How do lived experts define and assess child safety?

This brief was developed in partnership with members of the Casey Family Programs Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Board, which includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, foster and adoptive parents with lived experience in the child welfare system. Transforming the child welfare system will require centering the expertise of those most impacted and engaging them in co-designing projects and strategies for systems change.

Child safety is the fundamental responsibility of a child protection agency. In the context of child welfare, safety often is defined as a child's freedom from abuse or neglect.

A child's experience of feeling safe might be very different from a system's definition. Children or older youth who have been separated from their family, neighborhood, culture, faith, or school may not feel safe, even if they have been protected from immediate harm. Families living in communities where friends and neighbors are subject to child protective services investigations, or where few resources exist, may not feel safe even if they themselves do not experience a CPS investigation or family separation.

Individuals impacted by the child welfare system are best positioned to help child welfare professionals better understand what safety means to the children and families they serve, how to assess it, and what changes may be necessary to ensure the system fulfills its promise of safety.[i]

> "From a lived experience perspective, safety isn't about feeling as though I won't be harmed. It's about not feeling the anxieties, pressures, and fears on a day-to-day basis. Put yourself in the families' shoes. Do you think they feel safe? What anxieties might they be feeling right now?"
>
> —Gabriel Foley, Youth, Illinois

What are some common safety assessment challenges?

The child welfare safety assessment process focuses on "immediate" or "imminent" danger of serious harm. But predicting the future, even the immediate, is difficult. Differences in caseworkers' education, experience, caseloads, and personal biases can influence decision-making.[ii] These differences impact critical decisions about family separation, as well as determinations about the safety of kinship care, foster home, and group placements.

Many jurisdictions use structured tools to help, and they vary widely among jurisdictions. As of 2021, 13 states required formal safety assessment in statute, and 12 specified safety assessment instruments.[iii] A review in 2019 identified 11 safety assessment instruments in use. Most did not define "immediate danger."

A 2022 quality improvement study of safety assessments and safety plans conducted by Washington state found evidence of racial disparities in both, with American Indian/Alaska Native families most affected by bias in the safety assessment and Black families most affected in safety plans. Preliminary recommendations from the study included developing clear standards for the administration of multiple, integrated safety assessment tools and additional training in cultural competence.

All child protection agencies reassess safety, formally or informally, at various points throughout a family's case, including prior to unsupervised family time, before a child returns home, when significant changes (such as marriage or a birth) have occurred in a parent's home, and prior to case closure. These assessments are not necessarily consistent in employing instruments, criteria, or decision-makers. For example, at least seven states use separate instruments to reassess families before children may return home.[iv] These differences can contribute to different standards of safety being applied to a child's family or kinship caregiver than a foster family, or a higher bar for reunification than was applied at removal — both of which could result in longer family separations.

> "Lived safety has to do with every area of your life, whether you're in a home, a bedroom, at school, or out in the community. It's important to look at all those kinds of safety the entire time a child is in care instead of looking only at the question of, 'Is my parent keeping me safe?'"
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> —Beth Patton, Kinship Caregiver, Kansas

How might safety assessment better reflect lived experience?

Family engagement is an important aspect of gathering information and accurately assessing safety and risk. Greater awareness of how children and families define safety can help build empathy and commonality between caseworkers and the children, families, and communities they serve. The following recommendations were developed in conversation with lived experts — youth formerly in foster care, parents previously involved in the child welfare system, kinship caregivers, and foster parents.

Honoring the strength and expertise of families

Safety Organized Practice (SOP) is a collaborative, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive evidence-based approach for achieving safety, permanency, and well-being for children. SOP positions children, families, and their networks as experts and holds practitioners responsible for honoring each family's unique culture and perspectives. An SOP toolkit offers resources to support engagement, assessment, training, safety planning, and transitions.

Take multiple aspects of safety into account

While child welfare practice defines safety in the context of child maltreatment and the risks therein, lived experts described safety — or its absence — within several domains:

- Is connection to my culture and religion respected and protected?
- Do I feel supported in engaging in my cultural practices and traditions?
- Can I safely express my thoughts and feelings, sexual orientation, and gender identity?
- Do I have adequate privacy and feel safe in my home, school, neighborhood, and online activities?

> "My idea of safety could be very different from someone else's, based on culture. We have to be informed to explain those differences to different groups.'"
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> —Melissa Zimmerman, Parent, Arizona

Assess the well-being of the whole family

A growing body of research[v] supports the idea that the safety of children cannot be assessed in isolation from the well-being of their families. Parental resilience is a well-known protective factor against child maltreatment. Reducing parents' hardships and supporting the family's economic well-being help protect children and buffer the family from stressors. When children cannot remain with their parents, evidence suggests that children in *formal* kinship care, with caregivers receiving support through the child welfare system, are safer than those in *informal* kinship care, where such support is scant or non-existent.[vi]

Engage families with cultural humility

Not all cultures define safety the same way, particularly when it comes to prioritizing different aspects of safety. The idea that one culture or group of people knows what is best for all children across all cultures is false and can undermine children and families' experience of safety when it drives child welfare decision-making. Culturally competent assessments and services increase the likelihood that families will feel safe seeking and accepting support that may protect their children. Cultural humility requires building trust with community leaders and approaching families

with curiosity and an openness to learn about their cultural norms and beliefs, as well as an awareness of caseworkers' own lenses and perspectives.

Consider the availability of community supports

Family actions offer only a partial picture of child safety. The ability of families to protect their children is often impacted by public investment in the community where they live. Research shows that living in poverty has significant long-term negative impacts on families. While family poverty never should be confused with child neglect, neighborhood poverty is one of the strongest predictors of a child's risk of child welfare system involvement and a host of other poor outcomes.[vii] [viii] Conversely, the presence of community-based supports, such as family resource centers, help families overcome occasional challenges and reduce children's risk of entry into foster care. Economic supports, such as food, housing assistance, or low-cost childcare, increase child safety by helping parents provide for their families and reduce stress. A more complete framework of safety planning would include ensuring that all families have access to these essential safety nets and live in communities where public policies enable them to thrive.

Weigh the harms of CPS investigation and family separation against other risks

A child protective services investigation process is adversarial by nature and frequently can compound trauma and anxiety in families already facing stressful life circumstances. The decision to separate children from their families comes with its own risks, including the potential for maltreatment in congregate care, frequent moves, disrupted schooling, long stays in care, reaching adulthood without a legal connection to family, and inadequate or inappropriate behavioral health support, including overprescription of psychiatric medications.[ix] [x] Child welfare safety assessment and decision-making therefore should weigh the likelihood of future harm not in isolation, but against known risks. Offering families voluntary services in the home or community, when possible, might be the best route to achieve the goal of child safety.

> "Forced family separation and the idea that brown and Black women don't know how to mother is deep in the origins of the child welfare system. There's this idea that one culture or the way one set of people might live is the best way, and those children will have the best outcomes, when in reality they might just face fewer barriers — socially, economically, and financially."
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> —Brittney Lee, Youth, Washington

Questions to consider

The following questions, which incorporate the perspectives of those with lived experience in child welfare, can help child protection agencies broaden their views on safety and safety assessment:

- In what ways does your agency assess children's emotional, mental/cognitive, social, physical, cultural, and spiritual safety while in the agency's care?
- How are the needs of the whole family assessed, including poverty-related concerns, in considering safety?

- How do you promote and encourage workers' cultural humility and competence in safety assessment?
- What public policies or systemic issues might undermine families' ability to keep their children safe in your jurisdiction? What services could promote family well-being in spite of these challenges?
- How does your agency invite and assess children and older youth's own feelings about the safety, comfort, and support within their homes, schools, and neighborhoods? What is the protocol for responding when a child or family expresses feelings of being unsafe?
- How do the safety assessment procedures and tools of your agency limit and correct for the impact of cultural differences and personal bias?
- How often is safety reassessed throughout the duration of a case, and are the same standards applied at each stage?
- How does your agency ensure, before case closure, that families know where to find help and how to access safety-enhancing services if needed in the future?

> "Neglect might be a result of lack of resources to properly support families, instead of a lack of willingness to grow and learn how to be a better parent. Improved child safety requires policies that set up economic and concrete supports, and then communities that are willing to drive families toward family resource centers where they can receive those supports."
>
> —Gabriel Foley, Youth, Illinois

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[i] Content of this brief was informed through ongoing consultation with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Board. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience in the child welfare system who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Members who contributed to this brief include: Gabriel Foley, Brittney Lee, Beth Patton, and Melissa Zimmerman.
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[v] Center for Youth Wellness and ZERO TO THREE. (2018). Two-generation approach to ACEs.
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[viii] Kim, H. and Drake, B. (2023). Has the relationship between community poverty and child maltreatment report rates become stronger or weaker over time? *Child Abuse and Neglect*, *143*.
[ix] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. (2021, May 7). Child welfare outcomes 2018: Report to Congress (Publication No. cwo2018).
[x] American Bar Association, Children's Rights Litigation Committee. (2019, May). Trauma caused by separation of children from parents: A tool to help lawyers.

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