



NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT
OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

New Jersey Department of Children and Families Policy Manual

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| Subchapter: | 6 | Structured Decision Making | |
| Issuance: | 600 | Structured Decision Making (SDM) | |

General Purpose:

This issuance establishes policies and procedures for Structured Decision Making (SDM™). Structured Decision Making is a uniform process for Division-wide decision-making regarding critical aspects of the agency’s intervention with a child and family. SDM™ tools are research and evidence-based, designed to assist field staff to make important decisions.

Authority:

- N.J.A.C. 3A:10-3.2

Safety Assessment (In-Home) CP&P Form 22-22

A. Purpose

The Safety Assessment:

1. Determines whether any child is likely to be in immediate or imminent danger of serious harm that requires immediate safety intervention; and
2. To determine what specific safety intervention (Safety Protection Plan or placement) needs to be implemented or maintained to provide appropriate protection if needed.

B. Which Families

All investigation and permanency cases open because of reported child abuse or neglect, shall be documented on the SDM Safety Assessment, CP&P Form, [22-22](#) Safety Assessment or CP&P Form, [22-22\(S\)](#) Safety Assessment.

Note: This does not apply to institutional abuse, resource care, or relative care. Use CP&P Form 22,6 Resource Family Safety for resource care or relative care investigations.

C. When to Complete

Safety Assessments shall be completed throughout the life of a case as well as during the following times frames:

1. **Initial assessment:** During first face-to-face contact following report. If there are one or more threats to safety, the Worker shall consult with his or her supervisor before leaving the home. The safety assessment shall be documented in NJ SPIRIT within three business days.
2. **Review:** If new information changes what was previously scored as threats to safety, or changes the safety decision, a safety assessment review document shall be created in NJ SPIRIT upon completion of the safety assessment.

It is **not** necessary to create a safety assessment review document in NJ SPIRIT if there are no changes, or changes **ONLY** to vulnerabilities, protective actions and strengths, or which in-home interventions are being used in the immediate Safety Protection Plan.

3. **Closing:** Before closing a case open for on-going services, assess child safety and create a closing safety assessment document in NJ SPIRIT. If threat to safety is still present, the case shall remain open.
4. **Investigation:** A closing safety assessment shall be completed **ONLY** if a previous safety assessment was unsafe or safe with Safety Protection Plan and the case is not transferred for on-going services.

D. Safety Assessment Decision Immediate Action Taken

1. Safe -
 - i. No immediate threats to safety.
 - ii. When no safety concerns have been identified child remains in placement. No Safety Protection Plan needed.
2. Safe with Safety Protection Plan
 - i. One or more immediate threats to safety AND ability to implement a Safety Protection Plan.
 - ii. When safety protection is needed child remains at home with a Safety Protection Plan. Plan shall be monitored and adapted if necessary or if safety decision changes.
3. Unsafe
 - i. One or more immediate threats to safety cannot be controlled with a Safety Protection Plan.
 - ii. Child shall be moved to a safe placement.

Procedures:

To assess child safety, take copy of CP&P Form [22-22](#), Safety Assessment (In-Home Cases) in the field.

If a safety factor is checked "yes" which indicates child is not safe the Worker immediately consults his or her Supervisor. Determine with the Supervisor what the

appropriate course of action is to ensure the child(ren) safety and if removal is warranted or the child(ren) may remain home with Safety Protection Plan (SPP).

1. Safety Protection Planning

If one or more threats to safety are selected, and the family is willing and able to develop and follow a Safety Protection Plan that would allow the child to remain at home, work with the family and the **safety team** to develop a detailed plan.

Note: A safety Team are individuals (family, friends, or professional(s)) who:

- a. Acknowledge the threat of safety,
- b. Are engaged and willing to participate as safety team members, and
- c. Have the ability and capacity to perform or support the specific responsibility detailed in the Safety Protection Plan.

2. Use of Safety Protection Plan Requiring Special Protocol

A Safety Protection Plan is utilized when concerns for the child have been noted by CP&P and the parents or caregivers are willing and able to develop a plan with CP&P to keep the child safe; therefore, mitigating the need for out-of-home placement. In the scenarios described below, a Safety Protection Plan is required:

- a. Parental agreement for a parent alleged to have abused or neglected his or her child, agrees to leave the home;
- b. Parental agreement to suspend contact with his or her own child; or
- c. A parent agrees to have all contact with his or her child supervised by another adult.

The Safety Protection Plan is appropriate when CP&P is investigating an allegation of abuse or neglect in certain situations. The denial of access of a parent to his or her child(ren) and home has an effect of limiting his or her rights and shall be a short-term resolution. If the safety issues remain, these actions shall be adjudicated in court.

Note: The actions in the Safety Protection Plan shall only be viewed as a short-term alternative to court action if safety issues remain. Parental participation shall be consensual.

In these complex situations, the following protocols have been established, to safeguard the rights of parents and the safety of their children:

- a. The assigned Worker or Supervisor consults promptly with the Casework Supervisor when Safety Protection Plans, as described above begin.
- b. The Casework Supervisor shall notify the DAG as soon as possible, but no later than **five calendar days** from the implementation of the plan, when safety issues remain, even though a plan continues to be in place.
- c. Within **ten calendar days** of the implementation of the Safety Protection Plan, the safety issues shall be resolved, or CP&P shall file a Title 9 or 30 complaint with the courts to keep the safeguards in place.

Note: Litigation is only required if one of the three provisions above continue to be necessary. If safety is achieved without barring a parent from his or her home or preventing him or her from unsupervised time with his or her children, litigation is not necessary. Consult the assigned DAG to determine whether litigation is required to achieve safety

Safety Protection Plans **do not expire** and should not have an end date. While Safety Protection Plans are temporary in nature, there may be an occasion for a Safety Protection Plan to exceed 10 days (e.g., the case is filed in court timely, but the court date given exceeds the 10 days, the existing Safety Protection Plan should remain in place until the case is heard in court).

Note: In a situation where the parent or caregiver has sought legal counsel, and agrees to keep Safety Protection Plan in place, the case may not need to go to court; however, in all of these circumstance, CP&P shall discuss the case with the DAG to ensure that parents' rights are not being infringed upon.

In determining whether the action desired can be supported by a safety plan or requires an emergency removal without a court order (Dodd), [CP&P-II-C-2-700, Removal of a Child](#), with litigation within two court days, consult the DAG and be guided by the following four factors:

- a. Is the child remaining with a parent or legal custodian? If not, the action constitutes a Dodd and cannot be achieved by a Safety Protection Plan.
- b. Who made the plan, CP&P, the parent or custodian? Was the plan already in place before CP&P involvement? If a child was previously residing with the proposed caregiver, it may be possible to rely on a safety plan, supported by actions other than CP&P litigation to render the plan enforceable (e.g., private custody complaint).
- c. Is it necessary for the plan be legally enforceable in order to keep the child safe? If so, litigation for care and supervision or custody shall be filed.
- d. Has the parent or legal custodian voluntarily consented to the plan?

3. Signatures Needed

Best-case practice requires that when a parent consents to the Safety Protection Plan, it is preferable that he and she also sign demonstrating agreement to the plan. If it is not immediately possible for the parent to sign, a verbal consent from the parent may be acceptable, until such a time that the signatures can be obtained.

Call the Supervisor to conference the case further:

- a. If neither parent signs the plan (but the Worker has reason to believe the plan will be followed):
- b. If only one parent agrees to sign the plan;
- c. If the Worker believes the parent(s) will NOT comply with the plan despite agreeing to sign it;

- d. In any other unusual or questionable circumstance.

The Casework Supervisor signs the document following the Safety Protection Plan for overall approval of the assessment and the plan.

4. **Safety Protection Plan Monitoring**

Each individual plan details how it is monitored. The assigned Worker monitors the parent's compliance with the Safety Protection Plan and the parent's improved functioning or progress toward changing negative behavior.

The need to assure children are safe, and remain safe, is an ongoing responsibility of the assigned Worker throughout CP&P intervention with a family:

- a. While an incident is under investigation, the assigned Child Protection Service Investigator is responsible for monitoring the Safety Protection Plan.
- b. When a service case is open, the Permanency Worker is responsible.
- c. In cases where the Safety Protection Plan exceeds ten days, the family is seen weekly to ensure that the Safety Protection Plan is being followed and ensure parents remain in agreement with the plan.
- d. Assigned Worker conferences with Supervisor, Casework Supervisor, and DAG to ensure that Safety Plan remains in effect following visit to the family.

5. **Resolution to Threat of Safety**

A threat to safety is present when current circumstances meet the definition.

Once selected, a threat to safety remains until it is resolved or ruled out.

- a. **Resolved:** Protective actions have been consistently demonstrated over time and show the Worker and the family team that the family has established new behaviors that keep the child safe.
- b. **Ruled out:** New information establishes that the threat to safety was not present in the first place. For example, new medical information indicates that a previously assessed serious injury was accidental.
- c. **Controlled:** A previously identified threat to safety has not been resolved but is being controlled through a Safety Protection Plan or child placement.
- d. **Discovered:** A new threat to safety has been identified after a previous safety assessment.

Identification of a threat to safety is identified through Worker observations and information from child, caregiver, network, any other person with relevant information, or document review.

Reassessing Child Safety

- 1. Reassess child safety as follows:
 - a. Assess the child safety throughout the life of the case.

- b. Once every three months.
- c. Consider safety factors at each contact with a family.
- d. When closing an ongoing Permanency case or at the completion of an investigation when the family is not receiving services, document in the case narrative how each identified safety factor was resolved.

Note: For cases where a child is in out-of-home placement, complete CP&P Form [22-27](#), New Jersey Family Reunification Assessment, to guide decisions about return home.

Special Note: A case cannot be closed if any safety factors have not been resolved.

Related Policy

- [CP&P-IV-A-2-100](#), Assessing Child Safety in Out-of-Home Placement Settings
- [CP&P-VIII-B-1-100](#), Domestic Violence

Family Risk Assessment, CP&P Form 22-23

A. Purpose

The purpose of assessing risk is to determine the likelihood of future maltreatment within the next 18 to 24 months.

Risk assessment is based on the following:

1. Conditions that exist at the time the incident is investigated;
2. The prior history of the family.

CP&P Form [22-23](#), New Jersey CP&P Family Risk Assessment, is a tool completed in NJS, composed of:

1. A neglect assessment index; and
2. An abuse assessment index.

Levels of risk include a

1. Low;
2. Moderate;
3. High; or
4. Very High.

Assess only one household per risk assessment tool, CP&P Form [22-23](#). If two households are involved in an incident, complete separate risk assessment tools for each household.

B. Which Families:

1. All families for which a child abuse or neglect (CA/N) investigation has been initiated, including new investigations on currently open cases.
2. Non-custodial parents who are being provided with reunification services.

C. When to Complete

Assess risk through the life of a case by completing CP&P Form [22-23](#) in NJ SPIRIT, whenever conducting a child abuse or neglect investigation, for a new case, a re-opened case, or when conducting an investigation on a case with ongoing services. The risk assessment shall be completed once every three months.

If the investigation is being held open pending receipt of final information, complete the risk assessment according to the 45-day timeframe. If the final information is received more than 30 days following completion of the risk assessment, review the completed risk assessment in light of the final information.

1. If the risk score is unchanged, indicate that no changes are needed.
2. If the new information would change the risk score, revise the risk assessment and take action as needed.

D. Decisions

For new cases, the risk assessment *guides* the decision of whether to close a case after investigation or transfer a case to ongoing intervention based on the family's assessed risk level. The case opening or closing guidelines for all cases, regardless of finding, are as follows:

1. Low and Moderate Risk Level - Close, unless there are one or more unresolved threats to safety.
2. High and Very Risk Level - Transfer to ongoing service

The Worker discusses any action (close after investigation or transfer for ongoing services) with his or her Supervisor. When completing the risk assessment in NJ SPIRIT, if the action taken differs from the recommendation in the table, the Worker shall provide a brief rationale in the provided text box.

The risk level guides minimum monthly visitation requirements (MVR) with caregivers and children receiving ongoing services or were open at the time of the current investigation. See [CP&P-III-C-3-100](#), In-Person Visits with Clients and Out-of-Home Placement Providers.

E. Policy Overrides that require Supervisory approval.

Review the list of case conditions that automatically create very high risk and select any that are applicable. Consider whether a discretionary override should be applied and, if so, describe your rationale.

If a discretionary override is required, document the conditions that exist to make the determination "Very High Risk."

F. Case Conditions That Create Very High Risk

When the scored risk level is low, moderate, or high, it is necessary to review the list of case conditions that automatically create very high risk to see if any apply. If the family's scored risk level is already very high, this section does not need to be completed. The case conditions listed reflect serious incidents or child

vulnerability concerns and have been determined by the agency to warrant a risk level designation of “very high,” regardless of the family’s scored risk level. Supervisory consultation and review is required whenever any of these conditions are present.

G. Discretionary Overrides

Case conditions may require a discretionary override. The discretionary override is necessary to permit an increase in the risk level when the risk level is not scored high enough due to the unique conditions of the case. The Worker confers with the Supervisor. The Supervisor’s review and approval, including approval of the use of any override option, is indicated when he or she signs and dates the form.

H. Supplemental Risk Items

Completion of the supplemental risk items is required for purposes of data collection for a future validation study.

Family Risk Reassessment, CP&P 22-26

A. Purpose

The SDM risk reassessment involves evaluation of the caregiver’s progress toward attaining case plan goals. Information gathered for the initial Risk Assessment and the family’s current progress help the Worker evaluate a family’s progress toward achieving case plan goals.

B. Which Families

All families with ongoing services whose children remain in the home.

C. When to Complete

1. Three months after transfer to ongoing services, and every three months thereafter.
2. Whenever circumstances in a case change that warrant a reassessment, such as a change in family structure or dynamics, a new allegation of child abuse or neglect.
3. If a new referral is received while the case is open, complete an initial Risk Assessment as part of the investigation. Continue to complete the risk reassessments based on the original schedule of every three months.
4. Complete the SDM Risk Reassessment no more than 30 days prior to case closure.

Note: The risk reassessment is not used during investigation or assessment, even if the investigation remains open more than 30 days after completion of the risk assessment.

D. Use Risk Reassessment Form to Decide Whether to Close a Case or Set MVR Schedule

The risk reassessment guides the decision to close a case.

1. Low and Moderate Risk Level - Close, unless there are one or more unresolved threats to safety.
2. High and Very Risk Level - Continue ongoing services.

When completing the risk reassessment in NJ SPIRIT, if the action taken differs from the above table, the Worker shall provide a brief rationale in the provided text box.

Additionally, for cases that remain open for ongoing services, the risk level guides Worker's minimum monthly visitation requirements with caregivers and children (See [CP&P-III-C-3-100](#), In-Person Visits with Clients and Out-of-Home Placement Providers (MVRs)).

E. Discretionary Override

Case conditions may require a discretionary override. The discretionary override is necessary to permit an increase or decrease in the risk level when the risk level is not scored to reflect the unique conditions of the case. The Worker confers with the Supervisor. **The Supervisor's review and approval, including approval of the use of any override option, is indicated when the Supervisor approves the form.** The justification for the override shall be documented and the risk level after the override is indicated. Supervisory review and consultation are required whenever the Worker recommends a discretionary override.

Family Reunification Assessment, CP&P 22-27

Purpose

The SDM reunification assessment consists of six components, which are used to evaluate risk, visitation compliance, safety, and permanency planning decisions. The results are used to reach a permanency plan recommendation and to guide decisions about whether to return a child home.

A. Which Families

1. Households with an open child protective services or child welfare case in which at least one child is in placement (including placements with a relative) and has a permanency plan goal of reunification.
2. Households of non-removal parents, if the parent is being considered as a reunification resource.

If more than one household is receiving reunification services, complete a separate reunification assessment for each household.

B. When to Complete

1. No later than three months from the date of placement and every three months thereafter.
2. Prior to any court hearing at which the permanency goal or progress toward case plan goals and objectives is being reviewed.

3. Any time a child is being considered for return home.

C. Decisions

The reunification assessment guides the decision of whether to recommend reunification or to change the permanency plan goal.

If a family has effectively reduced their risk level to low or moderate and has achieved acceptable visitation, a reunification safety review is conducted, and the results are used to determine whether the home environment is safe to facilitate reunification. The permanency plan guidelines and permanency plan recommendation summary (Sections D and E) guide the decision of whether to return a child home or to change the permanency goal.

Forms and Attachments:

- [CPP-X-A-1-22.22](#) CP&P Form 22-22, Safety Assessment (In-Home Cases)
- [CPP-X-A-1-22.23](#) CP&P Form 22-23, Family Risk Assessment
- [CPP-X-A-1-22.26](#) CP&P Form 22-26, New Jersey CP&P Family Risk Reassessment (In-Home Cases)
- [CPP-X-A-1-22.27](#) CP&P Form 22-27, New Jersey Family Reunification Assessment