

Comprehensive Family Assessment: A Brief Synthesis

This summary provides a brief look at a cluster of 5-year discretionary grants awarded by the Children's Bureau in 2007 to develop, implement, and evaluate comprehensive family assessments in the child welfare arena. It provides background information on the Children's Bureau's interest in family assessment, and it briefly describes the family assessment projects of these five grantees. It provides links to further information on this grants cluster.

What Is Comprehensive Family Assessment?

"...When [child welfare] agency staff members determine that a child is in need of protective services, they must quickly move beyond investigating facts to develop an understanding of what has occurred, including why it has occurred and what will be required to restore the family's functioning and prevent the recurrence of abuse or neglect. ... Comprehensive family assessment [CFA] is recommended when it is determined that the child welfare agency is responsible for serving the family. Such assessment goes beyond the investigation to permit the identification and provision of services that are specifically targeted to address the family's needs and problems and insure the child's safety, well-being, and permanency." *CFA Guidelines*¹

¹ The Children's Bureau's *Comprehensive Family Assessment Guidelines* are available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/cfa-guidelines-for-cw>.

WHAT'S INSIDE

What is comprehensive family assessment?

The need for CFA

CB CFA demonstration grants

Project synopses

Further information

The Need for CFA

“Through the findings of the initial 52 Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), the Children’s Bureau identified a connection between comprehensive family assessments and good outcomes for children and families. Positive ratings on comprehensive family assessments are associated with positive ratings on these permanency and safety outcomes:

- Timely achievement of adoption and reunification;
 - The stability of foster care placements; and
 - Meeting the educational and health (physical and mental) needs of children.”
- CFA Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) on April 4, 2007²

Comprehensive Family Assessment Guidelines

As a result of the CFSR findings, the Children’s Bureau requested that its federally funded National Resource Centers develop *Comprehensive Family Assessment Guidelines* to serve as a resource to States. The *Guidelines* explore the nature of comprehensive family assessment and its relationship to other agency operations. The *Guidelines* are intended to serve as a guide to the nature and function of comprehensive family assessments. The foundation document was prepared by Patricia Schene, Ph.D., and the guidelines were published by the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice, a service of the Children’s Bureau (CB), on May 24, 2005. The guidelines can be downloaded here: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/cfa-guidelines-for-cw>

CB CFA Demonstration Grants

In 2007, the Children’s Bureau published the FOA *Using Comprehensive Family Assessments to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes* - HHS-2007-ACF-ACYF-CA-0023. The purpose was to identify and fund projects that would demonstrate the implementation of the *Comprehensive Family Assessment Guidelines*. Specifically, grant funds

² The FOA is available by contacting the Information Gateway Library at library@childwelfare.gov.

were to be used to develop, implement, and evaluate comprehensive family assessments in child welfare practice. The FOA stated that grantees were expected to implement, at a minimum, these eight key components:

1. Use Comprehensive Family Assessment (CFA) results to guide decision-making and service planning
2. Use the 10-step process outlined in the *CFA Guidelines*
3. Address the big picture
4. Assess multiple domains for the family, children, and youth
5. Reassess strengths and needs over the life of the case
6. Establish effective working partnerships with families to identify and respond to needs
7. Build collaboration between child welfare agencies and community partners
8. Make necessary changes to organizational and administrative supports and staff time

Grantees were also required to conduct a local evaluation in order to examine implementation and practices, and demonstrate potential linkages between comprehensive family assessments and improved outcomes for children and families. Guided by a logic model, the evaluation plans were to include process, practice, and outcome evaluation components. The process evaluation examined the implementation of the eight key components and the linkages between child-serving systems that will ensure that identified needs are met. The practice evaluation explored how comprehensive and ongoing assessments improve over time. The outcome evaluation used a rigorous approach to assess how different CFA strategies impact key outcomes of interest. Grantees were expected to address performance indicators equivalent to CFSR Item 3 (provision of services for the family to protect the child and prevent removal or re-entry into foster care) and CFSR Item 17 (address the needs and services provided to children, parents, and foster parents). Evaluation findings were intended to support evidence-based practice and provide examples of assessment strategies that are related to positive outcomes for children and families.

In 2007, five grants were awarded to support 5-year demonstration projects. Individual synopses are presented below, with links to specific project information, including grantee reports and resources provided as attachments to the “Site Visit Report.” Following the project synopses are links to further information on this grants cluster.

Project Synopses

Alabama Department of Human Resources (Grant #90CA1751)

Site visit report: https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/funding/funding_sources/sitevisits/alabama.cfm

Children’s Bureau Express article: <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=136&articleid=3544>

Alabama’s Department of Human Resources (ADHR) used this grant to implement a family-centered comprehensive assessment process (CAP) in response to Child Protective Services reports, aimed at shifting case planning from incident-driven to safety-focused. The three pilot counties—Baldwin, Escambia, and Mobile—represented varied populations and different socioeconomic and cultural issues and challenges. Evaluators were the Ruth H. Young Center (RYC) for Families and Children, in collaboration with ACTION for Child Protection and the Alabama Department of Family Services (State and local agency representatives). The CAP process was composed of four stages:

- During the Intake Assessment, workers evaluated reported threats to child safety, identified parental or caregiver protective skills, and assessed the prevalence of danger.
- During the Family Functioning-Safety Assessment (FFA), workers evaluated alleged maltreatment, looking for essential family system and family-centered information, which drives the CAP system of decision-making and intervention. Workers assessed practice indicators to evaluate whether children were unsafe

and needed protection and whether parents or caregivers needed continued services.

- The Protective Capacity Family Assessment (PCFA) - Individual Service Plan, which was concurrent with the FFA, served as the State’s Individual Service Plan and directly involved caregivers in case planning. The PCFA followed case planning and measured progress toward increased protective capacities.
- The ongoing PCFA monitored case plan goal achievement, reconfirming safety plan sufficiency, caregiver motivational readiness, and stages of change, all of which were mutually agreed upon by workers and caregivers.

Contra Costa County (California) Child & Family Services (Grant #90CA1755)

Site visit report: https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/funding/funding_sources/sitevisits/contracosta.cfm

Children’s Bureau Express article: <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=151&articleid=4026>

Contra Costa County (California) Child & Family Services (CFS) implemented the Comprehensive Assessments for Positive Family Outcomes (CAPFO) project to address outcomes identified in the California CFSR. The target population included children and families entering the child welfare system at the point of referral. The CAPFO model built on existing policy and practice strengths in line with the eight key components and the 10-step *Comprehensive Family Assessment Guidelines*. These strengths included strong family engagement practices, a family assessment practice model, and enhanced strategies to support family-driven case plans. The model also incorporated new practices, such as the use of the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale, Motivational Interviewing, Parent Partners, Learning Communities, Coaching Circles, and a strong focus on father engagement. Evaluation strategies included a random selection of CAPFO service and control families. Features of CAPFO included:

The Parent Partner Program. The Parent Partner program draws upon the strengths of families and engages family and community members in program planning. The program seeks to enlist as staff mothers and fathers who have themselves experienced child removal, services, and reunification. These individuals are trained and supported to provide direct services to parents seeking reunification with their children. CAPFO staff indicate that Parent Partners have been an invaluable component of their work in collaborating with clients.

Team Decision-Making. The basic goal of a Family Team Meeting is to promote family involvement and empower families to come together to generate a plan that first promotes safety and then works to engage other members of the family and community.

Assessment of Father Involvement and Incarcerated Parents. Training continues to support staff in family engagement and the inclusion of fathers. Working with incarcerated parents was also a project focus for engaging those fathers who had not been included in planning direction, safety, and permanency for their children.

Motivational Interviewing. Participating staff received training on the Stages of Change Motivational Interviewing techniques, the CAPFO process, and the implementation of coaching, case teaching sessions, and feedback meetings. Universally, caseworker staff stated that the high-quality training received for Motivational Interviewing resulted in practice change.

Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (Grant #90-CA-1752)

Site visit report: https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/funding/funding_sources/sitevisits/illinois.cfm

Children's Bureau Express article: <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=133&articleID=3452>

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) Integrated Assessment Program (IAP) is an example of how one statewide child welfare system is implementing CFAs using a dual-professional approach. IDCFS took the existing IAP—which was designed for children entering foster care—and used this grant to extend it to intact families in need of services from the Department. Chapin Hall's evaluation of the expansion of IA to intact family cases used mixed-method approaches and an experimental design. The IAP for intact families comprises the following three steps:

The Initial Assessment Phase begins after a report of maltreatment is assigned to a Child Protection Investigator to assess threats to safety, risk factors, and the need for intervention. Families that are determined to pose the highest risk factors for disruption are eligible for random assignment. An IA screener is assigned and participates in the hand-off meeting, during which the case is transferred from the investigator to the intact family caseworker.

The Integrated Assessment Phase is highly collaborative and involves an IA team composed of the child, parents or guardians, stepparents, caregivers, caseworker, supervisor, and the IA screener and supervisor. Screenings and interviews are conducted using the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment tool, the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, and other tools. Within 40 days, the caseworker and supervisor conduct a family team meeting to discuss IA recommendations and begin developing the service plan. The clinical screener remains available for 90 days to complete additional interviews if the family composition changes or previously unavailable parents engage in the process.

The Ongoing Integrated Assessment is the continuation of the collaboration among the case manager, the family, and service providers throughout the life of the case and after the screener is no longer involved. The service plan and the IA report are updated at a minimum of every 6 months to document the family's progress in completing services and addressing risk factors.

Ramsey County (Minnesota) (Grant #90CA1753)

Site visit report: https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/funding/funding_sources/sitevisits/minnesota.cfm

Children's Bureau Express article: <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=131&articleid=3348>

Ramsey County (Minnesota) Community Human Services Department (RCCHSD) implemented a CFA program under this grant to develop a more consistent, holistic, family-centered, and culturally responsive approach to in-home and out-of-home child welfare assessment. The CFA model is grounded in strengths-focused practice—whereby caseworkers help families identify and build on their strengths—and critical thinking and analysis, which caseworkers use to gather and assess information and design a case plan that is most likely to change behaviors. From training to supervision to documentation, nearly every phase of RCCHSD's assessment of family functioning focuses on parents' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral protective capacities. In partnership with an evaluation team from the University of Minnesota's Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW, this assessment has been redesigned, incorporating the new CFA model in the following four ways:

Intake staff receive ongoing training to conduct child safety assessments and develop safety plans that focus on the specific parental behaviors that must change to eliminate risk and ensure protection.

Program staff receive ongoing training to focus on the family's functioning to determine the underlying causes of behaviors that put the child at risk, and this assessment forms the basis for case plans.

Supervisors and coaches aid critical thinking and analysis that creates awareness and promotes responsibility so that workers can come to conclusions on their own.

Cultural Consultants contribute to the development and refinement of a culturally appropriate CFA practice model. Cultural Consultants were a significant aspect of this project, and were part of the broader County-level effort to address racial and culturally based disparities for its clients and employees.

An online module developed by UMN from this project is found here: <http://cascw.umn.edu/portfolio-items/cfa-module/>. UMN also has a webpage on this grant project: <http://cascw.umn.edu/community-engagement-2/research-projects-2/cfa/>

Alamance County (North Carolina) Department of Social Services (Grant #90CA1754)

Site visit report: https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/funding/funding_sources/sitevisits/alamance.cfm

Children's Bureau Express article: <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=158&articleid=4241>

The Alamance County (North Carolina) Department of Social Services used this grant to develop a number of new and modified assessment tools to more comprehensively gauge the needs of children and families receiving in-home family support or family preservation services. The Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University conducted the evaluation. The Department leveraged existing research findings to implement a long-term multilevel approach, utilizing Motivational Interviewing and ongoing coaching to increase family engagement in order to obtain a truly comprehensive assessment. Workers followed the following sequence with families:

- A comprehensive risk and safety guide was completed at initial visits and followed by the North Carolina DSS Risk Assessment within 48 hours, in addition to the mandated completion at case closure.
- At subsequent visits, social workers assessed multiple domains individually using SEEMAPS (social, economic,

environmental, mental health, activities of daily living, physical health, and strengths) and screened for possible issues with substance abuse, domestic violence, and depression to obtain a holistic picture of family strengths and needs.

- Lastly, ACDSS implemented new policies for home visits to provide a consistent purpose, process, and approach (low risk – monthly visits; moderate risk – biweekly; high risk– weekly). This visit schedule is identical to the mandated policy for home visits for cases receiving in-home services.

Further Information

Additional information about these projects, their findings, and their products and publications is available at:

- **The grants cluster webpage** - Provides links to the individual project site visit reports, which include links to manuals and other product produced by these grants : https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/funding/funding_sources/familyassessments.cfm

- **The CB Discretionary Grants (CBDG) Library** – Contains final reports and other products submitted by grantees. (Search using grant numbers which are provided in the individual grantee synopses above): http://library.childwelfare.gov/cbgrants/ws/library/docs/cb_grants/GrantHome

A search of the CBDG Library keywords comprehensive&family&assessment yields the following results: http://library.childwelfare.gov/cbgrants/ws/library/docs/cb_grants/ResultSet?w=NATIVE%28%27DOCS_DE2+ph+is+%27%27comprehensive%27%27%26%27%27family%27%27%26%27%27assessment%27%27%27%29&upp=0&rpp=25&order=native%28%27year%27Descend%27%29&r=1



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau

