



New Jersey Department of Children and Families Policy Manual

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Chapter:	B	Case Planning	
Subchapter:	6	Structured Decision Making	
Issuance:	600	Structured Decision Making (SDM)	

Overview 5-5-2008

Structured Decision Making (SDM™) is a uniform process for Division-wide decision-making regarding critical aspects of the agency intervention with a child and family. Structured Decision-Making assessment tools are research and evidence-based, designed to assist field staff to make important decisions, based on the facts of a case, rather than relying solely on individual judgment. SDM™ tools, completed in NJ SPIRIT, assure that case characteristics, safety factors, risk factors, and domains of child and family functioning are assessed for every family, every time.

The use of systematic assessment tools allows the agency to increase reliability and validity in critical decision-making. The process targets resources for families with the highest risk and the greatest vulnerability.

Child Safety Assessment (In-Home)

Purpose 5-5-2008

The purposes of assessing child safety:

- a) determine whether any child, residing at home, is currently unsafe (i.e., in IMMEDIATE or IMPENDING DANGER), requiring protective intervention; and
- b) determine what action CP&P needs to take to provide protection. See N.J.A.C. 10:129-3.2, Safety assessment and risk assessment for local offices. If a child is in danger, a Safety Protection Plan is warranted, or the child must be removed.

When safety is of concern, the Safety Protection Plan must be designed to have an immediate positive impact on the child. CP&P views the Safety Protection Plan as a short term alternative to court action.

When to Complete 9-26-2011

CP&P Form [22-22](#), Safety Assessment (In-Home Cases), is the written result of a process to assess safety, completed for children who are living in their own homes with their parents, adopted, or living with relatives or family friends through private arrangements or transfers of custody which did not involve CP&P. The form is completed in NJ SPIRIT. When assessing safety of a child in out-of-home placement, see policy at [CP&P-IV-A-2-100](#).

Assess a child's safety (in-home):

- When investigating a child protective service (CPS) allegation in a new, open or a previously closed case.
- Whenever new information is learned on a CPS case in open status or a family under investigation that indicates a threat to the safety of the child.

A child safety assessment may be completed when CP&P considers whether a non-custodial parent is a resource for a child. Complete CP&P Form [22-22](#) to determine child safety in the non-custodial parent's household.

Complete a child safety assessment (in-home, using CP&P Form [22-22](#)) when an adoptive parent, the child's sole caregiver, has died or is residing apart from the child, and CP&P has learned that the child is now residing with his or her birth parent(s), from whom parental rights were terminated (TPR), or another relative. See [CP&P-IV-C-8-600](#), Death and/or Change in Adoptive Caregiver.

What It Decides 9-26-2011

The Safety Assessment (In-Home Cases), CP&P Form [22-22](#), completed in NJ SPIRIT, is used to guide decisions about:

- Whether it is safe for a child to remain at home.
- The need for an in-home Safety Protection Plan.
- Whether to remove a child to assure the child is safe.
- Whether to return a child home.
- Whether to "return" a child to (i.e., "place" a child with) the non-custodial parent
- Whether it is safe for an adopted child to reside in the same home as his or her birth parent(s) or a relative, upon the death of, or separation from, the adoptive parent/sole caregiver.

Assess the safety and well-being of ALL children in the home. If a child is in the home who is not included as a case participant in the electronic case record, assess the child's safety while on the field visit.

Once back in the office, take steps to:

- a) Register the child as a family member in NJ SPIRIT.
- c) Register the child as a participant in the given incident in NJS.
- d) Assure the child is reflected on the CP&P Form [22-22](#).

A child is "safe" only when NO safety factors are identified. When safety factors are identified, a viable in-home Safety Protection Plan must be put in place, or the child must be removed from the home to secure his, her, or their safety.

When domestic violence is alleged or co-occurs with child abuse and/or neglect, the Division's primary responsibility is to ensure the safety of the child. See [CP&P-VIII-B-1-100](#) Domestic Violence, and the [DCF Domestic Violence Protocol](#) for additional considerations in the development of the child's Safety Protection Plan in these households. Note: It is important that the child's "Safety Protection Plan" is not confused with the "Safety Plan" in matters of domestic violence. See definition of this term in [CP&P-VIII-B-1-100](#); see details regarding safety planning in the Protocol.

Procedures to Follow 2-6-2012

To assess child safety, take a copy of CP&P Form [22-22](#) into the field.

If a safety factor is checked "yes," meaning a child is not safe, the responding Worker immediately consults his or her Supervisor. Call the Supervisor by cell phone from the field/client home.

Determine, together, the appropriate course of action to assure the child is safe. Consider whether any child can remain in the home under a Safety Protection Plan. Provide specific details about how to monitor the Safety Protection Plan to facilitate the child's continued care and safety.

When considering the use of a Safety Protection Plan to allow the child to remain in the home, questions to consider include, but are not limited to:

- Is it reasonable to expect the safety factor(s) identified will be eliminated in a short period of time;
- It is reasonable to expect that the child's exposure to the safety factor can be effectively managed and sufficiently minimized to assure the child is safe and may remain in the home until the safety factor is abated.

If denied access to a child by the parent/caregiver, consult a Supervisor immediately.

If a child is removed during an investigation, use CP&P Form [22-22](#) to guide decision making on when it is safe to return the child back to the home. A child must be "safe," or there must be a viable in-home Safety Protection Plan in place, PRIOR to the child's return home.

Use of Safety Protection Plan Requiring Special Protocol 9-4-2012

Special protocols are required when the Safety Protection Plan is developed and implemented with parental consent to mitigate the need for out-of-home placement of the child. These protocols are needed if the Safety Protection Plan includes any of the following elements:

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

In some situations these elements of a Safety Protection Plan are appropriate when CP&P is investigating an allegation of abuse/neglect. However, since these actions have the effect of limiting the parents' right to access their children and their home, they can only be viewed as short term alternatives to court action, if the safety issues remain. Such actions can only be implemented, absent a court order, with parents whose participation is truly consensual.

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

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

Litigation is only required if one of the three provisions above continues to be necessary. If safety can be achieved without barring a parent from his/her home or preventing him/her from unsupervised time with his/her children, litigation is not necessary.

Consult the assigned DAG to determine whether litigation is required to achieve safety.

In determining whether the action desired can be supported by a safety plan or requires an emergency removal without a court order (DODD), with litigation within two court days, consult the DAG and be guided by the following four factors:

- Is the child remaining with a parent or legal custodian? If not, the action constitutes a DODD and cannot be effectuated by a Safety Protection Plan.
- Must the plan be legally enforceable in order to keep the child safe? If so, litigation for care and supervision or custody must be filed.

- Was the plan already in place before CP&P was called? If a child had previously been 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).
- Who made the plan, CP&P or the parent/custodian?

Signatures Needed 5-5-2008

When a Safety Protection Plan is required, the parent/caregiver must agree to follow the plan, and commit to the agreement in writing by signing the plan BEFORE the Worker leaves the home (unless the Worker takes the children with him or her).

Call the Supervisor to conference the case further:

- If neither parent will sign the plan (but the Worker has reason to believe the plan will be followed);
- If only one parent agrees to sign the plan;
- If the Worker believes the parent(s) will NOT comply with the plan despite agreeing to sign it; or
- In any other unusual or questionable circumstance.

Safety Protection Plan Not Needed 5-5-2008

When a Safety Protection Plan is not needed, the Worker meets with his or her Supervisor within three work days of the field visit to the home to conference the case. The Worker completes the safety assessment in NJ SPIRIT to produce CP&P Form [22-22](#). The Supervisor approves the safety assessment in NJS.

Safety Protection Plan Intervention Options 5-5-2008

Each Safety Protection Plan must be individually crafted, based on the applicable safety factor(s) and the circumstances of the child.

Safety Protection Plan interventions include one, or a combination of, the following -

- 1.) Direct intervention by the CP&P Worker or other CP&P staff as a safety resource, to achieve an immediate, positive impact on the child or the child's circumstances.
- 2.) Parent/caregiver uses appropriate resources - neighbors, relatives, or other individuals in the community as a safety resource.
- 3.) Use of community agencies or services as safety resources.

- 4.) The alleged perpetrator leaves the home, temporarily or permanently, either voluntarily or in response to legal action. (See policy in this section, "Use of Safety Protection Plan Requiring Special Protocol.")
- 5.) The non-abusing parent/caregiver moves to a safe environment with the child, where the alleged perpetrator has no access to the child.
- 6.) Other - The parent/caregiver or Worker identify a unique intervention that does not fit within options 1-5.

Safety Protection Plan Monitoring 5-5-2008

Each individual plan must detail HOW it will be monitored.

The assigned Worker monitors the parent's compliance with the Safety Protection Plan and the parent's improved functioning/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:

- While an incident is under investigation, the assigned Child Protection Service Investigator is responsible for monitoring the Safety Protection Plan.
- When a service case is open, the Permanency Worker is responsible.

End Date 5-5-2008

Determine what is required of the parent/caregiver/family, what must happen, and what must change within the household to render the Safety Protection Plan no longer necessary. Determine what assistance is needed to resolve the safety issue(s). Use this determination to derive a tentative "end date" for the plan.

Do not allow the Safety Protection Plan to expire, or to remain in effect for an excessive period of time.

Reassessing Child Safety 5-5-2008

Reassess child safety as follows:

- Assess the child safety throughout the life of the case.
- Consider safety factors at each contact with a family.

- If a service case will be closed or an investigation is completed for which a case need not be opened for 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.

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

Related Policy 5-10-2010

[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

Purpose 5-5-2008

The purpose of assessing risk is to determine how likely it is that a family will abuse or neglect their children in the next 18 to 24 months.

Risk assessment is based on the following:

- Conditions that exist at the time the incident is investigated;
- 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:

- A neglect assessment index; and
- An abuse assessment index.

Levels of risk include a

- Low;
- Moderate;
- High; or
- Very High

likelihood of future child abuse or neglect without CP&P intervention.

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.

When to Complete 10-3-2011

Assess risk by completing CP&P Form [22-23](#) in NJ SPIRIT, whenever conducting a child abuse/neglect investigation, for a new case, a re-opened case, or when conducting an investigation on an open case.

Complete CP&P Form [22-23](#):

- After the safety assessment (CP&P Form [22-22](#)) has been completed and the Worker has reached an investigation finding regarding the allegation.
- Within 30 days prior to closing at intake.
- To determine whether to open a case for ongoing services, based on the family's assessed risk level. Open a case if the risk level is high or very high. (Consult a Supervisor about continued agency involvement when the risk level is moderate or low.)

Policy Overrides 5-5-2008

Policy Overrides require the approval of a Supervisor.

If a determination of risk does not appear to be correct, the Worker discusses it with his or her Supervisor. Consider whether to apply an "override" to derive a risk level different from what the SDM™ tool suggests.

Policy overrides warrant a risk level designation of very high, regardless of the risk level indicated by CP&P Form [22-23](#).

Determine whether to activate a policy override, based on a situation with at least one of the following dynamics:

- Sexual abuse case and the perpetrator is likely to have access to the child victim.
- Non-accidental injury to a child under age three.
- Severe, non-accidental injury to any child.
- Caregiver's action or inaction resulted in the death or near death of a child due to abuse or neglect (whether a previous occurrence or relating to the current CPS report).

Discretionary Overrides 5-5-2008

Discretionary Overrides require the approval of a Supervisor.

A Worker can identify and recommend to his or her Supervisor that a risk level needs to be corrected - increased by one level.

The recommendation to apply a discretionary override is based on unique circumstances of a case that are not captured in the form.

Risk Assessment Supplemental Data Collection 5-5-2008

CP&P Form [22-23](#) was developed for further research into risk assessment. It captures information about:

- Cases in which there was only one incident of domestic violence during the past year.
- Firearms in a household.
- Parent or caregiver mental illness.
- Parent or caregiver history of criminal convictions.

Family Risk Reassessment for In-Home Cases 10-3-2011

- The CP&P Form [22-26](#), New Jersey CP&P Family Risk Reassessment for In-Home Cases, combines items from the original risk assessment tool with additional items, to evaluate a family's progress toward achieving case plan goals. The Worker completes the form:
- For all open CPS cases in which at least one child remains in the home;
- Initially - six (6) months from the date of the CPS report;
- Ongoing - every six (6) months thereafter; and, whenever new circumstances or new information becomes available that potentially changes the level of risk, including a child returning home;
- Within 30 days prior to case closure; and
- Whenever a case remains in Intake beyond the 60 day Initial Response Program.

If a new CPS report is received on an open case, complete an initial risk assessment, CP&P Form [22-23](#) (not a risk reassessment) during the investigation:

- Keep the original "risk" assessment schedule (reassess risk every six months from the date of the initial report).

- If the new report results in a placement, conduct future reassessments using reunification assessment protocol using CP&P Form [22-27](#), New Jersey Family Reunification Assessment, until the child returns home.

**Use Risk Reassessment Form to Decide Whether to Close a Case or Set MVR Schedule
5-5-2008**

The Worker and Supervisor use CP&P Form [22-26](#), New Jersey CP&P Family Risk Reassessment for In-Home Cases, to determine whether to close a case:

- Consider closing cases where risk is reduced to "low."
- Discuss whether to close cases where risk remains, or is reduced to, "moderate."
- Keep cases open where risk is "high" - and especially "very high" - unless special circumstances exist, or CP&P is court ordered to close the case.

SDM™ Minimum Visitation Requirement (MVR) 5-10-2010

[CP&P-III-C-3-100](#) In-Person Visits with Clients and Out-of-Home Placement Providers (MVRs).

Parent/Caregiver Strengths and Needs Assessment

Purpose 5-5-2008

Assessing parent or caregiver strengths and needs is a process in NJ SPIRIT, to produce CP&P Form [22-24](#), New Jersey CP&P Caregiver Strengths and Needs Assessment. The assessment is completed to identify critical strengths and needs of parents/caregivers in a child protective services case that will be open for CP&P supervision and services.

CP&P Form [22-24](#) provides information for the case plan, identifying the caregiver(s)'s top three strengths and top three needs.

**CP&P Form [22-24](#), New Jersey CP&P Caregiver Strengths and Needs Assessment
5-10-2010**

Use the form to:

- Assess the strengths and needs of each family for whom CP&P opens a CPS case for ongoing supervision;
- Identify critical family needs in an objective format;
- Develop effective Case Plans;
- Monitor service referrals;

- Assess changes in caregiver functioning over time, and evaluate the impact of services to meet identified needs.

Engage the family when gathering information to complete CP&P Form [22-24](#) and when developing the case plan.

When domestic violence is alleged or co-occurs with child abuse/neglect, see [CP&P-VIII-B-1-100](#), Domestic Violence, and the [DCF Domestic Violence Protocol](#), when assessing the non-offending parent's/caregiver's strengths and family needs, holding separate family team meetings, and developing separate case plans.

When to Assess Caregiver Strengths and Needs 5-5-2008

The initial assessment is completed by the Worker:

- When a CPS case will be open for CP&P supervision and services.
- No later than 60 calendar days from assignment of the CPS report to the Local Office from SCR.

The assigned Worker completes CP&P Form [22-24](#) as a re-assessment:

- a) In-home cases -- every six (6) months from the date of the CPS report.
- b) Placement cases -- every three (3) months from the date of placement.
- c.) Whenever circumstances in a case change that warrant a reassessment, such as a change in family structure/dynamics, a new allegation of child abuse/neglect, or when preparing for a court hearing.

The strengths and needs of only one household are assessed or reassessed on CP&P Form [22-24](#). (The household assessed must be the same household for which the CP&P Form [22-23](#), Family Risk Assessment, was completed.)

One form is completed per household, to capture information about all of the caregivers in the home.

Child Strengths and Needs Assessment

Purpose 5-5-2008

The CP&P Form [22-25](#), New Jersey CP&P Child Strengths and Needs Assessment, is completed in NJ SPIRIT to identify the critical strengths and needs of a child in a CPS case who will be open for CP&P supervision and services.

The CP&P Form [22-25](#) provides information for the case plan, identifying the top three strengths and the top three needs of each child opened for services.

**CP&P Form [22-25](#), New Jersey CP&P Child Strengths and Needs Assessment
5-5-2008**

Use this form to:

- Assess and evaluate the strengths and needs of each child for whom CP&P opens a CPS case for ongoing supervision;
- Identify the child's critical needs in an objective format;
- Develop and plan effective service intervention;
- Monitor service referrals on behalf of the child;
- Assess changes in a child's functioning over time, to evaluate the impact of services.

Complete one form for each child in a household in "open" case status.

Engage the family when gathering information to complete CP&P Form [22-25](#).

When to Assess Child Strengths and Needs 5-5-2008

The initial assessment is completed by the Worker:

- When a CPS case will be open for CP&P supervision and services;
- No later than 60 calendar days from assignment of the CPS report to the Local Office from SCR.

The assigned Worker completes CP&P Form [22-25](#) as a re-assessment:

- a.) In-home cases - every six (6) months from the date of the CPS report.
- b.) Placement cases - every three (3) months from the date of placement.
- c.) Whenever the current circumstances in a case warrant reassessment, such as a change in family structure/dynamics, a new allegation of child abuse/neglect, or when preparing for a court hearing.

Family Reunification Assessment

Purpose 5-5-2008

The CP&P Form [22-27](#), New Jersey Family Reunification Assessment, is completed in NJ SPIRIT for open cases, where at least one child is in out-of-home placement and the goal is to reunite the child with the family. The form is also used when a household, which was not involved in the removal, is being considered as a reunification resource.

**CP&P Form [22-27](#), New Jersey Family Reunification Assessment
5-5-2008**

Use this form when a child is in out-of-home placement to:

- Evaluate and determine a Visitation Plan;
- Conduct a reunification assessment in the parent's/caregiver's home;
- Develop or revise a Permanency Plan.

When to Complete the CP&P Form [22-27](#) 5-5-2008

Complete the Family Reunification Assessment:

- No later than three (3) months from the date of placement;
- Every three (3) months while a child continues in placement;
- Prior to any court hearing, to review the permanency goal and/or progress toward achieving case plan goals and objectives;
- At any time a child is being considered for return home.