

# Applying Critical Thinking Skills in Child Welfare

**Purpose** To strengthen the ability of supervisors and senior workers to apply critical thinking skills to the major decision points in child welfare in order to support workers' ability to gather and synthesize the right information to make the right decisions as effectively as possible.

**Rationale** All workers and supervisors in child welfare must be able to gather and evaluate information throughout the casework process related to decisions about safety, risk, child abuse/maltreatment, and service planning. Supervisors must monitor performance and provide feedback to staff in making accurate safety and risk assessments, correctly identifying and responding to abuse and maltreatment, and creating service plans that will meet families' diverse needs. Senior workers also need to apply these skills to their own cases and those cases they assist more inexperienced workers on. In order to accomplish these tasks, supervisors and senior workers must apply critical thinking skills.

**Learning objectives** Participants will be able to:

*Cognitive*

- define *critical thinking*
- identify the critical thinking skills utilized in child welfare
- describe how critical thinking skills are applied in child welfare to gather, analyze, and evaluate information
- explain common errors in reasoning
- describe how to set expectations for staff, monitor their performance, and provide them with evaluative and developmental feedback to improve safety and risk assessments and related decisions
- identify common errors of reasoning

*Affective*

- value the professional strengths they bring to the decision-making process in child welfare services

- appreciate various decision-making styles

*Operative*

- N/A

Materials

PowerPoint slides, APPLYING CRITICAL THINKING IN CHILD WELFARE, RELATING TO THE WORK, STRUCTURE OF THE DAY, DECISION POINTS, AREAS OF DECISION-MAKING FOR EVERY CHILD WELFARE SERVICES CASE, THINKING ABOUT THINKING, SCORING KEY, UNDERSTANDING A SITUATION, IN MAKING EVERY DECISION, YOU NEED TO..., DEFINING CRITICAL THINKING, VARIABLES COMPRISING UNDERLYING CONDITIONS, YOUR TASK, CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN CHILD WELFARE, EVERYONE MAKES MISTAKES, AVOIDING ERRORS; handouts, TODAY'S AGENDA, DECISION POINT QUESTIONS, IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS, CHILD ABUSE: THE DEFINITION, CHILD MALTREATMENT: THE DEFINITION, CRITERIA FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICE PLANS, MODEL FOR ASSESSMENT AND SERVICE PLANNING, SCORING KEY, DEFINING CRITICAL THINKING, CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN CHILD WELFARE, COMMON ERRORS IN REASONING; worksheet, THINKING ABOUT THINKING; posters, DECISION POINT QUESTIONS, IN MAKING EVERY DECISION, YOU NEED TO..., CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS FOR CHILD WELFARE WORKERS, SET PRINCIPLES AND CRITICAL THINKING.

Time

4.5 hours

## Learning Process

Getting started

Welcome participants to the seminar, introduce yourself and your co-trainer, and ask them to complete the worksheet, THINKING ABOUT THINKING, in their workbook.

***Ancillary instruction:***

- Tell the senior caseworkers that they should answer the questions based on their experience providing supervision and support in their role in the unit.
- Tell participants that we will process the worksheet, Thinking About Thinking, later in the activity.

Display the PowerPoint slides, APPLYING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN CHILD WELFARE and RELATING TO THE WORK.

***Ancillary instruction:*** In your own words, explain the rationale statement to participants and connect it to their job in child welfare.

Refer to the PowerPoint slide, STRUCTURE OF THE DAY, as well as the handout, TODAY'S AGENDA. Provide an overview of the seminar, materials, and housekeeping details.

Connecting to the major decision points

***Caution:*** There will be several references to material that was covered in prior training during this course. These are intended for reference only in the following lecture and for support in completion of the case review discussions and worksheet later. If participants ask a specific question about this material, you can answer it. If they need additional support, refer them to their supervisors.

Refer to the PowerPoint slide, DECISIONS POINTS, and the poster/handout, DECISION POINT QUESTIONS.

State:

- The decision point questions provide a simple frame through which to view the work of child welfare caseworkers.
- Decision one targets the major assessments related to safety, abuse/maltreatment, and risk.
- This decision then leads sequentially and logically to the next three.

***Ancillary instruction:*** Refer participants to the handouts, IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS, CHILD ABUSE: THE DEFINITION, CHILD MALTREATMENT: THE DEFINITION, MODEL FOR ASSESSMENT AND

SERVICE PLANS, and CRITERIA FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICE PLANS, if they need support recalling these major decisions/concepts.

**Caution:** Do not review these materials. They are for reference only.

- In order to make sure our workers are making accurate decisions, caseworkers, senior workers, and supervisors all must apply critical thinking skills throughout the decision-making process.

**Ancillary instruction:** Ask participants, “What do you perceive are your unit’s current strengths in making these important decisions?”

- The leadership in your counties have requested today’s program to support all of you in conducting your work to the high standards you collectively hold yourself to.

Identifying local issues

A representative from the regional office or one of the counties will welcome the participants and deliver a brief presentation regarding issues related to the application of critical thinking skills and common errors in decision-making in Fulton, Montgomery, and Schenectady counties.

**Comment:** It is anticipated that this presentation will include the following issues:

- Cases with multiple reports related to recurrence of the same issues.
- Caseworkers’ ability to gather sufficient information (especially related to underlying conditions and contributing factors) to support decisions related to safety, risk, allegations of abuse/maltreatment, and service needs.
- Supervisors’ ability to determine with the worker whether sufficient and/or accurate information has been gathered and how to set expectations for re-engaging the family if the information is not sufficient.

**Ancillary instruction:** Facilitate participants’ connecting the identified local issues to the items on the PowerPoint slide, AREAS OF DECISION MAKING FOR EVERY CHILD WELFARE CASE.

Thinking about reasoning

Display the PowerPoint slide, THINKING ABOUT THINKING.

Explain:

- At the beginning of the program, we asked you to complete the worksheet, THINKING ABOUT THINKING.

- We did this because both supervisors and senior workers rely on reasoning to obtain the information that will best inform the decisions made in child welfare.
- These questions were asked to determine whether you tend toward the use of your intuition or an analytical style of reasoning in your supervisory capacity.

Refer participants to the worksheet, THINKING ABOUT THINKING (and related scoring key), they completed earlier.

*Comment:* Scoring instructions are included for your reference.

*Ancillary instruction:* If all participants have yet to complete the task for this worksheet, allow them a few minutes before proceeding.

Refer to the PowerPoint slide, SCORING KEY.

State:

- If your TOTAL SCORE is 24-31, you value decision-making based on intuition, with little (if any) reliance on analytic reasoning.
- If your TOTAL SCORE is 32-39, you value making decisions based on intuition, but you also place some value on using analytic reasoning.
- If your TOTAL SCORE is 40-47, you value decision-making based on analytic reasoning, and you also place some value on the use of intuition.
- If your TOTAL SCORE is 48-56, you highly value workers who make decisions based on analytic reasoning, with little (if any) intuition involved.
- Different approaches to decision-making are present in this room and as you identified this morning, everyone brings strengths to this process. Both approaches have strengths.
- It is important to draw on various strengths in these styles to make better assessments and decisions in child welfare.
- Intuition and analytic reasoning are not oppositional to one another. They exist on a continuum and can be utilized in a balanced manner when workers consciously apply a set of skills that constitute critical thinking.

- Before we define this concept, let's pause a moment to think about how we understand a given situation.

## Exploring objectivity

State:

- We've already established that you make decisions in child welfare by gathering and analyzing information. As we are gathering information, sometimes what we *think* we are seeing isn't really what's happening at all.
- The time pressure workers and supervisors face and the challenges presented by families who may be angry and who may have a lot of issues makes it a challenge to see it all, to be thorough all of the time, and to see all situations and information objectively.
- This pressure tends to tilt staff toward making judgments quickly and acting decisively, when in order to really get it all, they need to be able to temporarily suspend judgment. It's a fine line.

***Ancillary instruction:*** Display the PowerPoint slide, UNDERSTANDING A SITUATION.

- Objectively understanding a given situation can be complicated. When subtle, yet critical, information is absent or overlooked, our understanding of the situation can be incomplete, even flawed.
- As caseworkers and supervisors, you are regularly in situations where you think you know what the truth is; however, with new information—and an open mind—your understanding may change.

***Ancillary instruction:***

- Elicit examples from participants of anytime in their supervisory practice when their perception of the truth about a situation changed based on new information that was gathered.
- Display the PowerPoint slide/poster, IN MAKING EVERY DECISION, YOU NEED TO....
- Regardless of where or how a case originates, or at what point along the casework process it may be, it is absolutely necessary to *gather information relevant* to specific child welfare concerns, to *weigh* that information against a set of standards embodied in our protocols related to safety, risk, and the process for determining whether there has been

abuse/maltreatment, and to *take the action* needed to achieve and maintain the children's safety, permanency, and well-being.

**Ancillary instruction:** Display the PowerPoint slide, DEFINING CRITICAL THINKING, and refer to the handout of the same name.

- *Critical thinking* is a mental discipline used to continually gather, analyze, and re-examine information in order to assure that assessments are as current and accurate as possible and that the actions taken are consistent with these assessments.
- Our goal is to get you to step back from your current practice to objectively consider how you and your workers are using critical thinking skills now, and how you might strengthen the use of them in the future. We will work together to apply these skills to a case later so that you can try on some new or modified ways of approaching your supervision and your worker's practice.
- Using critical thinking skills can *reduce* errors in reasoning related to the four decision points and *increase* the potential for plausible explanations related to the presence or absence of abuse/maltreatment.

**Ancillary instruction:** Refer again to the handout, MODEL FOR ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING.

- The structures of the protocols in child welfare, assessment, and planning have been designed to guide the worker and supervisor in the casework process so as to narrow the focus of inquiry to those areas that are specifically **relevant** to child welfare concerns, and to **minimize distractions** posed by the complexities of families' lives.

**Example:** A worker learns that the family in a case that was indicated for educational neglect follows a very strict vegan diet. So long as the children are receiving an adequately nutritious diet and are growing normally, the family's dietary restrictions should not distract the worker from the identified issues in the family.

- Using critical thinking skills can also facilitate your evaluation of the accuracy of information children, parents or caretakers, and collaterals provide, and helps to identify resources for a family or child.

**Ancillary instruction:** Display the PowerPoint slide, VARIABLES COMPRISING UNDERLYING CONDITIONS.

- In the process of conducting the assessments, it's important for caseworkers to be aware of their own beliefs, values, perceptions, and other underlying conditions (or even contributing factors) that have the potential to create biases that may impede their decision-making ability by focusing on **irrelevant** information and/or by **filtering out** information that's needed to make accurate assessments.

*Example:* In the case (above) of the family following the vegan diet, the caseworker needs to be aware of and control his own negative reactions to vegans that are related to having an in-law who is a vegan and who constantly belittles the worker for eating meat and other animal products.

*Ancillary instruction:* Remind participants that monitoring their own and workers' biases is an important task of a supervisor or senior worker. Further remind them that supervisors and senior workers are human beings with underlying conditions as well. Keeping bias in check is a task everyone should be aware of during the casework process. Tell participants we'll discuss minimizing biases later in the program.

- Using critical thinking skills is an ongoing process by which the significance, adequacy, and relevance of information is under constant scrutiny while the caseworker is engaged in inquiry, decision-making, and action-planning. Using them serves as a check on "mental short cuts" that are taken to expedite decision-making, often at the expense of gathering sufficient relevant information.

*Example:* In the case of the family following the vegan diet, the assessment of the *significance* of the information would include questions such as, "Is any child's health compromised by the diet?" The assessment of the *adequacy* of the information would include the question, "Is the family's diet *adequate* to meeting the children's minimal care needs?" The assessment of the *relevance* of the information would include the question, "Is the area of inquiry *relevant* to assessing the safety and well-being needs of the children?"

- Critical thinking skills should be applied by the caseworker and monitored by the supervisor throughout the life of the case.
- Consistently using critical thinking skills is a way to approach the work so that caseworkers and supervisors can identify together what activities they need to perform, organize them, and prioritize them.
- Now, let's look at the specific critical thinking skills you and your workers need.



Identifying critical thinking skills and their application in child welfare

Instruct participants:

- Individually read the handout, CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN CHILD WELFARE.

*Ancillary instruction:* Display the PowerPoint slide, YOUR TASK.

- As you read each item, place a check mark next to any skills you feel you already attend to in your supervisory capacity.
- You should also place a star next to any of the skills you feel you need clarification on from us or that you feel you should be paying more attention to in your unit.
- Also for each item, provide a numerical rating on a continuum from 1-5 (1=frequent and 5=completely lacking) to the level of attention paid by the workers under your supervision as a whole to each of the identified skills.
- Everyone should try to be as honest as possible in these assessments.

*Ancillary instruction:*

- Assure participants that we will only elicit examples of skills that they feel they could individually improve upon, as opposed to reflecting on the practice of the unit as a whole in the large group, as identified by the supervisors' ratings.
- Tell participants that we are asking them to rate their workers' attention to the skills as a way of helping them identify which skills they could focus future supervisory efforts on.
- Display the PowerPoint slide, CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN CHILD WELFARE.
- Elicit examples from participants of some of the skills they may have already developed and how they can continue to apply those skills in their supervisory practice.
- Elicit from participants the items on the handout that they placed a star next to. Tell the group that as they progress through the program, they will be consistently focusing on the handout so that they leave the program clearly knowing how these skills should be integrated into their work.
- Also, hang the wall posters with the same content in the training room so that you can easily refer to and reinforce the material related to critical thinking throughout the remainder of this training program.
- When you look at the list of skills on the handout, CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN CHILD WELFARE, it might seem that

these skills are sequential, i.e., that you use one after another, but in reality you will need to use different skills at different times in your work with families.

- Imagine a caseworker (assisted by his/her supervisor) has organized all the initial information, dealt with any bias, filled in some gaps in information, and drawn upon other resources to strengthen his/her casework practice. Then an offhand remark by a family member sends the worker and supervisor back to square one.

*Example:* A safety plan is in place for a baby whose single mother is struggling to recover from substance abuse. This plan includes the mother's sister moving into the home to provide 24-hour supervision to the baby. When checking in with a collateral contact in the apartment building, the neighbor mentions that the sisters hosted a "huge, blow-out" party last night and that the sister who was the lynch pin of the safety plan got so drunk she needed to be briefly hospitalized.

- To be a good critical thinker, you need to be willing to go back to square one when the evidence before you suggests that your assumptions and information might be flawed or inadequate.

*Example:* In the example above, the new information about the sister's excessive use of alcohol should lead the worker to be concerned if the baby can be cared for safely in the home at all.

- When you get back to square one, both caseworkers and supervisors need to ask, "Okay, what do we need to do now? Is there a pattern we're just now seeing? Is there a new explanation for what's going on that deserves a thorough look?"
- Answers to these questions will yield direction as to which skill to use, when, and why.
- After gathering and sufficiently evaluating all information, you make decisions and take action based on these decisions, while continually re-evaluating and making changes accordingly.

*Ancillary instruction:* Display the PowerPoint slide, DECISION POINTS, and refer to the handout, DECISION POINT QUESTIONS.

- You must ask yourself, "Do we have enough of an understanding about what is going on with this child or family to make these decisions?"

- It is important to acknowledge that inherent throughout this process in the possibility of making mistakes.

Considering common errors in reasoning

Ask: “How many of you have ever made a mistake in life? How about in your casework practice?”

*Comment:* It is anticipated that everyone will acknowledge making mistakes.

Display the PowerPoint slide, EVERYONE MAKES MISTAKES.

State:

- Everyone makes mistakes, and child welfare caseworkers and supervisors are no different.
- Even seasoned workers and experienced supervisors with expertise and good intentions can make errors or have lapses in their application of critical thinking skills.

*Ancillary instruction:* Elicit from participants a few examples of the conditions that could cause a worker or supervisor to lapse in applying critical thinking to a case.

*Example:*

- The supervisor is overwhelmed with other professional responsibilities.
- The worker is overwhelmed with personal responsibilities.
- The worker feels his/her personal safety is threatened and is unable to acquire necessary information during a home visit.

Refer participants to the handout, COMMON ERRORS OF REASONING IN CHILD WELFARE.

Explain:

- These are some of the common errors that caseworkers make.

*Ancillary instruction:* Remind participants that caseworkers are not alone in their decision-making; therefore, these errors are a reflection on supervisors as well.

- In child welfare, these errors can lead to negative outcomes for children, e.g., by missing important new information, or by making an inaccurate assessment based on cultural practices with which you are unfamiliar.

- A British researcher summarized the findings of a study on this subject by stating that some mistakes are inevitable because they are due to our limited knowledge.
- Other mistakes, however, arise from errors in human reasoning.
- These errors are not random, but are predicable, because people tend to simplify the decision-making process when making complex judgments, especially in high pressure situations such as you are in as child welfare caseworkers.

*Ancillary instruction:* Display the PowerPoint slide, AVOIDING ERRORS.

- The good news is that these errors can be reduced if people are aware of them and strive consciously to avoid them.
- It's also as important to think critically about the information we obtain from professionals as it is to analyze the family's information.
- Remember, you apply critical thinking skills in order to reduce errors in reasoning and reach sound conclusions.
- This is why the application of critical thinking skills is not a linear process. It doesn't follow a simple, step-by-step formula.
- Now, let's prepare to apply the entirety of critical thinking to a case from right here in your region.

Thinking critically about  
a case record

Refer to item #5 on the handout, TODAY'S AGENDA.

Instruct participants:

- We're going to work with one case for the rest of the day. The names of the family have changed, but the case facts remain essentially the same.
- This case was chosen because it has needs in regards to how critical thinking skills could have been better applied by the caseworkers and supported by the supervisors in order to achieve better outcomes for the family.
- This will be an opportunity for you to use the skills outlined in the handout, CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN CHILD WELFARE, to review the workers' thinking and decision-making in regards to this case.

*Ancillary instruction:*

- Remind the supervisors of their SET training in CPS Supervisory or Supervisory Core.
- Display the poster, SET PRINCIPLES AND CRITICAL THINKING.
- Tell the supervisors that these four SET principles are particularly necessary when assisting workers in applying critical thinking skills and they should keep them in mind as they move through the upcoming practice exercise.
- This case begins with an SCR report, leading to CPS investigation, a removal of the children for a short time before they are returned to the family and then another removal and longer foster care placement.
- So as to make the lessons from this case most relevant to your varied positions, we will break into two groups.
- One group will focus on the CPS investigation and related casework practice and the other will focus on the case after the children were removed for the second time.

*Ancillary instruction:*

- Elicit participants' roles and assign both supervisors and caseworkers to their respective group (foster care or CPS) based on their role.
- For those participants whose job is outside of foster care or CPS (e.g., crisis workers, preventive workers, adoption, JD/PINS), evenly divide them among the two groups or assign them to a group based on what their job is closest to in terms of a similar skill set.

**Example:** Adoption workers could be assigned to work with the group focusing on the experience of the children in foster care whereas the crisis workers could be assigned to the CPS group.

- Tell these participants that while this case is focused on CPS and foster care issues, they still need to be able to learn to apply the critical thinking skills with their cases and this application of skills can be generalized to their role in their agencies.
- If near the lunch hour, break for lunch, telling participants they will reconvene in their assigned small group after the break. Otherwise, continue with the program.
- Refer to the PM session (either CPS or foster care, based on the group you will be conducting) for the remainder of the curriculum instruction.

# Thinking About Thinking

**Instructions:**

*Place a check mark in either the Agree or the Disagree box next to each statement that follows as it relates to the supervision you provide to workers in either your role as supervisor or senior worker.*

	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Score</b>
1.	In my unit(s), it's important for workers to make decisions and stick to them, rather than constantly questioning whether or not they're correct.			
2.	I value workers who, when faced with a problem, suspend judgment and use logic to identify solutions.			
3.	I value workers who base their decisions on their previous similar experience in the field.			
4.	I value workers who question my decisions and reasoning when I provide feedback on the decisions that they've made.			
5.	I prefer workers who trust their hunches when making safety decisions.			
6.	I prefer workers who think that decision-making requires them to openly and honestly question their assessment decisions.			
7.	When making safety decisions, it's important for workers to assess information from the family quickly in order to respond in a timely manner.			
8.	I value workers who explore ideas and generate many possibilities for decisions.			
9.	I think it's important for workers to respect the traditions and hierarchy of my agency in making decisions.			
10.	I am pleased when my workers search for knowledge based on concrete facts and evidence, rather than based on their feelings and previous experience.			

## Thinking About Thinking

	Statement	Agree	Disagree	Score
11.	It's important for workers to rely primarily on what's currently happening in the family, rather than concentrating on past problems and strengths.			
12.	It is always important for workers, regardless of time pressures, to seek information from all relevant sources.			
13.	Intuition is a valuable quality in a child welfare worker.			
14.	I look for workers to be willing to reconsider and revise their views about the families we're working with.			
15.	I appreciate when workers rely on their emotions and feelings to assess children's safety.			
16.	I prefer workers who ask questions about why we do things the way we do, rather than those who have read the procedures and follow them.			
<b>TOTAL SCORE:</b>				

# Scoring Key

## Instructions:

*Step 1: Record the raw scores using the information below.*

### **Odd-numbered statements (1, 3, 5...):**

- ➡ For each check mark in an *Agree* box, enter a score of **1** in the associated *Score* box.
- ➡ For each check mark in the *Disagree* box, enter a score of **3** in the associated *Score* box.

### **Even-numbered statements (2, 4, 6...):**

- ➡ For each check mark in the *Agree* box, enter a score of **4** in the associated *Score* box.
- ➡ For each check mark in the *Disagree* box, enter a score of **2** in the associated *Score* box.

*Step 2: Add up all the scores recorded in the *Score* column and then enter the results in the box at the lower left (next to **TOTAL SCORE**).*



*PowerPoint slide*

Applying Critical Thinking Skills  
in Child Welfare

## *PowerPoint slide – Relating to the Work*

To gather and evaluate information throughout the casework process and make informed decisions, you must first understand the concept, benefit, and application of critical thinking skills to your work in child welfare.

## *PowerPoint – Structure of the Day*

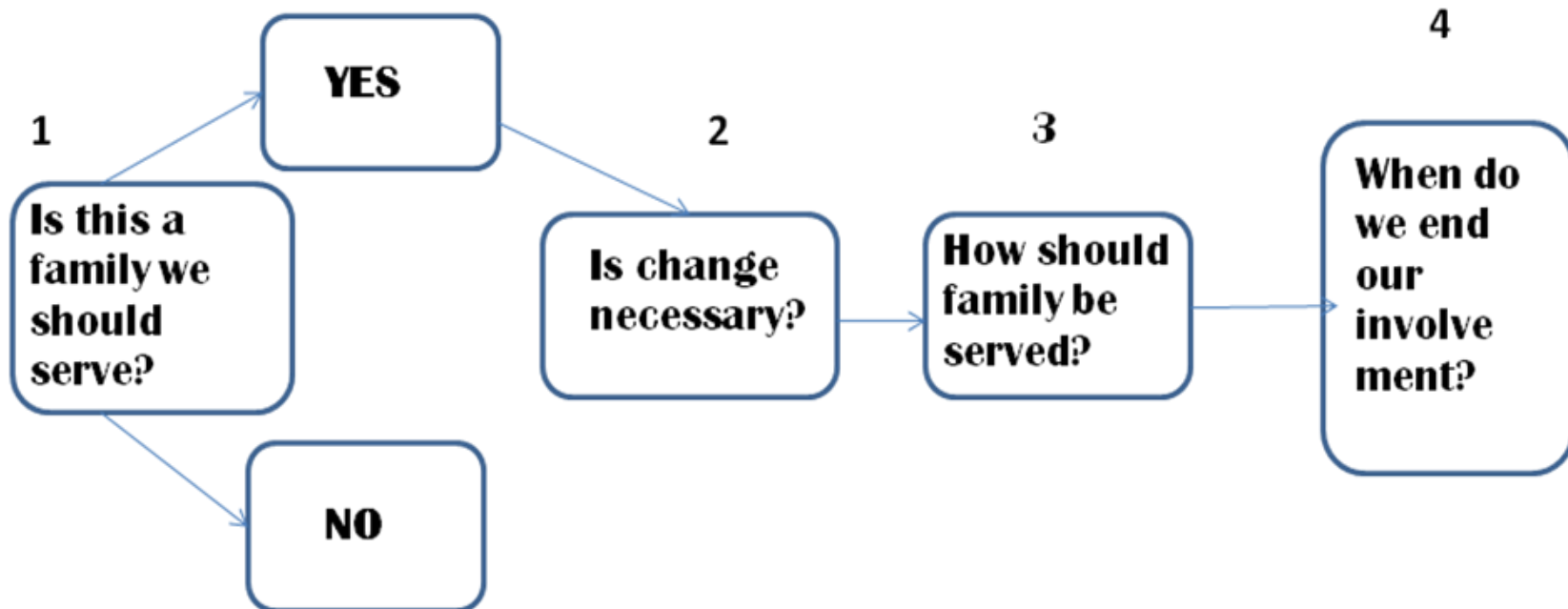
1. Questionnaire: Thinking About Thinking
2. Welcome and Introduction
3. Review Purpose of Training
4. Exploring Critical Thinking Skills in Child Welfare  
(Lecture/Discussion)
5. Breakout Groups for Alberti Family Case Review
  - A. Group Discussion
  - B. Strategy Development
6. Identification of Needs for Ongoing Supports and Resources

## Today's Agenda

1. Questionnaire: Thinking About Thinking
2. Welcome and Introduction
3. Review Purpose of Training
4. Exploring Critical Thinking Skills in Child Welfare (Lecture/Discussion)
5. Breakout Groups for Alberti Family Case Review
  - A. Group Discussion
  - B. Strategy Development
6. Identification of Needs for Ongoing Supports and Resources

*PowerPoint slide – Decision Points*

# Decision Points



## Decision Point Questions

- ➔ Is this a family we should serve?
  - ✓ Is the child(ren) safe?
  - ✓ Has a child been abused/maltreated?
  - ✓ Is a child at risk of harm?
  - ✓ Is a child at risk of being placed in foster care?
  - ✓ Is a child at risk of not achieving the outcomes?
  
- ➔ Is change necessary?
  - ✓ What has to change?
  
- ➔ How should the family be served?
  - ✓ What actions are needed to influence change where change is necessary?
  - ✓ Should specific services be added, stopped or modified?
  - ✓ Should the permanency goal be changed?
  
- ➔ When do we end our involvement?

## *Poster – Decision Point Questions*

- ➔ Is this a family we should serve?
  - ✓ Is the child(ren) safe?
  - ✓ Has a child been abused/maltreated?
  - ✓ Is a child at risk of harm?
  - ✓ Is a child at risk of being placed in foster care?
  - ✓ Is a child at risk of not achieving the outcomes?
  
- ➔ Is change necessary?
  - ✓ What has to change?
  
- ➔ How should the family be served?
  - ✓ What actions are needed to influence change where change is necessary?
  - ✓ Should specific services be added, stopped or modified?
  - ✓ Should the permanency goal be changed?
  
- ➔ When do we end our involvement?

## Important Definitions

### **Definition of Assessment**

A process of gathering and analyzing information for the purpose of making decisions with the family about the need for change and the actions that will promote change.

### **Definition of Safe (Protective)**

A child is safe when there is no immediate or impending danger of serious harm to a child's life or health as a result of acts of commission or omission (actions or inactions) by the child's parent(s) or caretaker(s).

### **Definition of Safe (Nonprotective)**

Nonprotective safety is the decision that one or more children, parents, caretakers, family members, or community members are not likely to be in immediate or impending danger of serious harm, or will not likely face a serious threat to their emotional, physical, or developmental well-being.

### **Definition of Risk (Protective)**

The likelihood that a child will be abused or maltreated in the future.

### **Definition of Risk (Nonprotective)**

The likelihood of not achieving the child welfare outcomes.

### **Definition of Change**

The process of making something different. It can include modifications, replacements, transitions, transformations, and evolutions.



## Child Abuse: The Definition

Pursuant to Social Services Law, Sec. 412, an abused child means a child under eighteen years of age defined as an abused child by the Family Court Act. Section 1012(e) of the Family Court Act further defines an abused child as a child less than eighteen years of age whose parent or other person legally responsible for his/her care:

→ inflicts or allows to be inflicted upon such child physical injury by other than accidental means which causes or creates a substantial risk of death, or serious or protracted disfigurement, or protracted impairment of physical or emotional health or protracted loss or impairment of the function of any bodily organ,

or

→ creates or allows to be created a substantial risk of physical injury to such a child by other than accidental means which would be likely to cause death or serious or protracted disfigurement, or protracted impairment of physical or emotional health or protracted loss or impairment of the function of any bodily organ,

or

→ commits, or allows to be committed an offense against such child defined in article one hundred thirty of the penal law;

allows, permits, or encourages such child to engage in any act described in sections 230.25, 230.30 and 230.32 of the penal law

commits any of the acts described in sections 255.25, 255.26, and 255.27 of the penal law

allows such child to engage in acts or conduct described in article 263 of the penal law provided however that (a) the corroboration requirements contained in the penal law and (b) the age requirement for the application of article 263 of such law shall not apply to proceedings under this article.

## Child Maltreatment: The Definition

Social Services Law, Sec. 412, states that a maltreated child includes a child under eighteen years of age: (a) defined as a neglected child by the Family Court Act; or (b) who has had serious physical injury inflicted upon him by other than accidental means. Section 1012(f) of the Family Court Act defines a neglected child as a child less than eighteen years of age:

whose physical, mental or emotional condition has been impaired or is in imminent danger of becoming impaired as a result of the failure of his parent or other person legally responsible for his care to exercise a minimum degree of care:

in supplying the child with adequate food, clothing, shelter or education in accordance with provisions of part one of article sixty-five of the education law, or medical, dental, optometrical or surgical care, though financially able to do so or offered financial or other reasonable means to do so;

or

in providing the child with proper supervision or guardianship, by unreasonably inflicting or allowing to be inflicted harm, or a substantial risk thereof, including the infliction of excessive corporal punishment; or by misusing a drug or drugs; or by misusing alcoholic beverages to the extent that he loses self-control of his actions; or by any other acts of a similarly serious nature requiring the aid of the Court; provided, however, that where the respondent is voluntarily and regularly participating in a rehabilitative program, evidence that the respondent has repeatedly misused a drug or drugs or alcoholic beverages to the extent that he loses self-control of his actions shall not establish that the child is a neglected child in the absence of evidence establishing that the child's physical, mental, or emotional condition has been impaired or is in imminent danger of becoming impaired as set forth in paragraph (i) of this section;

or

who has been abandoned, in accordance with the definition and other criteria set forth in subdivision five of section 384-b of the social services law, by his parents or other person legally responsible for his care.

## Child Maltreatment: The Definition

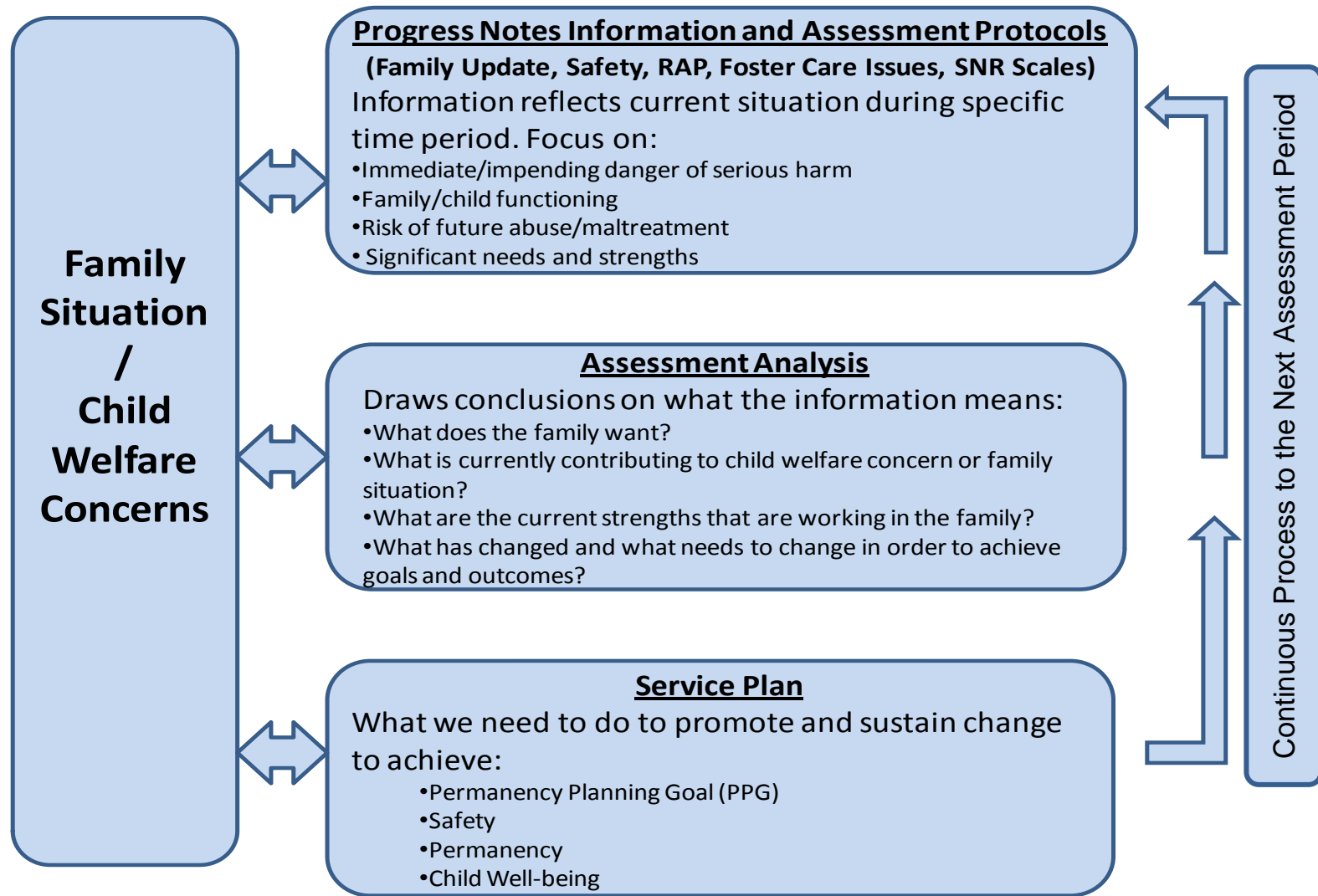
The circumstances which constitute impairment of mental or emotional condition, more commonly referred to as “emotional neglect,” are also defined as follows:

“Impairment of emotional health” and “impairment of mental or emotional condition” include a state of substantially diminished psychological or intellectual functioning in relation to, but not limited to, such factors as failure to thrive, control of aggression or self-destructive impulses, ability to think and reason, or acting out and misbehavior, including incorrigibility, ungovernability or habitual truancy; provided, however, that such impairment must be clearly attributable to the unwillingness or inability of the respondent [i.e., parent or other person legally responsible for the child] to exercise a minimum degree of care toward the child. Family Court Act, Sec. 1012(h).

## Criteria for Effective Service Plans

- ➔ Identifies the behaviors or conditions that need to change.
- ➔ Targets the underlying conditions and contributing factors that create and sustain those behaviors and conditions.
- ➔ Represents the information contained in the Assessment Analysis.
- ➔ Describes the specific outcomes that, once achieved, will resolve the issue.
- ➔ Describes specific family strengths that can be used to support change and achievement of specified outcomes.
- ➔ Defines specific activities the child, family, and worker will do to achieve the specified outcome(s).

# Model for Assessment and Service Planning



*PowerPoint slide – Areas of Decision-Making for  
Every Child Welfare Services Case*

- ➔ How will we engage and serve this child and family?
  
- ➔ Are the children safe from danger of serious harm from their caretakers or from their own behavior? What safety decisions, interventions, and safety plans are needed? How should safety be managed over the life of the case
  
- ➔ Risk assessment and service planning
  
- ➔ Decision to close case for services

*PowerPoint slide*

Thinking About Thinking

## *PowerPoint slide – Scoring Key*

### Total Score

- ➔ 24-31: you value decisions based on intuition, with little reliance on analytic reasoning.
  
- ➔ 32-39: you value decisions based on intuition, but also place value using on analytic reasoning.
  
- ➔ 40-47: you value decisions based on analytic reasoning but also place value on the use of intuition.
  
- ➔ 48-56: you value decisions based on analytic reasoning with little intuition involved.



## *PowerPoint slide – Understanding a Situation*

When subtle, yet critical, information is absent or overlooked, our understanding of the situation can be flawed.

*PowerPoint slide/Poster – In Making Every Decision,  
You Need to...*

- ⇒ Gather relevant information.
  
- ⇒ Weigh information against a set of standards.
  
- ⇒ Take action to achieve child welfare outcomes.

## *PowerPoint slide – Defining Critical Thinking*

*Critical thinking* is a mental discipline used to continually gather, analyze, and re-examine information in order to assure that assessments are as current and accurate as possible and that the actions taken are consistent with these assessments.

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## *PowerPoint slide – Variables Comprising Underlying Conditions*

- ⇒ Needs
  
- ⇒ Perceptions, beliefs, and values
  
- ⇒ Emotions
  
- ⇒ Capability
  
- ⇒ Self-Concept
  
- ⇒ Experience
  
- ⇒ Family System
  
- ⇒ Culture

## Critical Thinking Skills in Child Welfare

Applying critical thinking skills within the casework process supports the achievement of the child welfare outcomes by promoting an open-mindedness to gathering new or more accurate information, a willingness to make or revise decisions that reflect these refined analyses, and a method for evaluating the actions taken by caseworkers and family members.

**Example:** A caseworker who applies critical thinking skills won't assume that all the case information he/she inherited when assigned a case is the "last word" on the family's situation. He/she will weigh the information in the case record against his/her own observations and may decide he/she needs to re-interview a parent, child, or a source to gather more data about a trend he/she has detected in the family.

There is no simple, predictable formula for applying critical thinking skills, so it isn't something you can do in a linear fashion. Be aware that you will often need to go back and reuse skills in order to gain the information you need to support accurate assessments.

Listed below are critical thinking skills that are used in child welfare.

- ➔ Organize the initial information and separate what appear to be facts from what appear to be judgments/assumptions.

**Example:** As a preventive worker is about to arrive for an initial home visit, a neighbor tells her that the family's grade-school children walk a long way to school in the winter without proper clothing. Upon receipt of this initial information, the worker recognizes that the words "proper clothing" and "a long way" are judgments that require clarification and the words "grade-school children" and "walk...to school" are statements of fact that can be verified.

- ➔ Recognize the likelihood of bias in your personal opinions, acknowledge the intensity of your feelings about them, and be aware of the danger of weighing case evidence in the decision-making process according to your personal standards.

**Example:** A foster care worker whose father was an alcoholic realizes that she may be biased in assessing the influence of alcohol on a parent's abilities and seeks supervision to promote informed and objective decision-making related to her case.

- ➔ Temporarily suspend judgment in the absence of sufficient evidence.

**Example:** After reviewing information that a child in foster care has been injured with his supervisor, the supervisor reminds the worker not to assume that the foster parents or siblings were responsible for the injuries the child may have suffered until further information is gathered.

## Critical Thinking Skills in Child Welfare

- ➔ Develop as many reasonable explanations (i.e., multiple hypotheses) as you can to account for indicators of abuse/maltreatment.

**Example:** A CPS worker receives a report that alleges educational neglect of a 13-year-old, who is missing school about half of the time. The worker developed two hypotheses regarding this information: 1) the child could be cutting classes after the bus drops her off at school (and the parents are unaware of this); and 2) the child could have a chronic illness and the parents failed to inform the school and make alternate arrangements for her education. After consulting with her supervisor, she added two more hypotheses: 3) the child could be truant because the parents are requiring her to care for their younger children; and 4) she could be kept at home because her parents are trying to hide injuries that may have resulted from abuse or maltreatment.

- ➔ Examine and follow up on insufficient information, gaps in information, or inconsistencies in information being gathered.

**Example:** A teenager recently placed in an adoptive family has run away from the home following a fight with one of the other children in the home, according to the parents. The teen returned to the adoptive home of his own accord within hours. The father called the worker to let her know that the teen was safe at home. The worker immediately scheduled a home visit. During the interview with the family, the father and mother gave somewhat inconsistent information about the alleged fight that occurred between the teen and other child in the home that prompted the teen to run away. The teen disclosed he ran away following an argument with the father. The worker confronted the parents and teen regarding the inconsistencies in their explanations.

- ➔ Recognize the limitations in your knowledge and experience and draw upon available resources as necessary to strengthen the quality of your casework practice.

**Example:** A worker who has no experience working with cases involving domestic violence sought consultation from his supervisor related to how to develop a safety plan with the mother and children in his case.

- ➔ Look for patterns that appear during the case, rather than only examining the singular facts.

**Example:** A case has just been transferred to preventive services. After reviewing the family's prior history with her agency, the worker saw a pattern emerge related to the mother's mental health status and when requests for services were made. She then reevaluated her perspective and current thoughts about the case.

- ➔ Question your own assessments and consider all associated case implications.

**Example:** An adoption worker met with her supervisor to review a home study and realized that she hadn't yet assessed the mental and physical status of the aunt who the parents said will supervise the child they want to adopt when they're at work. The worker mentioned this to her supervisor and together they identified the information that is still needed, as well as sources the worker will need to consult in order to get it.

## *PowerPoint slide – Your Task*

- ➔ Place a check mark next to any skills you feel you already attend to in your supervisory practice.
  
- ➔ Place a star next to any of the skills you feel you need clarification on from us or that you feel you should be paying more attention to in your unit.
  
- ➔ Provide a numerical rating on a continuum from 1-5 (1=frequent and 5=completely lacking) to the level of attention paid by the workers under your supervision as a whole to each of the identified skills.



## *PowerPoint slide/Poster – Critical Thinking Skills in Child Welfare*

- ➔ Organize the initial information and separate facts from assumptions.
- ➔ Recognize the likelihood of bias in your personal opinions.
- ➔ Temporarily suspend judgment.
- ➔ Develop as many hypotheses as you can to explain or account for indicators of abuse/maltreatment.
- ➔ Examine and follow up on insufficient information.
- ➔ Recognize the limitations in your knowledge and draw upon available resources.
- ➔ Look for patterns that appear during the case, rather than only examining singular facts.
- ➔ Question your own assessments and consider all associated case implications.

*PowerPoint slide – Everyone Makes Mistakes*



## Common Errors in Reasoning in Child Welfare

- ➔ Making a decision with insufficient information about the family.
- ➔ Being biased toward remembering either the very first information or, paradoxically, the most recent.
- ➔ Selectively remembering information that supports one's own beliefs.
- ➔ Remembering information that is emotionally charged, vividly detailed, concrete, and recent more easily than information that is old, abstract, dull, or statistical.
- ➔ Being reluctant to change one's mind and/or to revise previously made assessments even when given new information.
- ➔ Fixing on one explanation/conclusion and looking only for information that confirms it or being too quick to dismiss new information that doesn't support it, rather than treating it as information that requires further testing.
- ➔ Failing to detect errors in communication, including hearing others incorrectly, writing records inaccurately, and expressing oneself in vague terms that contribute to misinterpretation.
- ➔ Giving allegations or other information very little weight (or none) when coming from members of the public versus giving much greater weight to allegations or other information coming from professionals.

\* **Source:** Munro, Eileen, "Common Errors of Reasoning in Child Protective Work." *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Vol. 23, No. 8, pp. 745-758, 1999.

## *PowerPoint slide – Avoiding Errors*

Errors can be reduced by:

- ➔ Being aware of them and striving to avoid them.
  
- ➔ Thinking critically about information you obtain from both the family and collaterals.

## *Poster – SET Principles and Critical Thinking*

- »» Set performance expectations
  
- »» Monitor performance
  
- »» Provide feedback to performance
  
- »» Coach workers in ways to be more effective