

The Functional Assessment Process

One of the key factors in achieving safety, permanency and well being is the creation of an effective assessment process. The assessment of needs is, in fact, so critical to the child and family's well being and dynamic in its focus that no single form, tool or single event can adequately support it. Needs assessment is a process that continues throughout the life of each case. Assessment tools are merely instruments that are useful in bringing attention to issues that need particular focus and in identifying current strengths, needs and functioning for purposes of decision-making.

Design

Any assessment approaches that are employed for case decision-making should reflect the following assessment process:

- The engagement of the child and family as partners in planning and decision-making
- Full child and family involvement in the decision-making process
- Creation of a family team (including the family/child, foster parents, individuals from the family's natural helping system, key professional stakeholders and providers and others as needed) that contributes its knowledge and expertise to the assessment and planning process and sustains the family over time
- Use of face-to-face family team meetings to assess needs and craft/ revise the service plan
- Recognition and affirmation of the child and family's strengths
- Attention to safety, stability, permanency, family connections, emotional-behavioral well-being, health, education and parent and caregiver supports
- A focus on underlying conditions and needs, as opposed to symptoms
- Attention to cultural considerations
- Utilization of the assessment findings to craft the child and family plan
- Regular and timely modifications of the child and family plan as assessment information changes

In the process of developing a comprehensive functional assessment, the use of a case example helps illustrate the appropriate steps. In the case of a child that has recently entered foster care with a goal of reunification, for example, the assessment process would generally be as follows.

If a team were not already in existence, the worker contacts the parents to discuss their interest and participation in a team meeting. The teaming and assessment process is described and the family is asked to identify its own

informal supporters that should be invited to join the team. Basic information relative to child and family strengths and needs is gathered and background necessary to complete a genogram/ecomap is attained.

Team members are identified and notified of the initial team meeting. Any previous information about the child and family known by team members is requested and if a need is identified for further specialized assessments, such as psychological evaluations or medical exams, those are scheduled. Written assessment materials are collected and made available to the team.

In the team meeting, the existing written child and family information is used to inform the strengths/needs discovery process, consistent with the facilitation process employed in the Department's Engaging Families policy and training. The assessment background and the specific needs statements provide a focus on the most critical underlying needs and help set priorities for the steps that become translated into the individualized service plan. The team's product is the foundation, at least, for the formal plan. A formal, written assessment is completed, based on background information and the contributions of the child and family and other team members. This written plan is shared with all team members. As events change, the assessment is updated to reflect current child and family needs.

Evidence of a good functional assessment of a child and family will be present when the assessment:

- Makes use of the understanding that families are systems of relationships and interactions within the family and outwards to many other relationships
- Begins with risk assessment and safety planning
- Is strengths-based
- Is needs-based
- Is team-based
- Engages the family in the assessment process
- Engages partners for sharing of information and team decision making
- Focuses comprehensively on child and family functioning
- Remains focused on safety, permanency and well-being in information gathering, analysis and synthesis for application in decision-making
- Is an ongoing process that is responsive to changes
- Includes community and informal support systems of the family
- Flows naturally into service planning and service provision
- Produces a "big picture", long-term view of child/family functioning
- Documents casework activity and planning
- Provides the justification and evidence for decision-making
- Includes special tools for assessing the presence of substance abuse and domestic violence in family functioning
- Provides information to the family and team

Format

A variety of forms may be useful in guiding the assessment process and providing for consistency of performance. Ecomap, genogram and social history formats may be structured to achieve this purpose. The formal assessment format should permit maximum flexibility in addressing strengths, needs and particular concerns. While check-off boxes and drop down lists are convenient in terms of workload, they are incompatible in a strengths/needs based assessment. However, written guidance/headings may be needed to insure that workers focus on particular issues or conditions, such as domestic violence, mental illness, child development, education or substance abuse.

Elements of a Sound Assessment Process

1. A narrative social history that assists the family team and caseworker (and the court, as needed) in knowing at a minimum the history of the child and family, the identity of extended family and friends, a chronology of child welfare actions and interactions with the family, past life successes and challenges and current child and family status. This tool should be designed to be regularly updated.
2. A comprehensive functional assessment format and guide that provides for a description and analysis of current child and family functioning (as opposed to a mere summary of current functioning). The analysis should focus on strengths and needs and answer the question of why the child and family are functioning as they do, which permits the assessment to identify underlying needs.
3. Clarity about the roles and responsibilities of workers in the assessment process when cases are to be transferred. For example, what is the CPS worker's role regarding the assessment when a child in a case he/she has investigated enters care? Similarly, how are roles and responsibilities divided when a case is transferred to a private agency?
4. At a minimum, the following areas of functioning and needs should be assessed and addressed:

Parents/Caregiver

Strengths

Attachment to and relationship with the child

Awareness of the child's needs

Family relationships

Caretaking capacity and ability

Employment and self sufficiency needs

Safety and risk

Stability

Health

Mental Health
Environmental stresses (domestic violence, substance abuse, disabilities, others)
Current services
Informal/community supports

Child

Strengths
Safety and risk
Permanency
Development
Health
Emotional and behavioral well-being
Relationships (within the family and with peers and others)
Education/Vocational

The format will need to provide some guidance on completion and should permit a narrative assessment of functioning in these key domains. The format should require a concluding summary of the immediate and intermediate needs within the family.

5. The assessment should reflect the input of the family team, gathered through a family team meeting.
6. Those preparing the formal written assessment should have at a minimum, face to face communications with the family and an observation of the child and family in their living environment. However, the basic functional assessment should be developed through the family team. A consistent statewide design for completing formal assessments should be adopted.
7. The assessment should be the basis of and reflected in the content of the child and family plan (case plan).
8. The new assessment process and tools should be reflected in the design of departmental basic training curricula.

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