

CALIFORNIA SDM® REUNIFICATION REASSESSMENT

Themes From 2022 Peer Learning Sessions

In 2022, Evident Change hosted a series of peer learning sessions with county leadership, program managers, and supervisors from child welfare agencies across California. The purpose of the sessions was to examine statewide practice related to reunification decision making; discuss current use of California's Structured Decision Making® (SDM) reunification reassessment; and learn about challenges, barriers, and best practices. Use of the SDM® reunification reassessment varies greatly across counties, with [completion](#) between 0% and 84%, and statewide completion was 43% for all youth who entered care in California in 2021.

The following themes emerged from the sessions and were documented to inform planning and next steps.

1. Current barriers: What system challenges or barriers do you believe are impacting completion of the SDM reunification reassessment?

Court/timelines

- Litigation in court can significantly delay timelines for completion.
- Current SDM completion policy ties the reunification reassessment to court timelines, and when court timelines get pushed back, the assessment is not done within six months. At times, this exceeds the nine-month mark as well (as measured in SDM management report).
- At times, court delays are so significant that Continuing Services can get a case where by the time we receive it, we are already late in getting reunification reassessments done.
- A compliance-based approach to case plans and court orders can limit the worker's perspective on the need for continual assessment. The focus of recommendations for returning home becomes whether the parent checked the boxes for case plan services instead of holistic assessment of the three areas in the assessment.
- Staff and supervisors focus on completion of the assessment tied to court report/case plan timelines.

Workload and staffing

- High caseloads lead staff to feel like they have less time to complete SDM assessments or assess case progress prior to court timelines—staff busy “putting out fires.”
- SDM system is one of the first things to suffer when staff are in crisis mode. We also receive a lot of training on the initial SDM tools, and there is less focus on these assessments.
- Demanding caseloads, competing priorities, poor understanding of the tool, unclear expectations.

- Multiple assessments in Continuing Services and lack of clarity around where they fit in the case flow and how they work together.
- Timely completion can be a challenge when a worker is new to the family. We are having every emergency response supervisor do a warm handoff to dependency investigations and Continuing Services in our office. We are hoping to improve clarity across workers about goals and progress for the family.
- Many staff leaving this past year. High rates of turnover create training and consistency challenges.

Understanding purpose: The SDM system as a support tool

- Understanding that the SDM system is a tool that supports decision making, not a tool that makes the decision.
- There is a lack of confidence that the tool recommendations will be taken seriously in court, so completing the assessment becomes more of an afterthought (another checkbox compliance item) rather than using it to support critical thinking.
- Workers and supervisors are not familiar enough with what the tool is going to ask, so they are not looking for that information during contact with families.
- Workers often make decisions in silos and rely on their observations (or individual perspectives) rather than rely on the SDM system as a structured tool.
- Staff and supervisors not seeing the tool's value/benefit and how it guides our practice. There is a lack of understanding of the purpose of the tool, and supervisors and workers see it as a task. It's "just a tool."

Training

- SDM training (with refreshers) is critical for a clear understanding. Often, statewide training focuses on decision making related to intake and removal, and does not focus on how to return kids safely.
- There is a lack of understanding across staff and supervisors of how the reunification reassessment should be completed. This impacts even starting the tool. There needs to be increased conversations with supervisors about it.
- Knowing the SDM definitions and keeping them at the forefront to support consideration for "how do I think about the answer to this question [in the assessment]?" Training and supervisors being familiar with the tool enough to ask about it.
- Need for training on the reunification tool and how it relates to Safety-Organized Practice (SOP) and Core Practice Model (CPM) behaviors, which can make the link to tool purpose and increase staff buy-in.
- More purposeful training and coaching behind using and understanding the tool after initial introduction.
- Misconception that workers are ONLY allowed to do the reunification reassessment once every six months.

Policy guidance

- Lack of state guidance around policy for SDM completion and what should drive decision making for safe reunification in its absence.

- Current SDM completion policy is complex to understand.

2. Current decision making: What key factors guide decisions about reunification and alternative permanency when not using the reunification reassessment?

Court, attorneys, and judge

- The trends of the court—social workers consider what the courts will find acceptable.
- Three prongs for court reports: (1) regular visitation; (2) parent has made significant progress; and (3) demonstrated capacity and ability to complete the objectives and provide safety.
- The perspectives of the judge and attorneys play a role—staff consider what the attorneys will find acceptable.

Compliance

- Service completion and compliance.
- Progress/compliance in services required in case plan.
- Compliance with case plan progress, which is impacted by current system challenges as compliance visits are in crisis this year.
- Compliance letters from service providers, drug testing results/attendance sheets, etc. Service providers' recommendation/input is included.

Bias

- Oftentimes, a practitioner's own feelings toward the dynamics with the family are at play. As a coach, personal feelings, regardless of how the completion is being done, often make unbiased solutions hard to come up with.
- Personal or supervisory bias, county/department bias, or liability concerns (e.g., domestic violence cases, marijuana use/cultivation).
- Assessment based on own experience. Workers go with their gut and think parents have done enough.

Visits

- The quality and consistency of visitation and participation.
- Quality of visitation.
- Visitation consistency/frequency.

SOP and CPM

- SOP tools have helped guide clarity between safety and risk.
- Focus on SOP and CPM, understanding complicating factors as different from safety threats.

Supervision and case consultation

- Regular supervision. In some counties, they have it twice a month.

- Weekly case staffings and regular Child and Family Team meetings (CFTs).
- Three-column mapping (what is working well, what are the next steps, what are the worries) during supervision.
- Staffing using SOP tools like the CAP framework.
- When happening well, supervisors are helping staff understand the difference between safety and risk, considering family time, joint staffings, and holding CFTs.

3. Best practice: What local infrastructure, policy, or practice currently supports best practice related to decision making about reunification?

Comprehensive policy, lists, and case aids

- Checklists for reports that include the assessments needed, and reference needs in the case plan.
- Clear county policies about completion of SDM assessments: when, how often, who reviews, etc.
- When staff have WebSDM on their phones and can access the definitions in the field and see decision trees.

Teaming

- Team Decision Making® meetings and CFT meetings
- CFT meeting and integrating it with the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths assessment. Looking at factors that brought the family to the attention of child welfare in the first place.
- CFT meeting for placement changes.
- Consistently work with the family's service providers and include their recommendation/input.

SOP

- Clear observations and focus on behavior change instead of service compliance.
- Building informal networks/support systems early and often.
- SOP supported through group supervision, case staffings, use of the three questions to develop an action plan.
- Formation of an SOP implementation team.
- Training focused on intersection between SDM system and SOP to increase confidence in the tool.

Supervision and coaching

- Quality supervision that occurs regularly and includes discussion about SDM tools and reviewing assessments.
- Regular coaching to support using the tool with fidelity.
- Coaching/consults with supervisors and trainers/coaches who are skilled and familiar with SDM tools.

Mapping and case consultation

- Supervisors team to consider intervention to keep children safe through mapping.

- Mapping and case consultations using SDM-anchored questions.
- Using mapping with workers to work on harm, danger, next steps.
- Group consultation to support shared decision making to rule out biases and improve outcomes.
- Visitation staffing to progress visits.
- Decisions made at a group level (CCG) for anything that goes to court, local protocol that you cannot staff a case unless there is an SDM tool attached to it.

4. Requested support: What statewide support or technical assistance would be most helpful to support improved completion of the reunification reassessment or your identified next steps?

Court

- Judicial council should include a requirement in court rules that judges should look for these assessments.
- Put headers about SDM system in court reports.
- Support or training for increasing court partner awareness of SDM tools, increase court partners' understanding of SDM system and guidance with SDM documentation in court reports.
- We need training provided to our Juvenile Courts because we need their buy-in.

Assessment reminders

- Perhaps a prompt or alert reminding staff of timely completion of the tool.
- More regularly incorporate reminders to refer to SDM tools in supervision, and explore what recommendation should follow based on the outcome of the tool.
- Develop reminders at critical junctures in a case to complete the reunification reassessment rather than just in six-month intervals.
- In the case management system, have pop-ups to remind staff to complete SDM assessments, including reunification.
- A visual timeline tool that incorporates the reunification reassessment into the larger framework of assessments that staff have to do (CANS, case plans, etc.).
- Any type of tool that would assist staff in completing the visitation section of the reunification reassessment, and help them assess when/how to liberalize visitation.

Guidance and policy

- State guidance around policy for what should drive reunification decision making.
- Update SDM policy to every six months for the completion of the reunification reassessment (de-link from case plan).
- Clear local policy: potentially hosting a cross-county policy review to support sharing best practice and learning around policy to support best practice.
- Increased emphasis on using SDM tools from the state.
- Guidance on using the tools at specific junctures in a case (every 90 days).

- I would appreciate more guidance/handouts/quick guides on how to incorporate the essential components of the SDM assessment tools into daily practice, including home visits and court reports.
- Guidance for use of the SDM case review or CQI tool to ensure that completed assessments are completed with fidelity.

Research and tool updates

- Update or explore new research specific to California and the connection of the tool to permanency outcomes.
- Clarity around how this tool supports increased reunification and decreased re-entry.
- Make sure tools are updated to reflect shifting California context, policy, and practice.
- A visitation progression SDM tool, or clarity about how the SDM visitation criteria should connect to liberalizing visitation.
- Maybe having a visitation tool of its own to assess lifting supervision or increasing to overnights.

Success stories

- Lift up or share more stories about families who have benefited from quality SDM practice.
- More peer learning across counties about infrastructure strategies that supported practice across units/programs.
- Anything that shows/connects the tool's completion with quicker and safer case closures.

Training

- Ongoing training/coaching on the reunification reassessment tool and specific definitions, as well as safety planning trainings. Better understanding of how the tool can support targeted intervention or shifts in the work with a family prior to court dates.
- More refresher training for staff on use of the tools in a more structured way, such as every two to three months. Include real-world examples to support social workers who do not complete the tool frequently, or workers who complete it inaccurately.
- Training opportunities for court partners, to deepen their understanding of the SDM system as a structured tool for decision making (e.g., how it is evidence-based and can filter out bias) and also their familiarity with the definitions.
- Deep dive into visitation practice: a structured case review or something similar that counties could opt into.
- Short ongoing trainings that help staff connect the dots on the *why* behind the importance of completing the tools, and how it can be used to support workload, especially with caseloads so high.
- Support for trainers and staff development at the county level. The trainings could also benefit coaches to attend, to hear the content and then coach and assist in the "transfer of learning," which could increase implementation practices.
- Assessing how county demographics should inform training strategies (i.e., what supervisors do in small counties that may fall to managers in larger counties).

Clear technical assistance support and availability

- Identify a contact at Evident Change with whom we can check in for clarifying questions, especially on a semi-urgent basis (e.g., we check in and get a response within 24 hours).
- More support in regards to quick responses to our individual questions about tools and practice.
- Building more support for workers and supervisors.
- Offer SDM coaching to teams that want to pilot the Collaborative Assessment and Planning framework.
- More direct consultations, determining who my Evident Change contact person is.

Caseload

- Lower caseload so that staff have more time to complete the tool regularly and as needed when circumstances change in the case.
- Ensure at the state level that there is a clear expectation for what is a manageable caseload and that there is an adequate number of positions to support best practice.

Leadership and staff engagement

- Use of the reunification reassessment and how it connects to System Improvement Plan goals.
- Leadership understanding and messaging of how the CPM fits into SDM system use and vice versa.
- Start at the top. Don't forget how it was to be a social worker out in the field. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Get more input from field social workers. They are the closest to the family's voice and choice. Better yet, get family input—those who successfully reunified and those who failed reunification. See what they think.

SafeMeasures®

- Have a dedicated county staff member to review SafeMeasures and help managers and supervisors review key benchmarks related to reunification.
- Have SMALL group SafeMeasures CQI sessions with leaders so they can think of ways to use SafeMeasures for increased accountability to increase SDM usage and to achieve improved family outcomes. Maybe counties can be broken up into small and large county groups.