment is the collection and analysis of information to determine the likelihood of future maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). Risk assessment is more nuanced than safety assessment. It serves two purposes: to determine the probability that a child will be abused or neglected in the future and to estimate the severity of the harm that may occur. Case workers categorize level of risk on a continuum from low to very high and determine what interventions are required. Factors related to the child, caregiver, parents, family, and environment may increase or decrease the potential for harm (JBS International, 2015). Common factors assessed include—

- Past allegations or incidence of abuse or neglect
- Mental health issues
- Drug or alcohol problems
- Domestic violence
- Inconsistency of care (e.g. physical care)
- Inadequate housing and living environments

The results of safety and risk assessments help providers make immediate safety plans, conduct an investigation, and develop subsequent case plans. If maltreatment is indicated or substantiated, the initial assessments are followed by more comprehensive assessments to broaden the understanding of the family’s functioning. Child protection staff can use both safety and risk assessments to make informed decisions throughout the child welfare process.

Historically, child welfare providers based their determination of safety and risk on their professional knowledge, experience, and understanding of individual children and families. Beginning in the 1980s, informal approaches came under increased scrutiny. Researchers and human service professionals questioned their accuracy in the absence of scientific research that established their reliability and validity (Hughes & Rycus, 2007). Most child protection agencies are implementing formalized, structured processes, including uniform safety and risk assessment tools that serve as decision aids (Schlonsky & Gambrill, 2005). These processes provide guidance, including conceptual frameworks, core questions, and interview protocols. The assessment types and limitations are discussed in the literature review later in this brief.

Overview of Child Safety and Risk Assessments in Tribal Communities

Few safety and risk assessment tools have been developed specifically for tribal communities. Tribal child welfare agencies need quality tools with measures that are relevant and responsive to the cultures and values of AI/AN families. Efforts to develop or modify safety and risk assessments are part of a broader effort to develop practice models that are based on native values and address the disproportionate removal of AI/AN children from their families. This work is consistent with the priority in tribal child welfare to “(preserve) the safety of children within their families and culture” (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Tribes, 2011).

Most standard tools do not allow for cultural differences in definitions of family, parenting practices, and community resources. A common difference in tribal communities is the extent to which extended family and community members contribute to the parenting of children. These tribal customary or informal parenting support roles may be overlooked in a standard assessment of strengths. Risk factors such as tribal communities’ exposure to adverse events and trauma may also be overlooked when compared to majority population norms. Without norming² for a tribal context, standard instruments may

A common difference in tribal communities is the extent to which extended family and community members contribute to the parenting of children. These tribal customary or informal parenting support roles may be overlooked in a standard assessment of strengths.

² Norming is a process completed during the development of an instrument to ensure that a test is valid (or works) for an intended group of people. The process requires administering the test to a large enough sample of individuals from the intended population (i.e., people with the same demographics, such as age, race, geographic area) to ensure the test’s results are accurate and have the same meaning when administered to others in the group.

not be sensitive to risk or protective factors in AI/AN communities. Tribal cultures are unique and vary, so instruments should ideally be normed for each community.

Review of Literature and Resources on Child Safety and Risk Assessments

Literature on the evolution of child safety and risk assessments reveals prominent approaches, promising practices in the field, and limitations of standard approaches. The studies build on risk assessment models and guidelines developed in the 1980s that focused on optimal use of resources, provided rationale for service planning, and prioritized the identification of key risk factors (Child Welfare League of America, 2005). The extensive research base chronicles the progression from traditional case study to the formalized, structured methods widely used today. Currently, two types of structured assessments are used in child protection to estimate safety and risk: actuarial and consensus based.

Actuarial Assessments

Actuarial assessments are based on empirical study of known child protective cases and their subsequent outcomes. Items included in the assessments are derived from statistical analysis and weighted family and environmental factors that, if consistent with past cases, may be correlated with future child maltreatment.

Consensus-Based Assessments

Consensus-based assessments determine risk using clinical judgment and knowledge of research and theory. They are intended to bridge the gap between unstructured and actuarial approaches.

Comparisons of assessments in the 1990s concluded that both actuarial and consensus-based models were more accurate than clinical judgment in predicting maltreatment (Epperson, Kaul, & Hesselton, 1998; Dempster, 1998; English & Pecora, 1994). However, actuarial measures demonstrate stronger predictive validity and inter-rater reliability than consensus-based measures (Price-Robertson & Bromfield, 2011). Predictive validity is how well a specific tool predicts future behaviors. Inter-rater reliability is agreement between assessors' ratings of the same item.

The characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of actuarial and consensus-based assessments are outlined on the following page.

Actuarial Assessments

Decisions Reached by...	Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners score each item N=0, Y=1. Scores of individual items are added, and families are assigned to a risk category according to their overall score. Some tools grant practitioners a degree of latitude to override an assessment rating. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tend to use fewer factors than consensus-based tools; helping practitioners to focus on the most important ones. Provide precise estimates of the probability of further maltreatment. Often the empirical analysis is done in the area or state in which the tool will be applied, which helps ensure its accuracy and relevance. Use separate variables to predict the likelihood of different forms of child maltreatment. Show stronger evidence of inter-rater reliability and predictive validity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place less emphasis on unique, unusual, or context-specific factors than consensus-based tools. Tend not to incorporate practitioner knowledge. May be ineffective if applied in different contexts (e.g., Indigenous communities). May be rejected by some practitioners due to a perceived lack of supporting theory. Conversely, can be vulnerable to perceptions that they will always make an accurate prediction.

Consensus-Based Assessments

Decisions Reached by...	Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual items guide practitioners to consider risk factors. However, the final decision as to the overall family risk category is left to the practitioner's (guided) discretion. This is the most common form of consensus-based tool. <p>OR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As with actuarial tools, the scores of individual items are added, and families are assigned to a risk category according to their overall score. However, practitioners often have latitude to override assessment ratings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow greater flexibility than actuarial tools. Often do not impose restrictions on the weighting or combining of risk factors. Emphasize a comprehensive assessment of risk. Incorporate the clinical judgment and knowledge of practitioners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor inter-rater reliability and predictive validity have been reported as compared to actuarial measures. Can be poorly conceptualized, with loosely defined and ambiguous risk indicators. May be overly subjective and too reliant on professional discretion. Often use the same variables to predict all forms of child maltreatment, even though separate forms of maltreatment can have different indicators.

Source: Price-Robertson, R., & Bromfield, L. (2011). Risk assessment in child protection.

Strengths-Based Alternatives

To make appropriate decisions, child welfare professionals need a comprehensive, balanced understanding of both threats to child safety and mitigating protective factors. A common criticism of actuarial and consensus-based assessments is that they focus too heavily on risk and “neglect any strengths, resources, and competencies that families may possess” (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). The Signs of Safety model is an alternative strengths-based approach that originated in Australia and is widely used internationally. It “consider(s) danger and safety simultaneously” (Turnell & Edwards, 1999) and aims to “identify and understand the values, beliefs, and meanings held by all members of the family...(and) determine the willingness and capacity of the family to carry out any suggested plans” (Price-Robertson & Bromfield, 2011).

The most commonly used safety and risk assessment tools in child welfare agencies are strengths based and include both safety and risk components. They include Signs of Safety as well as Structured Decision Making and the ACTION/National Resource Center for Child Protective Services (NRCCPS) model (Southern Area Consortium of Human Services, 2012). According to a national survey, 23 States use Structured Decision Making statewide or in one or more county, service region, or tribal area; 17 use ACTION/NRCCPS; and 11 use Signs of Safety (some use more than one model) (Casey Family Programs, 2011). Key administration, components, and scoring features of these models are outlined in the appendix. Additional information is available in the NRCCPS Decision-Making Tools Library and through links to tools (see Bibliography and Resources).

Assessment Adaptations and Implications for Tribal Communities

Applicability of Standard Assessment Tools

Most standard tools were not developed for indigenous or other minority groups (Maiter, 2009; Strega, 2009), which presents a significant challenge for tribal child welfare agencies. Among more than 100 tribes surveyed in 2011, most were using standard tools from their states (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Tribes, 2011). Several respondents expressed the desire to customize tools to reflect their cultures and values, and many tribal agencies have begun to adapt measures or develop their own instruments. To be effective, actuarial assessments should be based on diverse cultural populations, and consensus-based assessments should be based on child development and family functioning in tribal contexts (Price-Robertson & Bromfield, 2011).

Assessments Implemented in Tribal Communities

In the absence of culturally specific instruments, tribal child welfare agencies have used multiple means to assess child safety and risk. The five tribes on the following page have successfully implemented assessments, each in a different way. Their methods included customizing a standard assessment with the assistance of the developer, validating an instrument for a specific tribal population, adapting a state assessment to reflect local tribal culture and values, and expanding assessment knowledge through staff and community training.

Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska. In 2012, the tribal council partnered with the National Council on Crime and Delinquencies Children’s Research Center, developers of the Structural Decision Making model, to create a culturally responsive safety and risk assessment system. They adapted the model for use with families eligible for Tribal TANF to identify levels of risk for harm within the next 18 to 24 months. The system includes a screening assessment, a strengths and needs assessment, and a reassessment to determine whether services should be continued. Clear ratings of degree of risk have helped caseworkers prioritize families and manage their caseloads. At-risk families are referred to a program called Preserving Native Families for preventative and family support services (National Council of Crime and Delinquency’s Children’s Research Center, 2014).

Chippewa Cree Tribe of the Rocky Boys. Chippewa Cree of the Rocky Boys’ Reservation of Montana was one of three tribes that participated in the Casey Family Programs Breakthrough Series Collaborative on safety and risk assessments in 2009. The collaborative engaged 200 providers from 21 public and tribal child welfare agencies in the development, modification, or reform of assessment practices over an 18-month period. The tribe incorporated its values into the state’s safety assessment instruments using culturally responsive questions (Casey Family Programs, 2009).

Cook Inlet Tribal Council. As part of its 2006 TANF–Child Welfare coordination grant, the council worked with an evaluator to validate the North Carolina Family Assessment Scales for use with AN families in and around Anchorage, AK. Staff credited their ability to measure improvements in family safety and risk factors to local validation of the instrument. The project team demonstrated high inter-rater reliability in the family safety domain and improved scores in the areas of physical abuse, emotional abuse, child neglect, and domestic violence. High levels of agreement with case managers’ perspectives supported the predictive validity of the scales with AN families (Cook Inlet Tribal Council, 2009).

Oglala Sioux Tribe. The tribe implemented culturally responsive training to prepare its child protection staff to make safety and risk decisions. The curriculum focuses on distinguishing roles and responsibilities of the tribal agencies that investigate and prosecute child maltreatment cases, providing definitions and indicators of child abuse and neglect, distinguishing levels of risk using community-oriented examples, and providing training on conducting risk assessment with families. The curriculum includes initial interview questions, safety questions, and questions to determine risk and family functioning. Materials include terminology in the Lakota language and case examples within the local tribal context (Tribal Child Welfare Institute, 2011).

Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, Minnesota. Through its participation in the SafeKids/SafeStreets evaluation, the tribe developed a program called Building Strong Native American Families. This program overhauled child welfare practice in the community and aimed to increase staff and community knowledge about child abuse and neglect. This included interdisciplinary provider training, mandated reporter training for all tribal employees, a brochure for providers, and training for community members. Demonstrated improvements include increased sensitivity of providers to the cultural backgrounds of children and families and improved recognition of abuse by professionals (Westat, 2005).

Challenges

Tribal communities need safety and risk assessment instruments that have been developed, validated, and normed for them. While several tribes have successfully adapted tools in collaboration with developers and researchers, these efforts require substantial investment of resources, time, and caseworker training.

Developers and administrators must consider AI/AN tribal values and practices, such as the “intricate web of familial, kinship, tribal, and community relationships” that supports the raising of children (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Tribes, 2011). Researchers and practitioners in child welfare recognize the importance of cultural validity³ in decision making. The Casey Family Programs Breakthrough Series Collaborative (2009) addressed cultural biases in safety and risk assessment that may lead to disparate outcomes for children of color at every child welfare decision point, such as substantiation of abuse and neglect referrals, removals from the home, and reunifications.

“Staff are using traditional teachings with parents on the importance of safety and risk issues...CPS and case managers bring the strengths of the family into focus for parents to review and build from...If traditional services are requested, [the] case manager will help with locating a traditional practitioner and encourage the family toward well-being and balance.”

—Navajo Nation team member, Shiprock, NM, in self-assessment of system improvements made during Casey Family Programs Breakthrough Series Collaborative

Conclusion

Safety and risk assessments are important child welfare practice tools in AI/AN communities, providing a framework for asking key questions and documenting findings. When used by trained child welfare professionals, structured assessment instruments may provide consistency and reduce bias in child protection decisions.

The science of safety and risk assessment is still imperfect. Many questions remain regarding the reliability and validity of structured assessments, both broadly and in tribal communities. Further development, implementation, and study of assessment practices in tribal communities will inform effective prevention and intervention.

Regardless of the instruments chosen, the human element remains important. All resources, including professional experience and judgment, should be called upon to identify strengths and to make sound decisions regarding children’s safety. The experiences of tribal child welfare agencies that have worked to improve safety and risk assessment in their communities, such as those presented in this brief, provide promising examples for other tribes.

³ Culturally valid assessment addresses the socio-cultural influences (e.g., values, beliefs, experiences, communication patterns) and socioeconomic conditions prevailing in a cultural group.

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Resources

ACTION 4 Child Protection, Inc. Safety Intervention Articles. Available at <http://action4cp.org/resources/archives/>

California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare. Measurement Tools for Child Welfare. Available at <http://www.cebc4cw.org/assessment-tools/>

Child Abuse and Neglect User Manual Series. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. Available through the Child Welfare Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/>

Screening and Assessment in Child Protection. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. Available through the Child Welfare Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/responding/ia/>

National Child Welfare Resource Center for Tribes. Tribal Child Welfare Practice Findings. Available at <http://www.nrc4tribes.org/Tribal-Child-Welfare-Practice-Findings.cfm>

National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. NCWWI Reference List: Data-Driven Decision Making and Continuous Quality Improvement. Available at http://ncwwi.org/files/NCWWI_Data-Driven_DM-CQI_Reference_List.pdf

National Council on Crime and Delinquency. Children's Research Center. Structured Decision Making Model. Available at <http://www.nccdglobel.org/assessment/structured-decision-making-sdm-model>

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Signs of Safety. Resolutions Consultancy. Available at <http://www.signsofsafety.net/>

Appendix

Three Most Frequently Used Child Safety and Risk Assessment Models

Model	Overview
ACTION/NRCCPS	<p>Consensus-based approach</p> <p>Three-part assessment includes—</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identification of Safety Threats: 16 items on both present and impending danger 2. Caregiver Protective Capacities: 16 items on specific “assets that can contribute to reduction, control or prevention of present and/or impending danger” 3. Make the Safety Decision: Based on presence of safety threats and potential protective capacities that may control those threats <p>Decision assessment choices are “safe,” “conditionally safe,” and “unsafe”</p>
Signs of Safety	<p>Ecological approach</p> <p>Administration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple, open format form used in discussion with all persons involved in a child protection case to record professionals’ and family members’ views regarding concerns or dangers, existing strengths, safety, and envisioned safety <p>Core Questions/Domains Addressed (Turnell, 2012)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are we worried about? (Past harm, future danger and complicating factors) • What’s working well? (Existing strengths and safety) • What needs to happen? (Future safety) • Where are we on a scale of 0 to 10 where 10 means there is enough safety for child protection authorities to close the case and 0 means it is certain that the child will be (re)abused? (Judgment) <p>Decision Framework</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety and Context Scales <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Safety Scale: Given the danger and safety information, rate the situation on a scale of 0–10, where 0 means recurrence of similar or worse abuse/neglect is certain and 10 means that there is sufficient safety for the child to close the case. ▪ Context Scale: Rate this case on a scale of 0–10, where 10 means this is not a situation where any action would be taken and 0 means this is the worst case of child abuse/neglect that the agency has seen. • Agency Goals: What will the agency need to see occur to be willing to close this case? • Family Goals: What does the family want generally and regarding safety? • Immediate Progress: What would indicate to the agency that some small progress had been made?

Model

Overview

Structured Decision Making (SDM)

SDM Safety Assessment

Actuarial approach

Administration

- Completed in paper form by the primary caregiver or administered by the caseworker in an interview of the PC
- Individual items scored according to definitions and based on conditions that exist at the time of the assessment

Assessment Framework

- Safety Factors: 14 (Y/N) items; comments and other factors can be specified on form
- Safety Interventions: 8 potential safety interventions that allow child to remain in the home can be indicated, including “Other.” Resources considered for each safety factor identified, and actions taken are noted on the tool (e.g., non-maltreating caregiver moved to a safe environment with the child)
- Safety Decision: Decision made based on needs of least safe child in the home
 - No safety factors identified
 - One or more safety factors identified—Child to remain at home with interventions
 - One or more safety factors identified—Placement only protection intervention possible

SDM Risk Assessment

Actuarial approach

Administration

- Completed *after* the safety assessment and after the caseworker has reached a conclusion regarding an allegation and *before* a referral is closed or promoted to a case
- Completed by the caseworker for household in which abuse or neglect was alleged
- Individual items scored according to definitions
- Scored according to worker’s observations, including objective characteristics observed, discretionary judgment, statements, reports, other sources

Assessment Framework

- 12 Neglect index items and 11 Abuse index items scored
- Scored Risk Level is based on the highest total score on either the neglect or abuse scale: Low, Moderate, High, Very High