

Violence Of Any Kind In A Home Is A Threat To A Child's Safety

Introduction

Violence of any kind within a home is a threat to a child's safety. While safety assessment models across the country vary somewhat regarding the safety threats that are included as safety assessment criteria, all safety assessment models include violence. Most are concerned with violence of caregivers; some include any violent person in the home.

In a sense, this safety threat is a "no brainer." But let's spend some time on this one anyway to consider it in some detail and see if there are any nuances or clarifications that might be worth knowing.

Definition and Elaboration

Violence refers to aggression, fighting, brutality, cruelty, and hostility. It may be immediately observable, regularly active, or generally potentially active. Keep in mind that violence as a safety threat includes domestic violence generally, spousal abuse specifically, but also tendencies and behaviors that are more pervasively apparent such as those associated with civil disturbances, fighting, or violent acts involving non family members, association with violent groups such as gangs. Of course, the point is that any of these occurrences of violent behavior or tendencies are occurring directly in or around a child and the home or potentially could bring such behavior into the home.

A point to remember is that this includes *purposeful* violence and *impulsive* violence. Some purposeful violent responses occur as a means for conducting life, resolving conflict, and solving personal problems, while some violent responses

occur somewhat impulsively, such as a blow up, as a result of a particular stimulation, stress, an event, and so on.

We automatically think of violence as a threat to safety involving physical force to injure others or to damage or destroy property and things. It's important to also consider violence as a safety threat related to intimidation; terrorizing; coercion; and depriving people of their freedom, independence, and individuality. Now certainly some of these things, such as depriving people of their freedom, cannot be used conclusively as a threat to safety, but it can be important information in forming a conclusion about characteristics of someone who is violent.

Keep in mind **people** that may not seem violent. Caregivers or others in the home may conduct their lives generally in acceptable ways but demonstrate violence or commit violent acts under certain circumstances. And...such people may justify their behavior based on various rationales like good parenting or religious motivation. Consider parents who overstep any reasonable standard related to corporal punishment resulting in vicious beatings and justify their actions as in the best interest of the child or consistent with responsible parenting.

You see that we've included in this safety threat reference to *dangerous* people. In June 2003, we wrote about these people who fit into the category of violence associated with safety threats. In that article, we said:

Dangerous people are those who are likely to cause injury and pain with intent. The dangerous person doesn't abuse a child by mistake but on purpose. Such individuals have a kind of predatory nature. They are extremely self-centered which supports their behavior and results in a disregard for others or their suffering. Dangerous people are usually men

with histories of violence. Their lives lack stability related to such things as relationships and employment. Dangerous people are seriously maladjusted (which may not be obvious). Dangerous people may experience a range of personality disorders or psychopathology.

Pitfall

Earlier we said that this is a safety threat that seems to be a “no brainer.” Sure, it’s in every safety model in the country. Violent people are a danger to others around them whether directly or as bystanders. The problem is that violent people are not always clearly evident during CPS intervention. Often people report cases to CPS for reasons other than violence. So there is a danger in thinking that violence is obvious. There is danger in assuming that if violence is either not observable or reported by a family member, then it doesn’t exist. As you probably already know, a byproduct of violence is an atmosphere that accommodates it and hides it. Family members are as likely as not to avoid revealing violence in the home because of fear, to protect other family members, or even shame.

When violence is readily apparent during a CPS intervention, then it probably fits the present danger definition. Violence that is not apparent, whether it’s been reported or not, fits the impending danger definition. When a cloud of violence characterizes a family and a home, family members live in a state of danger—which is the fundamental meaning of impending danger.

To avoid this pitfall of overlooking violence, it is important that you (1) remain open to discovering violence in the home; (2) continue to interact and engage all family members in a non threatening, supportive manner; (3) seek sufficient information to fully understand the dynamics and functioning of family

members and the family; and (4) look for indicators in the home, family, and individuals of violent relationships, a violent climate, violent acts, and attempt to reconcile these indicators with respect to meaning and context that explain them.

It's important that you ready yourself to become prepared, knowledgeable, and skillful when intervening and interviewing in cases where violence may exist. Of course, we are not able in this article to provide practice guidance and specific techniques. But we encourage you to pursue sources of information and skill development that can serve you to avoid the pitfall we refer to here. Effectively gather relevant, revealing information; safeguard family members during intervention; and correctly evaluate violence as a safety threat. We've found that a Google search related to violence or domestic violence can provide a good starting place for identifying practice articles and guides.

Application of the Safety Threshold Criteria

A family condition, behavior, or situation is only a threat to safety if it meets the safety threshold criteria (see the article September 2004, *Considering the Safety Threshold*.)

To be out of control, the violence must be active. It moves beyond being angry or upset, particularly related to a specific event. The violence is representative of the person's state-of-mind or impulsive outrage and is either pervasive in terms of the way they feel and act or highly reactive. There is nothing within the family or household that can counteract the violence.

The active aspect of this sort of behavior and emotion could easily lash out toward family members and children, specifically, who may be targets or

bystanders. Vulnerable children who cannot self-protect—who cannot get out of the way and who have no one to protect them—could experience severe physical or emotional effects from the violence. The severe effects could include serious physical injury, terror, or death.

The judgment about imminence is based on sufficient understanding of the dynamics and patterns of violent emotions and behavior. To the extent the violence is a pervasive aspect of a person's character or a family dynamic, occurs either predictably or unpredictably, and has a standing history, it is conclusive that the violence and likely severe effects could or will occur for sure and soon.

Examples of This Threat

This threat includes both behaviors and emotions as illustrated in the following examples.

- Violence includes hitting, beating, physically assaulting a child, spouse or other family member.
- Violence includes acting dangerously toward a child or others including throwing things, bantering weapons, driving recklessly, aggressively intimidating, and terrorizing.
- Family violence involves physical and verbal assault on a parent in the presence of a child; the child witnesses the activity and is fearful for self and/or others.
- Family violence is occurring, and a child is assaulted.
- Family violence is occurring, and a child may be attempting to intervene.
- Family violence is occurring, and a child could be inadvertently harmed even though the child may not be the actual target of the violence.

- Parent/caregiver is impulsive, exhibiting physical aggression, having temper outbursts, or unanticipated and harmful physical reactions (e.g., throwing things).

Florida's Center for the Advancement of Child Welfare Practice

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