

SDM® SYSTEM DESK GUIDE FOR TRIBES

The Structured Decision Making® (SDM) system is a set of research- and evidence-based assessment tools used by social workers to help support accurate, consistent, and equitable decision making at key points in child welfare cases. SDM assessments do not make decisions; they are designed to build on social workers' wisdom and experience to help them make the best decisions possible for children, youth, families, and communities.

SDM assessments are used at each key point in a child welfare case, including the following.

DECISION	SDM TOOLS	WHICH CASES	WHEN
Does this referral meet the statutory threshold for an in-person response from child welfare? If yes, how quickly should we respond?	Hotline tools	All referrals created in the child welfare services case management system (CWS/CMS)	Immediately upon receipt of a report of alleged child maltreatment.
Can the child remain safely in the home?	Safety assessment ¹	All referrals assigned for in-person response	During first face-to-face contact with at least one alleged victim in the household. Recorded within 48 hours.
What is the likelihood of future system involvement?	Risk assessment	<i>Recommended:</i> All referrals assigned for in-person response <i>Required:</i> All substantiated and inconclusive referrals	As soon as the information is available and within 30 calendar days of first face-to-face contact.

¹ The SDM safety assessment for family homes is used for allegations of harm by a legal caregiver. The SDM safety assessment for substitute care provider homes or the SDM safety assessment for congregate care should be used when the referral alleges maltreatment in out-of-home care.

DECISION	SDM TOOLS	WHICH CASES	WHEN
Can the child safely return home?	Reunification reassessment	Cases with at least one child in out-of-home care with goal of "return home"	At a minimum, every six months from the point of removal. If adequate time has passed to demonstrate progress on the case plan, it is recommended to complete this assessment every 90 days.
Can this case be safely closed?	Risk reassessment Safety assessment (closing)	All open cases where <i>all</i> children are in the home.	<i>Division 31</i> : Review required every six months.

HOW DOES THE SDM SYSTEM AFFECT TRIBAL FAMILIES?

Accurate completion of SDM assessments requires the social worker's intentional collaboration with a child's family and support network to ensure a balanced and rigorous assessment at each decision point in a case. When a Indian child is involved, statute requires county social workers to actively engage the child's tribe(s) to support collaborative assessment and shared decision making whenever possible.²

To support meaningful engagement in this process, California tribal partners must have access to the tools and supports that county social workers use to guide their decision making, including the SDM system.

As you collaborate with county social workers on SDM assessments, it can be helpful to each have the definitions [website](#) loaded on your phone or log in to the [WebSDM training site](#) so that everyone can review the same information during the discussion.

KEY QUESTIONS SUPPORTING COLLABORATIVE SDM ASSESSMENTS

Tribal representatives can ask county social workers the following guiding questions to ensure tribal representatives have the information needed to support collaborative assessment and shared decision making at each decision point. See [ACL 18-140](#) for citing foundations for information sharing as needed.

FOUNDATIONAL

- What are some things that are going well for this family? What are their strengths?

² WIC 224.2 (a); All County Letter No. 20-38

- What are you worried about that has brought the family into contact with child welfare?
- What are you worried may happen to the children and family if nothing changes?
- Could you share any harm/worry/goal statement(s) you have made for this family?
- What SDM assessments have been completed so far for this family?
- What items did you select, and what information supported that? How soon could you share a copy of the assessment with us in compliance with All-County Letter (ACL) 18-140.³?
- What is the next recommendation you will need to make to the courts? Or: What is the next decision point you face in this case?
- What cultural context about this family are you considering so far in your decision making?

AT SCREENING

- What screening criteria (or maltreatment types) are or were being considered for this report?
- Who were you able to talk with besides the reporter, if anyone?
- Are you considering any overrides?/What overrides were applied?

SAFETY DECISION

See the SDM safety assessment and safety-planning guidance within the SDM policy and procedures manual for further details on collaborative safety assessment and planning.

- If you were to provide a number from 0 to 10 for how safe this family's children are or would be in the home, where 10 is totally safe and 0 is the opposite, what number would you provide and why?
- Which SDM safety threats have been identified, if any? What specifically is going on that met the threshold described in that safety threat definition?
- What support network members have been identified so far?
- Can you tell me about the household strengths and protective actions that were assessed as part of the safety assessment? Were these enough to lead to considering an in-home safety plan? Why or why not?
- If a safety plan has been put in place, when will a Child and Family Team Meeting (CFT) be taking place? How soon could you send us a copy of the safety plan so that we can work with the family to strengthen the safety plan ahead of the CFT? Continuous quality improvement (CQI) resource: [Safety Plan checklist](#)

³ See [ACL 18-140](#) for foundations for information sharing.

ONGOING PERMANENCY AND REUNIFICATION DECISIONS

Permanency

- Does the current case plan contain:
 - » Services for the caregiver to address the initial safety threat?
 - » Detailed description of behaviors that caregivers need to change (whether during visits or over time) in order for reunification to be considered?
- What is the plan for moving toward more frequent or unsupervised visits to support progress toward reunification?
- What is the family doing well? In what ways have they been able to demonstrate new behaviors or actions of protection so far?
- What are some things child welfare services (CWS) is still worried about that we could collaborate on addressing with the family?
- What do you think should happen next? What does the family think should happen next?

SDM Reunification Assessment (for out-of-home cases)

- Let's review the initial safety threats that brought the child into care. What progress has the family made on demonstrating new behaviors or actions of protection related to this safety threat over time?
- Is there still an active safety threat? Could we create a safety plan that would allow the children to go home?
- The SDM reunification assessment looks at the original safety threat, the quality and quantity of visitation, and changes to the risk level (driven considerably by progress on the case plan). Does the family understand that this is what you will be assessing and looking for? Are there ways this has been explained in family-friendly language to the family and network?
- Let's pull up the visitation criteria in the SDM reunification assessment. How are the caregivers doing on each one of these areas? What alternative supports have been considered if visitation frequency or quality is assessed as inadequate?
- If you were to provide a number from 0 to 10, what number would you provide for the caregiver's progress toward the case plan goals? (Focus on behavioral change, not service compliance.)
- What kind of supportive plan is there for after the children return home or after the case closes?
- How can we help as you gather the information that seems to be missing?