

SDM[®] NEWS

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USING SDM[®] ASSESSMENTS EFFECTIVELY IN COURT SETTINGS

In April 2011, the McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento, California, held a two-day event titled “Risk and Safety Assessment on Trial: How Structured Decision Making[®] (SDM) and Signs of Safety Can Withstand Courtroom Scrutiny.” Participants included child protection workers, attorneys, court commissioners, judges, and others who come into contact with SDM[®] assessments in court settings. The event included a presentation by Phil Decter of the Family-Centered Services Project, who spoke about Signs of Safety. The panel was organized by David Meyers, Senior Attorney at the Center for Families, Children and the Courts and the Judicial Council of California—Administrative Office of the Courts; and Susan Brooks, Director of the Northern California Regional Training Academy.

The purpose of the event was to discuss the use of child safety and risk assessment in the courtroom. Professor John Myers began with a talk on valid decisions in child protection. Professor Myers observed that while structured tools have limitations, SDM assessments are a valuable contribution to decision making. Research has shown that our neurological “hard wiring” makes us prone to cognitive errors in decision making, even for highly trained professionals. Structured assessments can help mitigate these cognitive errors.

A “cross-examination” of SDM assessments revealed practice issues in court. *SDM[®] News* interviewed attorney Randall Harris, who participated in the event. Harris noted that he came into the session with a negative perception of SDM tools based on his prior experience

with their use in court. Over the two-day discussion, Harris said, he realized that SDM assessments were, in fact, very helpful in court. The problem was “how the system was being reported on, not the system itself.”

In Harris’s experience, an SDM risk level classification, without adequate supporting case narrative, was often offered as the reason for making a particular decision about a child. This practice led to misunderstanding by court workers about how SDM assessments are used in child protection. “If [the SDM risk level] is in the court report, it overshadows the rest of the work that the social worker is doing with the family. The perception among the court report readers is that the computer is making the decision, not people,” said Harris.

Over the course of the event, Harris and other participants learned correct practice of SDM assessment. The SDM assessments are designed to structure decisions; in other words, to provide a research-based framework that ensures that all workers

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RISK ASSESSMENT'S ROLE IN REDUCING RACIAL DISPARITY IN CHILD PROTECTION PRACTICE

Kristen Johnson, Ph.D., and Deirdre O'Connor, MSW, LCSW

examine the same information for each family, every time. Within that framework, what workers observe will differ for each individual family. This information, observed Harris, is what needs to be in the court report. "In closed court reports and in conversations between managers and social workers, there should be two parts: what was your personal assessment of this family, your clinical analysis? What factors did you put into the SDM assessment, and how did the SDM results compare with or change your clinical judgment?"

Rather than writing "SDM results say risk is high," Harris suggested, workers should document what they observe, e.g., "We performed a risk assessment, and based on the following factors..." Workers should then note their observations and clinical judgments of the family, offering those details to the court rather than simply writing "SDM says."

Harris left the event appreciating what the SDM system offers both court and child protection workers when it is used correctly and understood by everyone involved. "[The SDM system] is very effective in allowing all of the attorneys on the case to understand what's going on with the family. In that regard, especially when you have social workers who are changing job duties, SDM is an incredibly helpful tool to help workers focus on what the key issues are at each step of the case. When social workers use it [correctly], as in 'Let's go through the SDM assessment and make sure I have thought about all the things I need to think about before making a decision'...it's incredibly powerful and really, really valuable."

Finally, Harris recommended that the legal community, including attorneys, judges, and other court workers, be included in training during SDM implementation so that the court can both benefit from workers' use of SDM assessments *and* recognize when SDM assessments are not being used correctly. He notes that social workers also need to be specifically trained on how to discuss SDM assessment results in a legal context. Lack of understanding and training on these issues can lead to poor understanding and negative perceptions, and more importantly, incorrect use of SDM assessments. With thorough training and an informed legal community, the SDM system is a powerful tool for social workers, attorneys, and judges to communicate in court.

Child welfare agencies' efforts to increase the equity and effectiveness of child protection practices involve three basic steps. The first is to better understand the nature and depth of disparity in agency practice by measuring disparity at key decision points in the child welfare process. The second is to develop a comprehensive action plan in conjunction with community stakeholders and cultural brokers. The third is to measure and evaluate whether the plan was implemented as designed, workload and other environmental conditions that may affect outcomes, and whether the changes implemented had a positive impact on outcomes (i.e., reduced disparity in child welfare). This article describes each step in more depth and highlights how risk assessment findings can be utilized at each stage in the process.

Agencies begin by identifying the degree of disparity at each child protection decision point. Key decision points to assess include decisions to report allegations, screen the report in for in-person assessment or investigation, refer to a differential or alternative response program, confirm child abuse/neglect allegations, remove a child from home, and open a case for services.

Most agencies start by comparing group representation relative to population estimates. The disparity index provides a meaningful comparison between groups by taking a ratio of respective rates per 1,000. The measure can best be conceptualized as "the likelihood of one group experiencing a given event compared to the likelihood of another group experiencing that same event." Agencies can also examine disparity after controlling for risk factors, protective factors, or family needs. For example, a jurisdiction that asks workers to complete SDM assessments when making critical child protection decisions could examine whether a client's ethnicity was significantly related to the likelihood of foster care placement and/or an in-home service case after controlling for assessment findings. Additional analyses could include an agency workload analysis and a community-based assessment of service needs and availability.

These analyses can help determine the focus and details of a comprehensive, community-based action plan. Agencies typically engage with community stakeholders and cultural brokers to share information, identify service gaps and other aspects of practice that may contribute to disparity, and develop an action plan that includes monitoring and evaluating practice. Examples of methods employed to reduce disparity at one or more decision points include increasing staff awareness of the issue, using decision-support systems to increase the accuracy and consistency of decisions, instituting a team approach to deciding whether or not to place a child, finding alternatives to foster care placement when possible, and monitoring practice to increase accountability at every level of the agency.

To be successful in disparity reduction efforts, agencies need a comprehensive evaluation plan. A process evaluation should be conducted to measure the fidelity of implementation. In addition, to determine whether the changes implemented were successful at reducing disparity and increasing the equity and effectiveness of services, agencies should conduct an outcome evaluation that employs a comparison or control group to control for changes that occur over time. The outcome evaluation will be strengthened by examining the effectiveness of services by the risk level assigned by the child protection worker assessing the family after a report of possible child maltreatment. It can also be informative to include worker and/or office or regional characteristics in estimates of program impact using hierarchical modeling regression techniques, which is a type of multi-level modeling to incorporate factors with different units of analysis (i.e., case versus worker versus community).

In a recently published report by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP), the evaluator suggested that a risk assessment did not work as intended (see <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/rptfiles/11-05-3901.pdf> for the WSIPP report and <http://www.nccd-crc.org/crc/crc/pubs/wsippcommentary.pdf> for the Children's Research Center's commentary). Although implementing a risk assessment is not sufficient for reducing disparity in child welfare, implementing a valid and reliable risk assessment like the SDM risk assessment can support a comprehensive effort to reduce disparity in several ways. Having workers complete a risk assessment

can increase the accuracy and consistency of case service decisions, and can facilitate case conferences, court hearings, and other conversations by clearly articulating decision thresholds. Aggregated risk assessment findings can be used to identify the degree of disparity at each child welfare decision point in the case process after controlling for family risk and needs such as a caregiver's substance abuse or mental health diagnosis. Managers can use risk assessment information to help monitor and evaluate workload, the appropriateness of service decisions, and the effectiveness of assessment and treatment practices. As part of a comprehensive action plan, risk assessment data are an important component of addressing racial disparity in child protection.

HELPING AGENCIES ALLOCATE ADOPTION RESOURCES EFFECTIVELY: THE CPRAA

Since 1997, when the Adoption and Safe Families Act was passed, child welfare agencies across the U.S. have instituted concurrent planning approaches designed to minimize the number of changes a child experiences and shorten the time it takes to find permanent homes for children in foster care. "Concurrent planning" means that an agency pursues a permanency plan in addition to and at the same time as they try to reunify children with their families. This strategy allows for an alternate permanency goal to be pursued in the event that reunification does not or cannot occur.

Requiring additional permanency options has direct implications for agency workload, as a worker must spend time pursuing the alternative plan. In some agencies, the primary caseworker is responsible for finding an alternative option while working with the child's family to return the child home. In others, the caseworker works closely with other agency staff, such as an adoption worker, to find permanent living arrangements for children in out-of-home care.

A county in central California asked CRC in 2008 to analyze agency data to help allocate their adoption resources more effectively. When the county first contacted CRC, caseworkers in the county were required to engage an adoption worker upon removal for all children removed from their family home with a primary

goal of reunification, i.e., all children for whom the agency was providing reunification services. At that time, the caseworker and adoption worker jointly decided the intensity level of the adoption worker's participation in the early stages of concurrent planning. The decision was clinical, and no structured method existed to determine the extent to which the adoption worker should pursue securing a potential adoptive home.

The county was interested in developing a method to ensure that adoption worker time and efforts were targeted at cases that were more likely to be in out-of-home care for a longer period of time. These are children for whom concurrent planning may be far more critical. Obviously, if a child is likely to be reunified in a short time, there is less need to have an adoption worker aggressively pursue adoption as a permanency option. A mechanism to estimate which children are likely to be reunified within a short timeframe could help the county to efficiently allocate its available adoption resources.

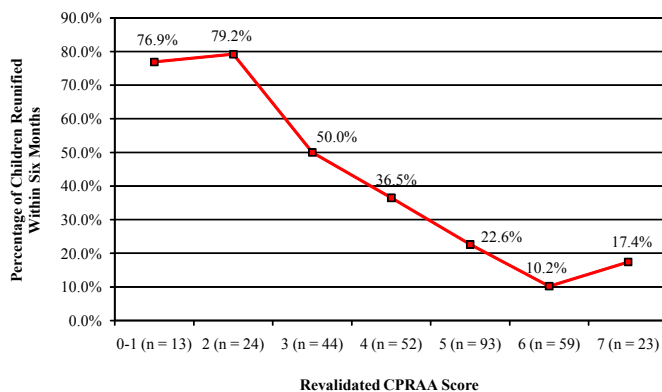
CRC developed a valid and reliable actuarial assessment that adoption workers could use to prioritize cases. The "concurrent planning resource allocation assessment," or CPRAA, consists of a limited number of items related to caregiver history and family functioning that are scored and summed, similar to the actuarial SDM risk assessment used by CPS investigators to guide case-opening decisions. The final score splits cases into two tiers: children who are likely to return home within the next six months and those who are likely to remain in care longer. As the sum increases, so does the likelihood that a child will remain in care. Adoption workers can focus efforts at finding homes for children who score on the high end of the index.

CRC acknowledges that there are a number of factors that influence how quickly children return home. The CPRAA is designed to be part of an internal agency decision-making process related to concurrent planning efforts.

The CPRAA is currently used in one county in California, and another intends to implement it in the upcoming year. For more information on the CPRAA, including what it would take to implement the assessment in your jurisdiction, please contact

Theresa Healy, thealy@mw.nccd-crc.org or Rod Caskey, rcaskey@mw.nccd-crc.org.

Reunification Within Six Months From Removal by Revalidated Assessment Score



REGISTER NOW FOR THE SDM® CONFERENCE

Registration for the 9th SDM® Conference is now open. The conference will take place October 19–21, 2011, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

The SDM® conference will highlight the successful integration of SDM assessments into child protection and other social service practice models to improve, support, and strengthen the safety of children, adults, and families. Plenary sessions will provide an opportunity to understand how the SDM model integrates into client-centric service delivery systems and strength-based interview strategies. Practitioners from the United States, Canada, Ireland, and Australia will provide workshops describing how agencies use the SDM assessments, data reports, and evaluation activities to support the safety of their clients, and to continually improve child protection decision making. Included in these workshops will be a description of recent research that has led to the piloting of new SDM tools; the integration of SDM tools into social work curriculum; and how numerous jurisdictions are integrating the SDM assessments with family engagement approaches. Workers, supervisors, managers, and administrators from public and private child protection agencies using the SDM model will have an opportunity to share their

experiences, insights, and innovations during these workshops as well as networking breaks throughout the conference.

CRC is delighted to partner with our host, the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services, in providing this conference. We encourage all registrants of the SDM conference to consider attending Louisiana's Together We Can conference as well. Together We Can takes place October 17–19, 2011, in Baton Rouge and provides a multi-agency perspective on systems, services, and interventions to support safety for all families. Attendees of the SDM conference have the opportunity to attend pre-conference sessions at the Together We Can conference on Wednesday, October 19, at no additional cost. We encourage attendees to register early, as space is limited at both conferences.

For additional information on conference workshops, plenary sessions, schedules, and registration, please visit www.nccd-crc.org/sdmconference. A downloadable version of the registration booklet and link to our online registration website is available at this link as well.

NEW SOUTH WALES TO IMPLEMENT SDM® SAFETY AND RISK ASSESSMENTS STATEWIDE

Following successful trialing of the SDM safety and risk assessments in eight Community Service Centers, New South Wales (NSW) Community Services, Australia, is preparing to launch statewide implementation. To prepare for the roll-out, 15 trainers participated in a week-long training for trainers in early May.

The training model will have many elements familiar to SDM jurisdictions; a number of new elements were introduced as well. First, the training on three of the SDM assessments (safety, risk, and risk reassessment) will span two days, compared to a more typical approach of two days for the entire model. The longer training will incorporate more explanation of HOW the assessments can be used WITH families. Trainers will focus on making connections between the SDM tools, interviewing skills, family engagement, and participatory safety planning. By building this information into initial training, CRC and NSW expect that workers will

experience the SDM system less as forms to complete and more as a way of working with families.

Second, the content portions of the training will be delivered by CRC staff through video segments of 5–20 minutes. Using recorded content will ensure that every worker hears exactly the same information on the basics of the SDM assessments. Trainers will use discussion to “set up” the video and to highlight key messages after the video, and will lead individual and group exercises to build skills. The mix of video content and in-person support is designed to keep the sessions moving, reduce the instruction load on trainers, and help increase consistency on key messages.

Third, most activities involve practice completing SDM assessments. Participants use a handheld electronic device called a Keypad to enter their individual responses. The trainer is able to instantly project the group's responses on a screen. Participants still discuss tool completion in small groups, and are asked to reach consensus as a group correct answers. However, the reporting back from small groups is done individually, through the Keypads, which allows instant visual reporting of how each participant scored items. In this way, the trainer can tell the extent to which the training participants agree or disagree and can spot individual items that may require further discussion. Results are presented in the aggregate, so no individual participant is singled out.

The NSW Learning and Development team, led by Rose Samuels, John Purcell, and Matthew Aouad, organized the details for this substantial training roll-out in record time. Each trainer left the training-for-trainers session with a suitcase containing a laptop loaded with the video and PowerPoint presentations, a projector, the Keypad kit, the trainer manual, and additional resources. The trainers, who demonstrated outstanding skills during their training-for-trainers week, will be busy delivering the training in three phases over the next eight months.



Participants in the May 2011 New South Wales training for trainers.

RESEARCH AS A POVERTY FIGHTER

Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity recently featured an article by National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) President Alex Busansky about how research in many of the fields that the NCCD and CRC work in can help inform poverty work and lead individuals and families to sustainable exits from poverty. Spotlight is a non-partisan initiative that brings together diverse perspectives from the political, policy, advocacy, and foundation communities to find genuine solutions to the economic hardship confronting millions of Americans. Mr. Busansky's article is titled "Research as a Poverty Fighter," and can be read [here](#) on Spotlight's website.

CHANGES AT CRC

Chris Baird

After serving as Executive Vice President of NCCD, CRC's parent organization, for the last 26 years, I am stepping down to focus on research for the next couple of years before actual retirement. Throughout my tenure, I have been surrounded and supported by incredible staff who have built CRC into a leading voice for child welfare, not only in the United States but in other countries as well. It has been an absolutely terrific experience for me, but I will enjoy spending more time on research issues.

Raelene Freitag will continue as Director of CRC, but will also develop and direct an international team to

respond to interest in SDM systems and other NCCD and CRC initiatives from abroad. The primary goal will be to find ways that CRC can assist jurisdictions in integrating the best research-based practices and dissemination of innovation. Kathy Park, as Chief Program Officer, will assume direction of the Midwest office of NCCD and its nearly 50 staff members with diverse responsibilities in research, program development and evaluation, and technological advancements in justice, child welfare, adult protective services, education, and welfare-to-work services. Our organization is expanding rapidly, and both Kathy and Raelene will provide the leadership needed to maintain the high level of service that NCCD and CRC have always provided.

Finally, I would like to thank all the great people I have come to know in the many agencies we have worked with over the years. It is your dedication to continuous improvement that makes our efforts worthwhile.

PROJECT UPDATES

Riverside County, California—Welfare to Work

Employment services counselors in Riverside County will be trained on a cause determination tool developed jointly between CRC, the Department of Public Social Services, and Riverside County Department of Mental Health to strengthen consistency in decisions about making good cause determinations when WTW customers are facing non-compliance with work participation requirements. Training will occur in June 2011.

Olmsted County, Minnesota—SDM System for CPS

Olmsted County is working with CRC on an "SDM Back to Basics" re-training to address model drift issues. This training will take place in July 2011.

LINKS OF INTEREST

Child Protective Services

[Male caregivers scrutinized in violent deaths of children](#)

[Hair not apparent: White foster parents of black children learn styling tips](#)

[Foster children would be allowed to get clothing only from second hand stores](#)

[Camreta v. Greene \(09-1454\); Alford v. Greene \(09-1478\)](#)

[The Nubia Report: The Investigative Panel's Findings and Recommendations](#)

Adult Protective Services

[Government report finds elder abuse on the rise](#)

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