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Commentary

## Evolving a theoretical model of child safety in maltreating families

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The primary objective of risk assessment processes is to identify, from cases referred to child welfare authorities, the subgroup of children at high risk of future abuse or neglect so that action may be taken to prevent it. A second identification relates to the likely severity of subsequent maltreatment (Knoke & Trocmé, 2005). The most extensive application of risk assessment in child maltreatment cases has been in the first context, estimating the likelihood of maltreatment recurrence. Since child protection agencies are not resourced to serve all children and families in which a report is substantiated, risk assessment has been suggested as a rational way to triage those families and children most in need of a service intervention (Johnson & L'Esperance, 1984).

Distinct from the need for targeting ongoing service interventions that are designed to ameliorate future risk of maltreatment, safety evolved around the need to determine which children require an immediate action, often removal from the home, to prevent serious harm. As Schwalbe (2004) observed, current risk decision-making predominantly relies on atheoretical instruments. The same may be said for safety protocols. In an effort to advance safety decision-making, the authors trace the evolution of safety as a separate construct from general risk of re-maltreatment and suggest a theoretical model for explaining and researching child safety.

While it might be asserted that safety, estimating the likely severity (and immediacy) of maltreatment, has always been a central function of child protective services, the formal use of safety as a construct, and specific attention to it using structured protocols in assessment, is a more recent development. In the United States, it was only in the early 1990s that child protection agencies began to adopt safety assessment protocols that were distinct from risk assessment instruments. The United States Congress,

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through the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, specified child safety as one of three national outcomes for which the US Department of Health and Human Services will hold state child protection systems accountable. This appears to be the first major introduction of safety as a distinct concept in federal child maltreatment legislation relative to the concept of child protection.

While there is general public concern about all child maltreatment, and especially children who experience repeat maltreatment, the level of concern rises significantly when child maltreatment results in death or serious injury. In the United States, most state statutes set the threshold for taking custody of and involuntarily removing a child at the level of imminent danger of serious harm. In 2004, about 19% of substantiated victims of child maltreatment entered out-of-home care (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). It is unknown how many additional victims were considered unsafe, but whose safety was managed through in-home safety plans.

The consequences of safety decision errors can be enormous. An unsafe child left at home may be seriously injured. A child who is actually safe, but removed to out-of-home care, experiences the unnecessary trauma of separation from a family. Predicting the immediacy and severity of harm from repeat maltreatment is a life altering decision and is distinct from estimating the likelihood repeat maltreatment of any level of severity within the ensuing 12–24 months.

Like the evolution of risk assessment in general, approaches to safety assessment have largely remained atheoretical with protocols containing items presumed to relate to future serious harm, but mostly without established validity. It seems unlikely that statistical models for predicting serious harm from re-maltreatment will achieve sufficient sensitivity and specificity due to the comparatively low base rate of serious harm. The Canadian Incidence Study (Trocmé, MacMillan, Fallon, & DeMarco, 2003) observed only 4% of substantiated cases to involve serious harm. Validating safety factors is complicated by the reality that child protection agencies remove children presumed to be unsafe from the custody of maltreating caregivers, thereby making the study of predictor variables more difficult. A theoretical framework for understanding and researching child safety could help fill a void that exists due to the nonexplanatory nature of current safety protocols.

### **Evolving from risk to safety**

Over the past two decades, considerable attention has been given to estimating the risk of maltreatment recurrence. For the most part, efforts to develop child maltreatment risk assessment instruments use recurrence without specific regard to severity as the primary variable in establishing criterion validity (e.g., Baird & Wagner, 2000; DePanfilis & Zuravin, 2001). As Sprang, Clark, and Bass (2005) observe, “Several studies have examined adult characteristics implicated as risk factors for child maltreatment or increased child abuse potential, but stop short of isolating any direct relationship between these risk variables and maltreatment severity” (p. 337).

In 1992, the New York State Department of Social Services developed and implemented a safety protocol, separate and distinct from an accompanying risk assessment protocol. The safety protocol, based on earlier work with the Child at Risk Field (Holder & Corey, 1986), contained 13 items, such as “Caretaker’s behavior is currently violent and/or out of control” or “Caretaker is unable or unwilling to meet the child’s immediate needs for safety, food, shelter or clothing.” The New York State safety protocol was designed primarily for use in the early phases of a child maltreatment investigation when information is scant and safety decisions often need to be made quickly. In reality, the first field level

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