

The Six (6) Information Domains

Successful assessment relies on comprehensive information gathering. Further, it is important to understand not just the allegations made, but also the underlying causes behind the allegations. In order to do this, we must gain a robust understanding not only on the maltreatment but also how the family operates. There are six domains that are used to accomplish this. Each domain can be restated in the form of a question to guide the worker in determining if enough information has been collected in relationship to the domain.

TYPE OF MALTREATMENT

This is a straightforward information element concerned with facts and evidence which support the presence of maltreatment which comes from worker observation, interviews and corroboration. This includes making a conclusion (substantiation) about the type of maltreatment (sexual abuse, lack of supervision, etc.) and the specific symptoms and facts (injuries/constant hitting) which are consistent with the maltreatment.

1. What is the extent of the maltreatment?

This question is concerned with the maltreating behavior and the immediate physical effects on a child. It considers what is occurring or has occurred and the results. The answer to this question results in a determination that maltreatment has or has not occurred. This includes decisions regarding allegations of suspected child abuse and allegations regarding the need for general protective services as defined in the Child Protective Services Law (23 Pa. C.S., Chapter 63) and the Protective Services Regulations (55 PA Code, Chapter 3490). However, relying only on information from this question is inadequate for assessing safety.

Information that answers this question includes:

- Type of maltreatment
- Severity of the maltreatment
- History of the maltreatment
- Description of specific events
- Description of emotional and physical symptoms
- Identification of the child and maltreating caregiver

NATURE OF THE MALTREATMENT: SURROUNDING CIRCUMSTANCES

This qualifies the maltreatment by placing it in a context or situation that 1) precedes or leads up to the maltreatment or 2) exists while the maltreatment is occurring. By selectively "assessing" this element separate from the actual maltreatment, we achieve greater understanding of how serious the maltreatment is. In other words, the circumstances that accompany the maltreatment are important and are significant in themselves and qualify how serious the maltreatment is.

2. *What circumstances surround the maltreatment?*

This question is concerned with the nature of what accompanies or surrounds the maltreatment. It addresses what is going on at the time that the maltreatment occurs or has occurred.

Information that answers this question includes:

- The duration of the maltreatment
- Caregiver intent concerning the maltreatment
- Caregiver explanation for the maltreatment and family conditions
- Caregiver acknowledgement and attitude about the maltreatment
- Other problems occurring in association with the maltreatment

CHILD FUNCTIONING

This information element is qualified by the age of the child. Functioning is considered with respect to age appropriateness. Age appropriateness is applied against the “normalcy” standard. So, it is critical that you have a working understanding of child development given that you will be considering how a child is functioning in respect to what is expected given the child's age. Among the areas you will consider in information collecting and “assessing” are trust, sociability, self-awareness and acceptance, verbal skills/communication, independence, assertiveness, motor skills, intellect and mental performance, self-control, emotion, play and work, behavior patterns, mood changes, eating and sleeping habits and sexual behavior. Additionally, you consider the child's physical capabilities including vulnerability and ability to make needs known.

3. *How do the children function, including their condition?*

This question is concerned with a child’s general behavior, emotions, temperament, and physical capacity. It addresses how a child is from day to day rather than focusing on points in time.

Information that answers this question includes:

- Capacity for attachment
- General mood and temperament
- Intellectual functioning
- Communication and social skills
- Expression of emotions/feelings
- Behavior
- Peer relations
- School performance
- Independence
- Motor skills
- Physical and behavioral health
- Functioning within cultural norms

ADULT FUNCTIONING

This information element has strictly to do with how adults (the caregivers) in a family are functioning personally and presently in their everyday lives. It is concerned with life

management, social relationships, meeting needs, problem solving. Among the things you would be concerned about in gathering information and assessing are behavior, communication, ability to relate to others, cognitive functioning, intellect, self-control, problem solving, coping, impulsiveness and stress management. It also includes adult mental health and substance use. It is concerned with whether role performance is influenced by mental health or substance abuse. It includes perception, rationality, self-control, reality testing, stability, self-awareness, self-esteem, self-acceptance and coherence. Remember it is important that recent (adult related) history is captured here such as employment experiences, criminal history, previous relationships and so on.

4. How do the adults within the household function, including substance use and behavioral health?

This question is concerned with how the adults/caregivers in the family feel, think, and act on a daily basis. The question focuses on adult functioning separate from parenting. It is concerned with how the adults in the household function, regardless of whether they are parents or not.

Information that answers this question includes:

- Communication and social skills
- Coping and stress management
- Self control and rationality
- Judgment, problem solving and decision making
- Independence
- Home and financial management
- Employment
- Community involvement
- Self care and self preservation
- Substance use
- Physical and behavioral health and capacity
- Functioning within cultural norms

GENERAL PARENTING

When considering this information element, it is important to keep distinctively centered on the overall parenting that is occurring and not allow any maltreatment incident or discipline to shade your study. Among the issues for consideration within this element are: parenting styles and the origin of the style, basic care, affection, communication, expectations for children, sensitivity to an individual child, knowledge and expectations related to child development and parenting, reasons for having children, viewpoint toward children, examples of parenting behavior and parenting experiences.

5. How do caregivers generally parent?

This question explores the general nature and approach to parenting which forms the basis for understanding caregiver-child interaction.

Information that answers this question includes:

- Reasons for being a caregiver
- Satisfaction in being a caregiver
- Caregiver knowledge and skill in parenting and child development
- Caregiver expectations and empathy for a child
- Decision making in parenting practices
- Parenting style
- History of parenting behavior
- Protectiveness
- Caregiver assures appropriate supervision in his/her absence
- Whether another adult is undermining parental authority

PARENTING DISCIPLINE

This is another information element that focuses information collection into one area—discipline of children. Study here would include the parent's methods, the source of those methods, purpose or reasons for, attitudes about, context of, expectations of discipline, understanding, relationship to child and child behavior, meaning of discipline.

6. How do the caregivers discipline the children?

This question is concerned with the manner in which caregivers approach discipline and child guidance. This question is broken out from general parenting because this aspect of family life is highly related to both safety threats and risk of maltreatment.

Information that answers this question includes:

- Disciplinary methods
- Concept and purpose of discipline
- Context in which discipline occurs
- Cultural practices

These domains apply to all types of child welfare cases from intake and referral through to case closure, regardless of whether the child is in the home or in a substitute care setting. Remember, the purpose of exploring the six domains is to understand how the family and specifically the caregivers function and protect the children in their care. This concept is universal regardless of the living situation. Although in some instances, e.g. a placement setting where no allegations/instances of abuse/neglect have occurred, it may not be necessary to explore the nature of maltreatment or the circumstances surrounding the maltreatment because there are none present at that time.

The effectiveness of a safety assessment is dependent upon whether or not the information collected is *pertinent* and *relevant* to identifying the safety threats to the child and caregiver protective capacities, and whether *sufficient* information has been gathered to draw accurate conclusions about child safety. For safety interventions and services to be relevant and effective, county agency staff must systematically gather information and continuously evaluate family members' strengths and their ability to address their problems. This information is used to engage parents and caregivers in a culturally responsive working relationship that builds on their strengths to resolve the problems that endanger their children and families.