

## **SAFETY APPENDIX 2**

### **The Vulnerable Child**

#### **Introduction**

#### **Is there a vulnerable child in this family?**

Child vulnerability refers to a child's capacity for self-protection. This definition helps to challenge the tendency of associating vulnerability primarily with age.

#### **The Safety Assessment**

Child vulnerability is the first conclusion you make when completing a safety assessment. If you conclude that there is not a vulnerable child in the family/household, no further safety assessment is necessary and no safety plan is required. When, however, you determine that a vulnerable child lives in the family/household, then you proceed with completing the safety assessment.

Safety is an issue only when there is a vulnerable child in a family.

#### **Judging Child Vulnerability**

In order to judge child vulnerability, you will need to observe the family and gather information to evaluate the child, understand the role the child has in the family, and have a sense of the parent- child interaction or relationship. While the vulnerability of some children is obvious simply by observation (e.g., an infant), it is not uncommon that a CPS worker cannot make an adequate judgment on the vulnerability of a child until the conclusion of the initial assessment/investigation.

The following will assist in judging child vulnerability:

**Age** – Children from birth to six years old are always vulnerable. Be hyper-vigilant about infants.

**Physical Disability** – Regardless of age, children who are physically handicapped and therefore unable to remove themselves from danger are vulnerable. Those who, because of their physical limitations, are highly dependent on others to meet their basic needs are vulnerable.

**Mental Disability** – Regardless of age, children who are cognitively limited are vulnerable because of a number of possible limitations: recognizing danger, knowing who can be trusted, meeting their basic needs and seeking protection.

**Provocative** – A child's emotional, mental health, behavioral problems can be such that they irritate and provoke others to act out toward them or to totally avoid them.

**Powerless** – Regardless of age, intellect and physical capacity, children who are highly dependent and susceptible to others are vulnerable. These children typically are so influenced by

emotional and psychological attachment that they are subject to the whims of those who have power over them. Within this dynamic, you might notice children being subject to intimidation, fear, and emotional manipulation. Powerlessness could also be observed in vulnerable children who are exposed to threatening circumstances which they are unable to manage.

**Defenseless** – Regardless of age, a child who is unable to defend him/herself against aggression is vulnerable. This can include those children who are oblivious to danger. Remember that self-protection involves accurate reality perception particularly related to dangerous people and dangerous situations. Children who are frail or lack mobility are more defenseless and therefore vulnerable.

**Non Assertive** – Regardless of age, a child who is so passive or withdrawn to not make his or her basic needs known is vulnerable. A child who is unable or afraid to seek help and protection from others is vulnerable.

**Illness** – Regardless of age, some children have continuing or acute medical problems and needs that make them vulnerable.

**Invisible** – Children that no one sees (who are hidden) are vulnerable. A child who has limited or no adult contact outside the home and is not available to be noticed or observed should be considered to be vulnerable regardless of age.

## Summary

- Child vulnerability is the first conclusion you make when completing a safety assessment.
- A judgment about child vulnerability is based on the capacity for self-protection.
- Self-protection refers to being able to demonstrate behavior that 1) results in defending oneself against threats of safety and 2) results in successfully meeting one's own basic (safety) needs.
- Child vulnerability is not a matter of degree. Kids are vulnerable to threats to safety or they are not.
- Vulnerability means being defenseless to threats of safety.
- Child vulnerability is not based on age alone.
- There are many characteristics of older children that make them vulnerable to threats to safety.
- If there are no vulnerable children in a family/household, then no additional safety assessment or safety planning is necessary.
- As a safety assessment concern, a child's vulnerability informs us about the predisposition for suffering more serious injury.
- As a safety planning issue, a child's vulnerability helps inform us about what is needed to manage threats and assure protection.