

# INTRODUCTION TO THE SDM<sup>®</sup> SYSTEM FOR CALIFORNIA TRIBES



## CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Structured Decision Making® and SDM® are registered in the US Patent and Trademark Office.



### ABOUT EVIDENT CHANGE

Evident Change promotes just and equitable social systems for individuals, families, and communities through research, public policy, and practice. For more information, call (800) 306-6223 or visit us online at [EvidentChange.org](https://EvidentChange.org) and [@Evident\\_Change](https://twitter.com/Evident_Change) on Twitter.

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# WHAT IS THE SDM SYSTEM?

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 are used at each key point in a child welfare case, from the decision about whether an allegation meets the threshold requiring an in-person response to the decision about whether to close a case. (This is detailed in the section “Using the SDM System at Each Decision Point.”) Data collected through these assessments are critical to providing agency administrators, tribal partners, and community stakeholders with transparent information about how these critical decisions are being made across the state.

The SDM system combines research with practice strategies to carry out Evident Change’s commitment to making research actionable across social services systems. This combination offers workers a framework for consistent decision making, and it gives agencies a way to target in-demand resources toward those who can benefit most.

## 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 child from a tribe is involved, state statute requires county social workers to actively engage the child’s tribe(s), not only to be in accordance with the Indian Child Welfare Act but also to support collaborative assessment and shared decision making whenever possible.<sup>1</sup>

To be able to engage 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.

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<sup>1</sup> WIC 224.2 (a); All County Letter No. 20-38

# SDM SYSTEM OBJECTIVES

## For Leadership



Prioritizes use of resources

Ensures statutory compliance

Provides data to inform policy and guide resource development

## For Managers and Supervisors



Provides framework for continuous quality improvement

Ensures implementation fidelity

Assists with workload management

Provides strategies for supervision and coaching

## For Workers



Prioritizes information gathering

Improves transparency in decision making

Provides tools for talking with clients

Maintains service standards

## For Families



Ensures fair and equitable assessments

Provides common language for conversations with workers

Improves consistency of decisions that affect them

Improves case planning

# USING THE SDM SYSTEM AT EACH DECISION POINT

Hotline Tools



Should this referral be investigated?

Safety  
Assessment



Can a child safely remain in the home?

Risk  
Assessment



What is the likelihood of future system involvement?

Reunification  
Reassessment



Can the child safely return home?

Risk  
Reassessment



Should this case be closed?

# CALIFORNIA SDM SYSTEM OVERVIEW

See policy and procedures sections for each tool for complete details.

| SDM TOOL                               | DECISION  | WHICH CASES  | WHO                              | WHEN  |
|--|---|--|----------------------------------|---|
| Hotline tools                          | Should the referral be accepted for in-person response?<br><br>If yes, how quickly should we respond? | All referrals created in CWS/CMS.  | Worker receiving the referral    | Immediately.<br><br>Tool should be used <i>during</i> call with reporter to guide questions and screening assessment.                                       |
| Safety assessment*                     | Can the child remain safely at home?  | All in-person responses.   | Assigned worker                  | ALWAYS: Process completed during first face-to-face contact with at least one victim child in the household (record within 48 hours).                       |
| Risk assessment                        | Should intervention be provided? At what service level?   | RECOMMENDED: All in-person responses.<br><br>REQUIRED: All substantiated and inconclusive in-person responses. | Assigned worker                  | Within 30 calendar days of first face-to-face contact.  |
| Family strengths and needs assessment† | Focus of case plan  | All open cases.  | Worker responsible for case plan | INITIAL: Prior to initial case plan.<br><br>REVIEW: For voluntary, within 30 days prior to case plan; for court-ordered, within 65 days prior to case plan. |

| SDM TOOL                                       | DECISION   | WHICH CASES   | WHO             | WHEN  |
|--|--|---|-----------------|---|
| Reunification reassessment                     | Can child be returned home, should reunification efforts continue, or should the permanency goal be changed? | Cases with at least one child in out-of-home care with goal of return home. | Assigned worker | At a minimum, every six months from 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.  |
| Risk reassessment<br>Closing safety assessment | Can this case be closed?<br><br>If not, what level of service?   | All open cases where ALL children are in the home.                          | Assigned worker | Division 31: Review every six months.<br><br>Voluntary cases: No more than 30 calendar days prior to case plan completion or case closure recommendation.<br><br>Court-ordered cases: No more than 65 calendar days prior to case plan completion or case closure recommendation.<br><br>All cases: Sooner if there are new circumstances or new information that affects risk. |

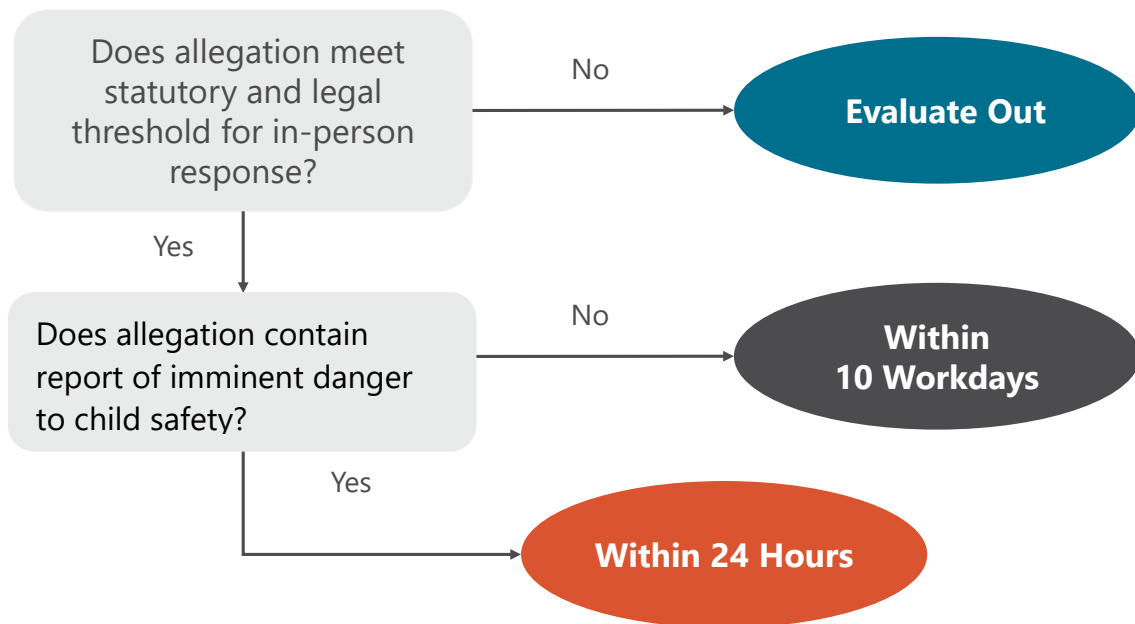
\*The SDM safety assessment for family homes is used for allegations of harm by a legal caregiver. The SDM safety assessment for substitute care provider homes should be used when the referral alleges maltreatment by a substitute care provider.

†California's SDM family strengths and needs assessment (FSNA) is no longer updated and maintained as an active assessment, per CDSS guidelines. This legacy version is available for use in case planning during the transition period to full implementation of the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths assessment.

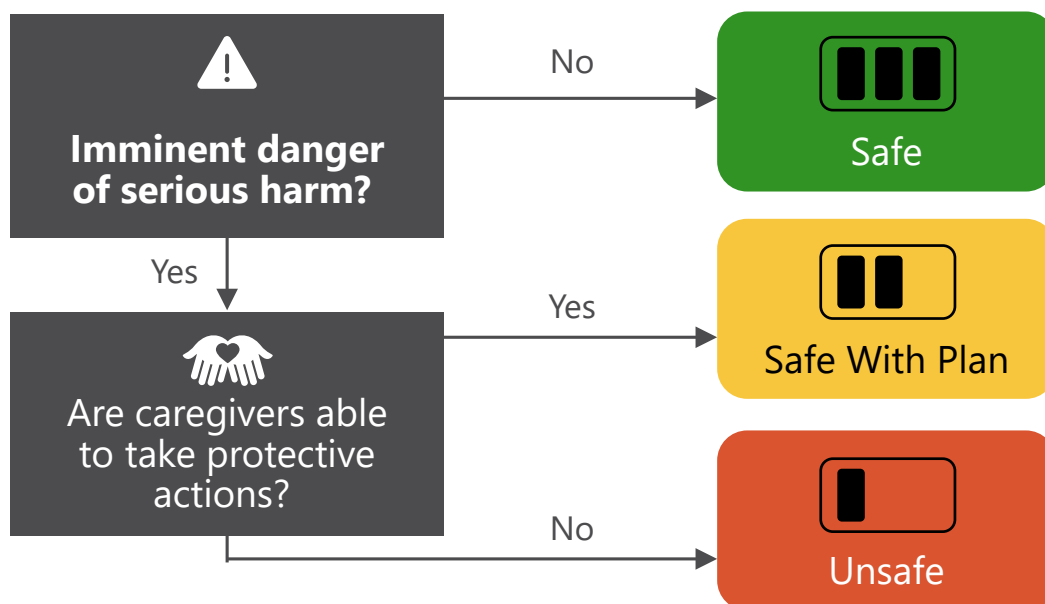


# SDM TOOL LOGIC

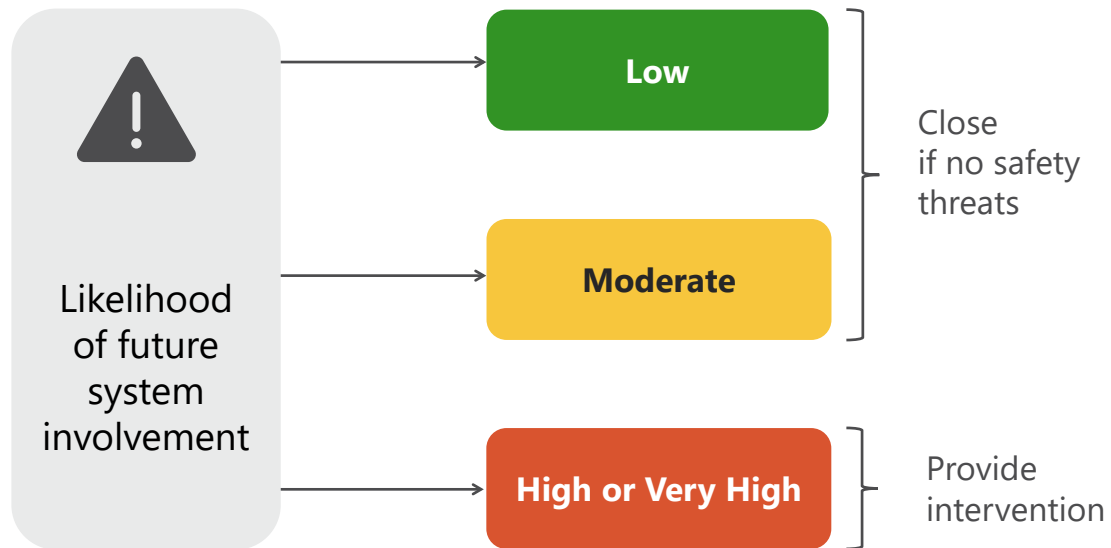
## HOTLINE TOOLS



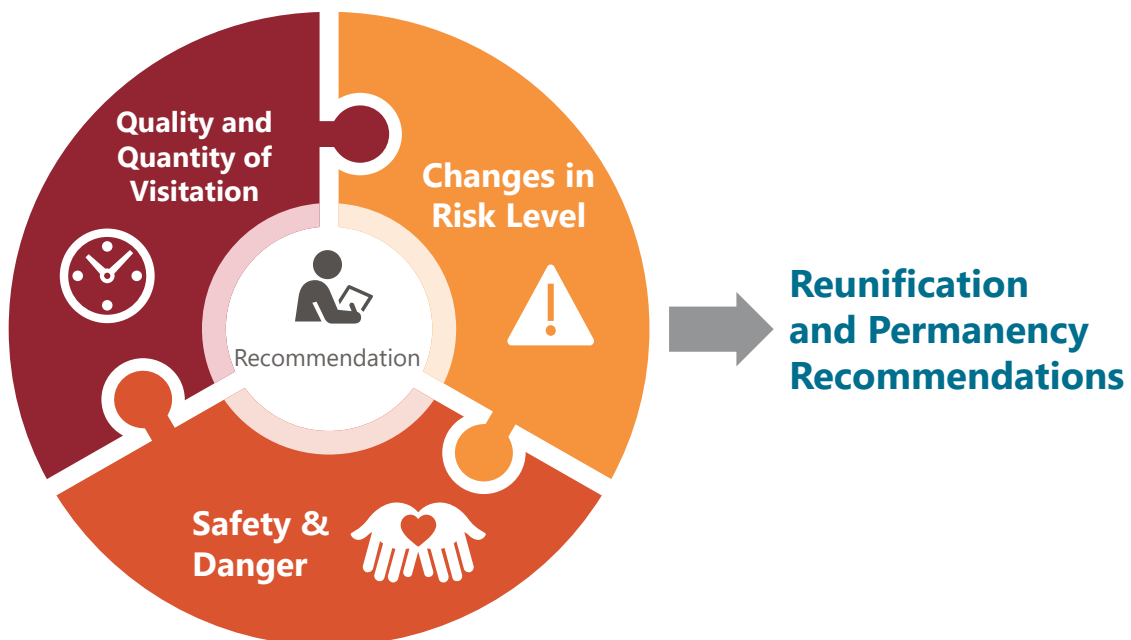
## SAFETY ASSESSMENT



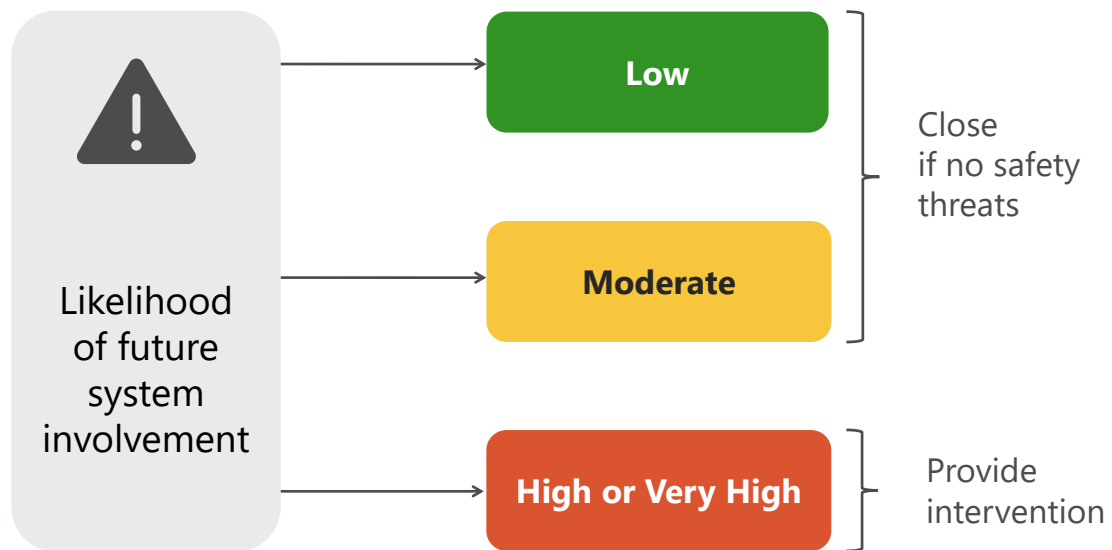
## RISK ASSESSMENT



## REUNIFICATION ASSESSMENT



## RISK REASSESSMENT



# HOW TO ACCESS THE WEBSDM TRAINING SITE AND MATERIALS

## SDM TRAINING MATERIALS

The full SDM policy and procedures manual, along with blank SDM assessments, are available on the California Training Site. Additional training materials also are available at the site, as well as a feedback form where users and stakeholders can submit recommendations for updates.

The link to the training site is <https://docs.evidentchange.org/california/>

**Password:** training

## WEBSDM ACCESS

Please note that tribal partners and social workers can access the WebSDM training site to walk through the web-based assessments. This may be helpful when exploring specific SDM definitions and thresholds, or during joint decision making with county social workers.

The link to the site is <https://ca-training.sdmdata.org/>

In the dropdown menu, tribal partners can select the county they partner with and then log in using the following information.

- **Username:** student1
- **Password:** training

## MORE TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Training and technical assistance on the SDM system are available to California tribal partners supporting families involved in the child welfare system. If you are interested in accessing specific support or technical assistance related to the SDM system, please email Claire Crowley at [ccrowley@evidentchange.org](mailto:ccrowley@evidentchange.org).