

Practice information

Background

The development of the family risk evaluation was based on longitudinal research that examines the relationship of family characteristics and the recurrence of harm and neglect. The family risk evaluation is an actuarial tool based on research of actual outcomes for families where harm has been substantiated. The items included have been shown to occur at higher rates for families that are re-substantiated for harm or neglect. The family risk evaluation does not predict recurrence, but simply assesses whether a family is more or less likely to have another incident of harm or neglect.

Risk assessment

The assessment of risk is a fundamental component of child protection work. It requires the analysis of information about the child, their family and the physical and social environment. Risk assessment involves a judgement about the likelihood of future harm, the vulnerability of the child and estimating the likely severity of any future incident of harm. The risk assessment helps assess the level of intervention required to those children who are considered to be at the highest risk.

The family risk evaluation

Completion of the family risk evaluation achieves a level of consistency and reduces the subjectivity that can occur as part of risk assessment decision-making. The family risk evaluation helps estimate the probability of further incidents which may result in harm to a child in the next 12-24 months. It does not predict abuse or harm for an individual child. It simply provides an objective evaluation about the probability that future harm is likely to occur and helps guide decision-making about the need for ongoing intervention with the family to reduce the likelihood of future harm.

The family risk evaluation is used to classify families into risk groups that have high, medium or low risk levels or probabilities of continuing to harm their children. The difference in probability of future harm between the risk levels is substantial. A score of 'high' risk means the family is significantly more likely than a family with a 'low' or 'moderate' risk level to re-enter the child protection system within two years. 'Low risk' means that the family shares critical characteristics with families who are less likely to have a child protection re-notification over the next two years.

Structure of the family risk evaluation

The family risk evaluation provides two sets of questions, or indices - one for neglect and one for abuse. Some of the questions are found in both sets of indices and some appear similar, but are defined slightly differently. Each question has two or more possible answers, each with an assigned score. All questions in both indices are answered, regardless of the harm type identified during the investigation and assessment. The scores of both indices are totalled and the highest of the two overall scores becomes the 'scored risk level' for the family. The 'scored risk level' classifies the family into one of the following three risk levels:

- low
- moderate
- high

There is also an override section where either a policy or discretionary override can be used to increase the scored risk level, if required, and a record of the subsequent 'final risk level'.

Practice considerations and appropriate completion

The following practice considerations are considered as part of completing each family risk evaluation.

1. General completion information

- The term 'parent' is not restricted to legal or biological parents. The definition of 'parent' is outlined in the *Child Protection Act 1999*, section 11. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children the definition includes family members who have been given the cultural responsibility to care for the child.
- One family risk evaluation is completed for each household.
- Most questions relate to the parent who has the primary responsibility for the care of the child (the 'primary parent'). This is determined by selecting the first of the following options that relates to the family situation:
 - the parent who assumes most of the child care responsibility in the household where the alleged harm or risk of harm has occurred
 - the adult who is the legal guardian of the child, where child care responsibility is shared equally between two parents/persons
 - the person responsible or alleged responsible for the harm, where both parents are legal guardians
 - the parent demonstrating the more severe behaviour, where both parents are alleged to be responsible for the harm.
- The secondary parent, if applicable, is defined as an adult living in the household who has routine responsibility for the child, but less responsibility than the primary parent.
- All questions are answered, based on the information obtained during the current investigation and assessment. The 'scored risk level' can be changed by either a policy override or a discretionary override:
 - a policy override reflects both the child's vulnerability and the seriousness of the concerns, and is applied to cases that warrant the highest level of service, regardless of the scored risk level. Whenever a policy override is used, the 'scored risk level' is changed to 'high'
 - a discretionary override increases the risk score by one level only, and can be applied when the 'scored risk level' is too low. Use of a discretionary override is approved by a team leader.
- Effective completion is dependent on a thorough knowledge and understanding of the definitions for each question.
- The information to complete the family risk evaluation is obtained throughout the investigation and assessment. While some of the required information will be easy to establish, either from departmental records or by observation, other factors will require more skilful exploration during interviews. Where information cannot be reliably obtained directly from the parent or the child, information gathered from other sources may be required to directly respond to the risk factor, or corroborate the information provided by the parent or child.

2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

If the investigation and assessment relates to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child the recognised entity is given an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process.

The CSO is able to consult with the recognised entity to assist with the completion of the family risk evaluation, particularly in relation to any cultural considerations as indicated within the family risk evaluation definitions.

Case open/close recommendation

Each family risk evaluation risk level has an associated recommendation about whether a case should be opened for ongoing intervention. When the final 'scored risk level' is 'high', it is recommended that a case be opened for ongoing intervention. This may occur as a 'support service case' or, where a child has also been assessed as being in need of protection, either intervention with parental agreement or intervention with a child protection order. When the score is 'low' or 'moderate', and there is no child in need of protection, the matter is referred to either another government agency or community service or closed.

Risk level	Case open/close recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open for ongoing intervention
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moderate risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Close unless there is a child in need of protection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Close unless there is a child in need of protection

The family risk evaluation does not provide guidance about the type of case to open – this decision is guided by professional assessment about whether there is a child in need of protection.

Minimum departmental contact requirements

The final risk level informs the amount and frequency of contact a CSO will have with a child and family during the ongoing intervention, where applicable.