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## Risk Assessment Study of Foster Care Providers

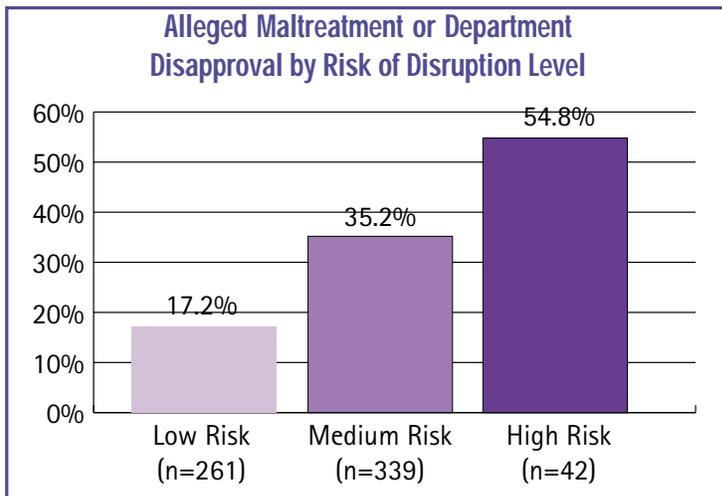
In 1999, **New Mexico's Children, Youth, and Families Department** (CYFD) decided to structure decisions about placement and monitoring of children in foster/relative homes. As part of this effort, CYFD worked closely with the Children's Research Center (CRC) to conduct a risk assessment study of non-institutional foster care providers. The study's goal was to develop a research-based assessment of caregiver and household characteristics that would estimate the likelihood of foster child maltreatment and/or inadequate foster caregiving. The study surveyed the characteristics of licensed foster/relative caregivers and their households and looked at the relationship of these characteristics to outcomes.

The study sample of 642 households included foster and relative homes, some with and some without a child placed in the home at the time of assessment, and some at initial licensing or at renewal. In

practice, the assigned case worker would score each caregiver's household based upon observations made prior to placing a child in the home. The classification of low, moderate, or high risk of child maltreatment and/or inadequate caregiving results from the sum of the scores and should be tied to the level of support provided to the foster/relative caregivers. The resulting assessment successfully

classified the 642 caregivers into low, moderate, or high risk groups.

The New Mexico study lays solid ground for the replication of this research in another jurisdiction. CRC staff believe that conducting this research will substantially contribute to the level of confidence placed in the validity of this new research-based assessment tool. CRC is also developing related assessments and practice strategies to support safe and nurturing foster/relative care provided to vulnerable children, including a Foster/Relative Caregiver Willingness to Provide Care Assessment to improve the matching process, a Foster Caregiver Protective Capacity



Assessment to evaluate safety, an Emergent Child Needs Checklist for use during emergency placements, and a Child Strengths and Needs Assessment.

If your jurisdiction is interested in partnering with CRC to take this research to the next level, we urge you to contact Raelene Freitag or Kathy Park at 608.831.1180 or Janice Ereth at 414.961.9849.

Photo by Bruce Boldon.



Anna Boldon in the Fox Cities Marathon. September 2003.

## Behind the Scenes at CRC

For two years, Anna Boldon has been an Internet Application Developer at CRC. Her focus is on the aesthetic design of the SDM application and the development of all supporting help systems and training curricula. Recently, she traveled to New Jersey to conduct SDM application training sessions. She is also working on improving the CRC website, soon to go "live".

Anna's primary activity outside of work is running. Last year,

she ran in the Big Sur and the Fox Cities Marathons. This year, she is training for the Boston Marathon. After that, she plans to try "ultramarathoning", which is any distance from 50K (31 miles!) on up, and is usually run on trails.

For Anna, her personal and professional lives are very connected. She strives to have the two complement each other in a balanced and stress-free way.

## California Risk Revalidation

The California Family Risk Assessment currently used by select counties is based on research conducted in 1998. Information was collected from case files for 2,511 families investigated in 1995. The 1998 research showed that the final risk classification clearly identified groups of families by the likelihood of future allegation(s) or substantiation.

**The California Department of Social Services (CDSS)** intended to re-validate the risk assessment resulting from the 1998 study. The most obvious advantage for re-validating is that research would be based on worker observation and documentation under actual field conditions. A second advantage of using operational data is to ensure that sampled families are representative of the larger population assessed for risk of future child maltreatment.

CRC staff completed research to re-validate the family risk assessment in 2003. The sample included 5,694 families investigated for abuse or neglect between January and March 2001. As with the first study, outcomes were collected for a standardized two-year period. Findings indicated that the risk assessment currently in use classified families such that an increase in risk level corresponded to an increase in the proportion of families with a subsequent investigation, as well as confirmation of child maltreatment.

Minor changes to the risk assessment, however, did improve its classification abilities. Across all measures of subsequent maltreatment, the classification resulting from the proposed risk assessment provides more distinction by consecutive risk

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Janice Erath, Ph.D.  
Director

426 S. Yellowstone Drive  
Madison, WI 53719

608.831.1180  
[www.nccd-crc.org/crc](http://www.nccd-crc.org/crc)

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Publications Department  
426 S. Yellowstone Dr., Ste 250  
Madison, WI 53719

## Targeting Prevention Services for TANF Applicants using Risk Assessment

As a group, families applying for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) have higher rates of subsequent referral to child protective services (CPS) than the general population. One study noted that 22% of all AFDC (TANF's precursor) families were

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*The front door of TANF may be an ideal opportunity to offer preventive services.*

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investigated by CPS in the five years following application.<sup>1</sup> The front door of TANF may be an ideal opportunity to offer preventive services. Each successfully prevented investigation translates into reduced strain on CPS resources. More importantly, harm to children is reduced, creating stronger, healthier families.

Blanketing all TANF applicants with preventive services, however, would be cost prohibitive and largely unnecessary. Nearly 80% of the families in the study did NOT experience a CPS

investigation. The need exists to effectively classify TANF applicants in effort to target preventive services for families at greatest risk. CPS agencies that use Structured Decision Making (SDM) for risk assessment know that there is no more reliable, valid and equitable way to accomplish this than use of an actuarial risk assessment tool.

The dilemma is that all existing CPS risk tools were developed on samples of families already referred to CPS agencies. Due caution must be exercised when applying a tool designed for one purpose for a related, but different purpose. After careful review of the literature and existing risk tools, **Orange County, California** is poised to pilot this innovative application for risk assessment.

Workgroups will meet during 2004 to adapt the California Family Risk Assessment for use with TANF applicants. Rollout of the tool is anticipated toward the end of the year, beginning with a

small cohort of pilot sites. Most of the information needed to complete the tool is already collected during TANF application. Families at higher risk will be offered voluntary preventive services. SDM's Family Strengths and Needs Assessment will be used to prioritize needs and strengths in order to select services.

Because the risk tool will be used in an innovative way, its results will be considered provisional until a prospective revalidation study can be conducted in two or three years.

For more information contact:  
Ray Gallagher, Orange County Social Service Agency  
[Ray.Gallagher@ssa.ocgov.com](mailto:Ray.Gallagher@ssa.ocgov.com)  
or Pam Boozan, Orange County Social Service Agency  
[Pamela.Boozan@ssa.ocgov.com](mailto:Pamela.Boozan@ssa.ocgov.com)

<sup>1</sup>Needell, B., Cuccaro-Alamin, S., Brookhart, A., & Lee, S. (1999). Transitions from AFDC to Child Welfare in California. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 21 (9/10): 815-841.

### CA Risk Revalidation

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levels than does the classification obtained with the existing risk assessment. For example, the existing risk assessment classifies families such that those in the very high risk group have a re-investigation rate that is 10% greater than the rate for high

risk families. In contrast, the proposed risk assessment shows a 24% increase in the re-investigation rates for very high versus high risk families.

The most recent validation study served its purpose. CDSS chose to remain with the current risk assessments and, despite agency changes to operational policies

and procedures, potential increases in the effectiveness of service delivery, or other changes among the client population (such as substance abuse patterns, demographic changes caused by migration, etc.), the department can be sure that the risk assessment accurately classifies families by their likelihood of future child maltreatment.

## National Conference: Strengthening SDM Practice for Improved Outcomes

Directors, managers, and supervisors will gain many useful ideas at this year's national conference, which will be devoted to achieving quality SDM implementation. It has been 18 years since research-based risk assessment first formed the foundation for SDM in child protection. Much has been learned about developing tools and initiating model implementation. As SDM matures, attention is turning toward maximizing the value of the model through quality implementation. Quality implementation covers many aspects, from effective use of the tools by line staff on a day-to-day basis, to integrating aggregate SDM data into decisions at the agency level.

Directors and upper managers will attend a track of sessions on topics including:

- CFSR reviews/PIPS/and the role of SDM
- IV-E waiver projects: results from current projects, using SDM in thinking about

applying, and a discussion of the new IV-E waiver option for states

- Juvenile justice cases in child protection: what it means for CFSR and what some states are doing about it
- New uses for SDM: foster care risk and using risk assessment to target prevention services for TANF applicants (see related article on page 3)

Supervisors and front-line managers will attend sessions including:

- Supervising in an SDM world
- Strength-based practice and SDM
- Using SDM to develop safety plans
- Tools for quality

Keynote and plenary sessions and final workshop agenda are being finalized.

The conference will be hosted by CRC and Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services October 13 & 14 aboard the Queen Mary in Long Beach, California.

The 6th National SDM Conference will be held aboard The Queen Mary



Photo courtesy of the Queen Mary

Registration brochures will be mailed this month and will be available on the website.

Watch for updates at:

[www.nccd-crc.org/crc/sdmconf.html](http://www.nccd-crc.org/crc/sdmconf.html)



**CHILDREN'S RESEARCH CENTER**  
426 S. Yellowstone Dr., Ste 250  
Madison, WI 53719

