

Assessing 101: Being Fair and Balanced (Practice Guide)



Audience

Caseworkers

Outcome

Using the guidance provided here, caseworkers will work toward applying fairness and balance during the Assessing process phase. This allows caseworkers to improve their engagement and assessment of the family, and effectively meeting the competency framework of the Texas CPS Practice Model.

Why Do This?

Assessing enables the caseworker to engage the family in collaborative dialogue, identify issues families are facing, identify strengths and worries of family members, and determine the family's ability to develop and apply plans for sustainable safety. Being fair and balanced during the Assessing phase contributes to consistency and accuracy in decision-making.

Practice Guidance

The information below provides questions, tips and other guidance you may use during the Assessing phase of the Texas CPS Practice Model. This guidance is meant as a critical thinking tool to use in developing a quality-based approach. These are not specific instructions or mandatory steps. What you do in each situation depends on the specifics of that situation. You will need to work with your supervisor to determine the best plan for each case; then, use this guidance to effectively implement the plan within the Texas CPS Practice Model framework.

What Do I Want to Achieve?

What can I do to achieve a fair and balanced assessment that will maximize child safety, minimize risk and look for child and family strengths?

General Guidance

Assessing can mean two things:

- First, you are asking questions and having conversations that will be gathering detailed information.
- Second, you are finding the most factual and specific information (in the present and from the case history) that will meet the child's every day safety needs, or those adult behaviors that may be putting the child at risk for immediate or future harm.

When you are assessing you are talking with children and families; you are not interrogating them. In this case you are respectful and transparent about your role. A good way to consider your role is to ask yourself how you would want to be interviewed if you were that child or parent.

Your assessing is fair and balanced because you are considering:

- what is the worry or harm and danger,
- what is going well (a parent's protective actions),
- what needs to happen, and
- what is your judgment about safety.

At the same time, your assessing will need to be impartial because you will determine if parents, caregivers or extended family can meet the child's safety needs quickly enough. In order to be impartial, you need to understand your personal bias and ensure that those bias are not reflected in your assessments.

A focus for your assessing includes demonstrating respect towards the family through a questioning approach without assuming a first impression judgment about safety. Here, you will need to balance intuition with critical analysis of each case. This ability reflects the skillful use of your authority.

10 Practice Tips for Building Knowledge and Skills

1. What have you learned about "flight risk" from trainings or in the case history that will help your planning? What do you know about the differences between low and high flight risk, and what are the necessary questions you will ask and information you will need?

2. In the face of family members hostility to your presence, what steps do you take to stay calm and safe?
3. When you meet the family for the first time, what skills do you use to get in the front door while at the same time not overwhelming them? How do you use your skillful authority to let family members know what you would like to do?
4. What fair and balanced steps have you taken with your assessment planning that will tell you about:
 - a. what are the worries,
 - b. what is going well and
 - c. what needs to happen?
5. What are some questions you can ask family members and children about “worries”, that will help you identify the "what’s" and "how’s" of safety and risk? That is, how do "what" questions help us determine safety? How do "how" questions help us determine risk to the child if nothing changes? Do these same questions consider the input from the family network?
6. What are some questions around what’s going well that help you get at family strengths and family protective actions?
7. What are some of the questions you ask that help family members think about what needs to happen, what needs to change? How do you use your skillful authority?
8. What are all the things you notice about the children that can help you with your assessment, and help to determine how safe they are right now and after you leave?
9. What specific information will you want to have by taking children aside and doing the 3 houses?
10. What "other" information will you need to help you make an informed judgment about child safety?

Additional Guidance

Your skillful use of authority is critical. Think of the ways you will assert and use yourself in an honest and transparent manner with a parent when discussing safety issues.

- Notice how you show respect to each family member from the first contact.
- Notice how you compliment family members for what you see them say or do.
- Are words like "harm", "risk", "danger", and "safety" used consistently so professionals and family members know what they mean?
- How do you engage with children at their developmental level?
- Notice how you minimize the use of jargon.

- You are more likely to gain traction with a family if you see yourself as an authority figure that influences by asking short open ended questions rather than by demanding answers.
- Your listening skills are critical. A parent's anger is NOT about you; they are frightened. How do you alleviate that? How do you listen early to their side of the story?
- Eye contact and body posture, such as non-verbal behavior, will say a lot to a family member about your intentions.
- What do you do to engage children who might be in the home?
- Notice the quality of the questions you ask family members, versus statements of expectation.
- Notice how you specifically tell family members what will happen next.

My Reflection

- What did I do well in this assessment in spite of it being stressful?
- What would the child and/or family say I did to engage them and build respect?
- What did I say or do that attempted to build some hope and alleviate unintentional fear?
- Based on what happened, what will I take to supervision?