

Practice Matters

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of the
Administrative Review Division



The Colorado Risk
Assessment Tool:
Origins, Intent, Use and
Recommendations for
the Future.

Quality Assurance and Improvement

Colorado's Administrative Review Division (ARD) serves as an independent third-party review system under the auspices of the Colorado Department of Human Services. The ARD is the mechanism responsible for the federally required Case Review System and a portion of the Quality Assurance System for the Division of Child Welfare (DCW) and the Division of Youth Corrections (DYC).

This newsletter is a joint project between the ARD and the DCW. This quarter, the co-authors are:

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The Colorado Risk Assessment Tool

Background

In 1999, the CDHS contracted with the Children's Research Center (CRC), a division of the National Council on Crime and Prevention, to develop a new Risk Assessment instrument. The previous Risk Assessment instrument was consensus-based and was created by importing various items from risk assessments utilized in other states. The process of creating a new Risk Assessment instrument involved a review of actuarial- and consensus-based instruments utilized by ACTION for Child Protection, the American Humane Association and the National Council on Crime and Delinquency's CRC.

As the initial step in creating the new Risk Assessment tool, the CRC selected a random sample of 977 families in five Colorado counties—Chafee, Denver, El Paso, Jefferson and Morgan—who were investigated for abuse and/or neglect between July 1996 and December 1996. Case records were reviewed by trained and experienced case readers. Each family in the sample was observed for a period of two years following the conclusion of the initial investigation. Analysis included the relationship between outcomes and characteristics of children and caretakers, prior

investigations of the families, and case service history. The resulting items on the current Risk Assessment instrument were selected based on their statistical association with future abuse or neglect, and the ease with which they could be identified and scored by caseworkers.¹ The final instrument comprised separate scales for Neglect and Abuse. The scores generated by each instrument are classified as low, moderate or high, with discretionary override capability for the worker completing the instrument. Scores showed correlations to future allegations and substantiated investigations of child maltreatment. Tables outlining these correlations are available on Page 4.

The Colorado Risk Assessment is intended to be completed by investigating caseworkers, based on their observations. After the Abuse and Neglect Scales are tallied, the highest score from either scale reflects the overall risk classification for the family. This risk score is intended to assist caseworkers in prioritizing case service interventions for families.



Quality of Risk Assessments

In the ARD's Assessment Review Instrument, Question 8 addresses the use of the Risk Assessment as follows: "Was the Risk Assessment tool completed in accordance with Volume VII?" A review of statewide aggregate data related to Question 8, collected through 687 Assessment Reviews conducted by the ARD between August 18, 2010 and November 17, 2010, reveals that only about 56% (380) of Risk Assessments were completed in accordance with Volume VII, leaving 44% (303) either missing or completed incorrectly.

Approximately 44% of assessments reviewed were either missing a Risk Assessment or contained a Risk Assessment that was completed incorrectly.

related to these items in the Abuse and Neglect Scales do not provide clarity regarding whether the term "investigations" refers to parents, children or other persons in the household, individually or all together.

There may also be further confusion related to whether the household has previously received Child Protective Services. Specific definitions of

"household" would be beneficial in guiding the caseworker in answering these areas accurately.

Through conversations with county departments of human/social services staff during In-Home Services and Assessment Reviews,

Barriers to Effective Use

Reviewers are able to choose several "No" response options for Question 8 in order to accurately capture what may have been missing or incorrectly completed in each Risk Assessment. Those response options include:

- "No, not completed," if the Risk Assessment was not completed but was required;
- "No, not timely," if the Risk Assessment was not completed in Trails within thirty days of the date that the referral was received;
- "No, not thorough," if all 13 risk factors were not completed; and
- "No, inaccurate documentation of risk factors," if the risk factors identified/ not identified in the Risk Assessment do not match the information available in the referral and other case file documentation.

A review of comments related to the answer option, "No, inaccurate documentation of risk factors," reflects that specific information entered in the Risk Assessment regarding the number of prior neglect and abuse investigations is frequently inaccurate. One logical explanation for the lack of accurate documentation is that the instructions

the ARD has identified that the primary barrier to the effective utilization of the Colorado Risk Assessment tool is that the instructions provided are difficult to apply, and the definitions provided often conflict with the instructions. This is especially evident when examining the definitions of "household" and "caregiver." Reviewer comments note a lack of accurate Risk Assessment documentation in the areas related to "Domestic Violence" and "Caregiver(s) Involved in Disruptive Volatile Relationships," likely because there is confusion related to the definitions for these items as well.

Children who come to the attention of the Department may have multiple caregivers and may reside in more than one household or within complex family systems. Allegations may include multiple children with different primary caregivers within the same household. However, this is difficult to convey when completing the Risk Assessment tool, primarily because the current instructions indicate that only one primary "caregiver" may be identified, and that the primary caregiver is the adult with legal responsibility for the child and who assumes the most responsibility for the child. Further confusion ensues when having to consider the current instruction

The purpose of risk assessment is to determine the likelihood of future child maltreatment, which is frequently used to determine which cases to open for services.

Akin, McDonald, & Tullis, 2010

that, in circumstances in which both parents live in the household and equally share caregiver responsibilities and both parents have been identified as alleged perpetrators, the parent demonstrating the more severe behavior is to be selected as the primary caregiver. There is no current definition of the term “more severe.”

There is additional uncertainty related to specific elements contained within the Abuse and Neglect Scales. For instance, the Abuse Scale asks caseworkers to count all prior investigations for any type of allegation (abuse, neglect, or other), substantiated or not, while the Neglect

Research indicates that the successful implementation of a Risk Assessment instrument requires major organizational change.

Gambrill & Shlonsky, 2000; Hughes and Rycus, 2007; Schwalbe, 2008

Scale requires the caseworker to count only investigations of neglect allegations, and to count the number of neglect allegations that were substantiated.

Instructions within the Neglect Scale indicate that the number of children in the household is defined as the “children who reside in the home, regardless of relationships,” which is subject to change and interpretation. The Neglect Scale also refers only to domestic violence that occurred in any household the *caregiver* resided in, and occurred “between *caregivers* or between the *caregiver* and another adult household member,” whether the caregiver was the victim or the perpetrator. Conversely, the Abuse Scale allows for the evaluation of relationships between *any* adults in the current household, despite the specific direction of the item title: “*Caregiver(s)* Involved in Disruptive/Volatile Relationships.”

Recommendations

The ARD collects all feedback and

questions received during reviews and other interactions with county and State entities. This information, as outlined in the “Barriers” section, has resulted in the following recommendations for the Division of Child Welfare:

1. Clarify the instructions, as well as the definitions used in the instructions, specifically related to “households,” “caregivers,” “domestic violence,” and “disruptive volatile relationships.” Ensure that these definitions are applied consistently throughout the instructions.
2. Make all definitions and instructions available in Trails to assist caseworkers in completing the Risk Assessment accurately.
3. Automate the counts of historical abuse and neglect assessments/ investigations. Trails should automatically calculate the number of previous investigations and auto-fill this field. Allow for caseworker override when the Trails count is inaccurate.
4. Clarify the relationships between safety, risk and comprehensive family assessments, along with the objectives for each type of assessment, so that workers can implement them effectively.
5. Clarify the role of clinical judgment in the Risk Assessment process and acknowledge it.

Next Steps

1. The DCW has created new definitions and is testing them through ongoing training in the counties.
2. A proposal has been submitted to CTUG for the addition of definitions and instructions in Trails, as well as the potential redesign of the Risk Assessment to incorporate additional suggestions to make the Risk Assessment more user-friendly.
3. DCW program staff have developed a schedule for over-the-shoulder training for county staff to ensure uniform understanding of the Risk Assessment.

During the first six months of SFY 2011, the ARD has held reviews on 886 child abuse and neglect assessments in 27 counties.

Comments from review participants regarding what is most helpful about reviews:

From Children~

- “I got to have an opinion.”
- “My goals were discussed and I was heard in every thought I had.”

From Parents~

- “The most helpful part for me was all of the good advice and encouragement.”
- “Hearing that my child is safe.”

From Grandparents~

- “Assurance that the child’s long-term needs are being recognized and addressed.”
- “Being heard.”

From Caseworkers~

- “The fact that all parties’ concerns and questions were given consideration and adequately addressed builds trust in what we do.”
- “Having the reviewer as a neutral party to give perspective to the case.”
- “Viewing the case through the child’s eyes.”
- “Being reminded that the kids’ needs are most important.”
- “I believe the information I receive helps make me a better caseworker.”
- “It’s important to give the family an opportunity to express their thoughts/concerns, and they really appreciate that opportunity.”
- “Gave the child hope and goals to work toward.”



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The Correlation Between Final Risk Classification Level and Outcomes

Table 1
Total Sample Cases: Final Risk Classification Findings for Follow-Up Investigation²

Final Risk Classification	Sample Cases	% Sample	Follow-Up Allegation*	
			Cases	Rate
Low	215	22.0%	20	9.3%
Moderate	615	62.9%	184	29.9%
High	147	15.0%	94	63.9%
Total	977	100.0%	298	30.5%

*Investigated allegation (one or more) within 24 months of the sample investigation.

Table 2
Total Sample Cases: Final Risk Classification Findings for Follow-Up Substantiation³

Final Risk Classification	Sample Cases	% Sample	Follow-Up Substantiation*	
			Cases	Rate
Low	215	22.0%	4	1.9%
Moderate	615	62.9%	70	11.4%
High	147	15.0%	45	30.6%
Total	977	100.0%	119	12.2%

*Substantiated allegation (one or more) within 24 months of the sample investigation.

References

^{1,2,3} Children’s Research Center, *Colorado Department of Human Services Risk Assessment Results, October 1999.*

Akin, B., McDonald, T., & Tullis, L. (2010). An inventory of risk assessment in child protection: Instrument usage and key features. *Protecting Children Journal, 25* (3), 35

Gambrill, E., Shlonsky, A. (2000). Risk assessment in context. *Children and Youth Services Review, 22* (11-12), 813-837.