

# BENCH CARD: Structured Decision Making



Research has demonstrated that when decision makers know exactly what information to consider (and what to ignore), they do better. Children and families experience treatment that is more equitable and more consistent.

Based on decades of research and practice, the SDM® model provides a framework for focusing on key information at each child welfare decision point:

- At the initial phone call: Should we screen this case in and respond? How quickly?
- At first contact: Is the child in any immediate, serious danger? Can she safely stay in the home?
- When concluding an initial investigation or assessment: Would this family benefit from intensive, ongoing intervention?
- If building a long-term plan: What are the most important things for this family to work on?
- If a child has been removed: Can this child be safely returned home, or should alternative permanency become the goal?
- When getting ready to end CPS involvement: If we close the case, will the child remain safe?

The SDM model provides an evidence-based framework for each of these decision points. Ensuring that workers collect and evaluate the same information in the same way reduces the range of what may happen to a given family based on which worker happens to be on duty that day, and supports equity for all families.

One of the cornerstones of the SDM system is the risk assessment. The SDM risk assessment was created through the use of powerful research methodology called actuarial science. Actuarial risk assessments in child welfare are created by sampling thousands of cases, and examining and analyzing hundreds of potential risk factors. Researchers are then able to determine which factors, and which combination of factors, will provide child protection workers with the information they need most.

The SDM model has been tested repeatedly on all of these measures. It has proven equitable across racial and ethnic groups. It is accurate and valid. It is reliable and consistent across workers, locations, and times. It has been used to improve practice and outcomes.

## Definitions:

**Intake assessment:** The screening section of the intake assessment helps child abuse hotline workers determine if the current report requires a child protective services (CPS) investigation response. The response priority section helps workers determine how swiftly an investigation must be initiated for those reports accepted for investigation.

**Safety assessment:** The assessment helps workers at all points in a case determine if there are active safety threats and if interventions are necessary to mitigate the safety threat. The Safety Assessment is completed within the first 24-hours of the first face-to-face contact with the family for the Initial Assessment.

- **Safety** in the context of the SDM system means looking for serious and imminent threats to a child. Serious means that the harm would require medical or mental health attention or emergency services, and that if the threat cannot be contained, the child could not remain in the home.
- **Imminent** means that there is a reasonable expectation that the harm will occur in the next week or month. In the SDM system, safety is assessed at first contact with a family, and again whenever a threat to safety occurs. A subsequent Safety Assessment is completed: anytime there is a new allegation; or anytime conditions in the home change; and prior to recommending case closure in an ongoing case.

**Risk and Prevention Assessments:** These actuarial assessments estimate the likelihood of future incident of neglect or abuse based on past and present circumstances and assists Initial Assessment CFSS in determining the appropriate level of intervention based on the risk level. Risk and Prevention Assessments inform the same decision: The risk assessment is used only when maltreatment has occurred, and the prevention assessment is used when there are safety concerns but there are no allegations of maltreatment by the caregiver.

- **Risk** evaluates the probability that harm will occur in the next year to two years. The higher the risk, the longer it is necessary to see acts of protection demonstrated before being persuaded that the harm will not occur again. The worker will also take into consideration

the vulnerability of the child, the acts of safety demonstrated by the parents in the past, and the safety net of the family.

**Family strengths and needs assessment:** The FSNA informs case planning by structuring the CFSS's assessment of family caregivers and all children across a common set of domains of family functioning. For the case plan, priority areas of need are chosen as the focus of efforts to improve family functioning and child safety. This assessment is repeated every time a new case plan is created.

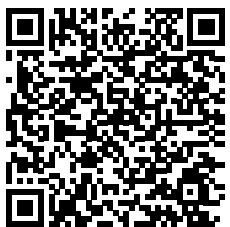
- **Needs** are about the underlying conditions in the home that may contribute to safety threats or risk factors.
- **Strengths** are areas of a family's life where they exhibit power and decision making and are also areas that can be built upon to achieve safety.

**Risk reassessment:** For families receiving in-home services, the actuarial risk reassessment helps the ongoing CFSS determine when risk has been reduced sufficiently that the case may be recommended for closure.

- After an in-home case has been open for three months, the **risk reassessment** is completed to determine if the likelihood of future harm has decreased to the extent that the case can be closed, or if the family should continue to receive services. The **risk reassessment** is completed every three months until the case is closed.

**Reunification assessment:** For families with a child in out-of-home care with a goal of reunification, this assessment helps the CFSS determine when a child may safely be returned to the home, or when a change in permanency goal should be considered. The assessment has four sections that focus on risk, parenting time, safety, and permanency. This assessment is redone every three months.

**Assessment of Placement Safety and Suitability:** Whenever there is an allegation of child maltreatment in a foster home or concerns about child safety in placement are raised, this assessment is completed. It assists the CFSS in determining if any threats to child safety are present and if a safety plan could contain such threats and allow the child to remain in the foster home.



*Why Structure Decisions in Child Welfare?*

From Chronicle of Social Change.org

<https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/featured/why-structure-decisions-in-child-welfare/12170>

# BENCH CARD: Structured Decision Making



## Protective Custody (Temporary Custody) Hearings

SDM Assessment	What it is/does	What a worker should be able to describe
SDM Safety Assessment	<p>Systematic way to identify the presence or absence of imminent danger of serious harm (safety threats); presence or absence of protective capacities; and whether or not a plan could be developed that would provide sufficient protection if the child remains home.</p> <p>Each item has an accompanying definition to help increase consistency in what is considered a safety threat.</p>	<p>The specific facts that supported marking a safety threat.</p> <p>Reasons identifying protective capacities that were considered insufficient to directly mitigate the danger or safety threat.</p>

## Adjudication

SDM Assessment	What it is/does	What a worker should be able to describe
SDM Safety Assessment	See above (Protective/Temporary Custody).	<p>The specific facts that supported marking a safety threat. Information supporting the presence of a safety threat may be relevant to the question of adjudication.</p> <p>Reasons existing protective capacities were considered insufficient to directly mitigate the danger OR reasons a safety plan is controlling the danger.</p>
SDM Risk Assessment	An actuarial tool to estimate the probability that a child in this household will be maltreated in the next two years.	The family's risk level. Whether the scored risk level matched the worker's impression.
SDM Prevention Assessment	The resulting risk level of low, moderate, high or very high is a VALID ESTIMATE OF PROBABILITY, but not a PREDICTION.	The facts the worker relied on for scoring items.
SDM FSNA	A comprehensive assessment of strengths and needs to help focus case planning.	If the adjudication hearing is being held more than 30 days after initial contact with the family, the FSNA may have been completed, but will only be included if a case plan has been written.

## Disposition

SDM Assessment	What it is/does	What a worker should be able to describe
SDM Safety Assessment	See above (Protective/Temporary Custody).	<p>Whether any safety threats have already been resolved.</p> <p>Whether any unresolved safety threats remain.</p> <p>If child is in the home, the actions being taken to protect the child.</p> <p>If child is out of the home, what needs to be resolved or controlled before the child can return.</p>
SDM FSNA	<p>A comprehensive, systematic assessment of families across key domains. There are two parts: caregiver and child. Each domain is rated on a four-point scale where A/B are strengths and C/D are needs.</p> <p>· For caregivers, typically the three highest scoring domains are considered priority needs. But, this should be confirmed in conversation with the family. The confirmation rests on consideration of whether the facts that led to the score of C or D contributed to the danger, or there is reason to believe that working in this area will help achieve the safety goal.</p> <p>· The goal is safety, rather than resolution of all needs. If safety can be achieved even while needs remain, it is no longer the work of CFSS to address remaining needs.</p> <p>· Safety and services are NOT the same thing.</p>	<p>The areas of priority needs for adults and all needs for the child. The worker should be able to describe facts of the case that supported the scoring.</p> <p>Why the plan is focused in the areas it is. Case plans should focus on priority areas.</p>

## Permanency and Review Hearings

SDM Assessment	What it is/does	What a worker should be able to describe
SDM Safety Assessment	See above (protective/temporary custody).	<p>Whether any safety threats have already been resolved.</p> <p>Whether any unresolved safety threats remain.</p> <p>If child is in the home, the actions being taken to protect the child.</p> <p>If safety decision supports case closure.</p>
SDM Risk Reassessment	For families receiving in-home services, the actuarial risk reassessment helps the ongoing CFSS determine when risk has been reduced sufficiently that the case may be recommended for closure.	The worker will be able to speak about how risk has been reduced and whether it is appropriate to close the case.
SDM Reunification Assessment	For families with a child in out-of-home care with a goal of reunification, this assessment helps the CFSS determine when a child may safely be returned to the home, or when a change in permanency goal should be considered. The assessment has four sections that focus on risk, parenting time, safety, and permanency. Redone every three months.	The worker will be able to speak to why they are recommending further out of home placement or reunification; including specific safety threats or demonstrated family safety.
SDM FSNA	See above (Disposition).	Worker will be able to describe progress of the family through the reduction or elimination of identified needs or enhancement of protective capacities.