

Reviewer Brief: Rating CFSR OSRI Item 12: Assessment of Needs and Provision of Appropriate Services

Purpose

The Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) Onsite Review Instrument and Instructions (OSRI) is the official instrument used in rating cases for CFSR determinations of substantial conformity. This brief is intended to strengthen how reviewers determine whether or not the agency made concerted efforts to (1) assess the needs of children, parents, and foster parents (both initially, if the child entered foster care or the case was opened during the PUR, and on an ongoing basis) to identify the services necessary to achieve case goals and adequately address the issues relevant to the agency's involvement with the family, and (2) provide the appropriate services. It builds on instructions provided in [Reviewer Brief—Understanding Federal Expectations for Rating Cases](#) and draws on information in the field of child welfare/social work regarding assessments and development and implementation of individualized case service plans.

Comprehensive assessment and provision of appropriate services to meet individualized needs is an important and fundamental child welfare practice that has far-reaching impacts on the lives of children and families in promoting positive outcomes. Several studies indicate that accurately matching services to complex needs is associated with important child welfare outcomes including a decrease in substance use issues, lower rates of maltreatment, and increased family reunification.¹

Comprehensive Assessment of Needs

Conducting a comprehensive assessment is the foundation for identifying services that effectively address the underlying needs of children and families. Item 12 of the OSRI requires reviewers to determine if the agency completed a formal or informal initial and/or ongoing comprehensive assessment that accurately assessed the needs of the child(ren), parent(s), and foster/pre-adoptive parent(s), if applicable.

Assessment in the field of child welfare encompasses the ongoing practice of gathering information to inform case plan decision-making by identifying and considering individual and family strengths, needs, underlying conditions, and contributing factors affecting the safety, permanency, and well-being of the child(ren). Assessment begins when the child(ren) and family first come to the attention of the child welfare system and continues until case closure.

¹ Simon, J. D., Brooks, D. (2019). Targeting services to reduce need after a child abuse investigation: Examining complex needs, matched services, and meaningful change. *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 99, 386–394. https://dworakpeck.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2020-10/Targeting%20services%20to%20reduce%20need%20after%20a%20child%20abuse%20investigation_Examining%20complex%20needs%2C%20matched%20services%2C%20and%20meaningful%20change.pdf

While many states require the use of instruments or tools to guide assessments and case planning, when answering the Item 12 assessment-related questions, focus on the quality, accuracy, and comprehensiveness of the assessment rather than the completion of an instrument. Children and parents involved in an open case may have obtained need-specific screenings, assessments, or evaluations to address needs such as substance use or mental health issues, domestic violence, and trauma. In your review of Item 12, examine how the integration of all of the available case information and professional evaluations provides a comprehensive assessment of the many factors that need to be considered and addressed to accomplish the case goals.

In child welfare practice, quality comprehensive assessment:²

- Relies on an array of information gathered through a number of sources, such as interviews with family members, results of other assessments, case history, and collateral contacts;
- Recognizes that the child, youth, and parents are essential sources of information to help identify strengths and needs because they are experts in determining what is best for themselves and their family;
- Considers underlying issues such as trauma, domestic violence, substance use or mental health issues, chronic health problems, and poverty, that may need to be addressed to ensure the safety and well-being of children; and
- Is an ongoing process that requires updates when:
 - Family circumstances change;
 - Families make progress or are presented with new challenges;
 - There are safety concerns for the child(ren) or other family members;
 - An individual’s readiness to change evolves;
 - New information is obtained; or
 - Decisions must be made about the case plan, the continued need for services, or the appropriate type, effectiveness, and intensity of interventions and/or supports.

In determining if the agency conducted a comprehensive assessment that accurately identified child(ren)’, parents’, and foster/pre-adoptive parents’ needs, consider some of these overarching questions:

- Was a comprehensive assessment completed initially and/or on an ongoing basis?
- What was the overall quality of the comprehensive assessments conducted throughout the period under review (PUR)?

² Developed in part using information provided in Comprehensive Family Assessment Guidelines for Child Welfare, Children’s Bureau (https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/family_assessment.pdf), and Comprehensive Family Assessment, Children’s Bureau (available upon request).

- How were needs comprehensively assessed throughout the PUR?
- Did the assessment process consider an array of information, including family history, case circumstances, individual and family perspectives, collateral contacts, and formal and informal screenings and evaluations?
- What did the assessment identify as underlying needs of the child(ren), parents, and foster/pre-adoptive parents (if applicable)?
- Given the circumstances and the history of the case, and each child's and parent's needs, did the assessment accurately identify all underlying needs, or were some needs not identified (e.g., underlying trauma that may be a contributing factor to substance use issues)?

Questions to consider for the comprehensive assessment of child(ren)/youth needs:

- Did the assessment consider whether the child(ren) has/had needs related to social competencies, attachment and caregiver relationships, social relationships and connections, social skills, self-esteem, and coping skills?
- Did the assessment consider the child's past abuse/neglect history and separation, grief, or loss concerns (for example, a young child who was severely neglected and hasn't learned how to interact with other children, or a teenager who was sexually abused by a parent and wants to form a connection with an adult with whom she feels safe and can trust)?
- For children residing with alternative caregivers, did the assessment consider their need for permanency and stability?
- Were the youth's needs for independent living (IL) skills assessed on an ongoing basis as part of an independent living plan (for example, an older teen who resides in residential care, has learned basic IL life skills, and expresses a desire to go to college)? Does the assessment identify what is needed to assist the youth in achieving goals? Is there an independent living plan in the file (required for all youth aged 16 and older)? Independent livings services should be provided to youth in foster care age 16 years and older, or a youth of any age with a goal of emancipation/independence or another planned permanent living arrangement who are expected to exit foster care to independence.

Note: The assessment of child(ren)'s needs for Sub-Item 12A is for needs other than those related to children's education, physical health, and mental/behavioral health (including substance use issues) as those are addressed in OSRI Items 16–18.

Examples of child/youth needs:

- Feeling secure in their relationship with their parents and/or caregivers.
- Learning how to recognize and express their feelings about attachment to and relationships with their parent(s) and/or caregiver(s).
- Strengthening self-esteem and building positive peer relationships by engaging in social group activities outside of the home.
- Establishing new, positive connections with siblings, kin/relatives, and/or the Tribe.

- Learning from peers and developing social skills by participating in early childhood education.
- Having security in the permanence of their living situation.
- Developing specific independent living skills.

Questions to consider for the comprehensive assessment of the parents' needs:

- Are the parents' needs clearly identified and related to the ability to provide for the safety and well-being of their child(ren)?
- Did the agency accurately identify the needs of each parent to understand what is needed to achieve the case goals and address the reasons for the agency's involvement with the family, or were one or more underlying needs not identified?
- What does each parent need to support their relationship with the child(ren) or to build a relationship if one was not established before the child's entry into foster care?
- What underlying needs, if they continue to be unmet, will affect each parent's capacity to safely parent and meet the well-being needs of their child(ren)?
- Was the parents' current interest/capacity to engage in services assessed? Were their needs for assistance/support to facilitate engagement in services assessed?
- If the child(ren) is/are in care and will be reunified, did the assessment consider what the parents will need to safely care for and meet their child(ren)'s needs after reunification?

Examples of parent needs:

- Building strong positive nurturing relationships with their child(ren).
- Addressing concrete needs (e.g., housing, employment, transportation).
- Addressing past trauma and understand its impact on self and interpersonal relationships.
- Receiving treatment for substance use or mental health issues, and/or domestic violence, and gaining an understanding of the impact of these issues on self and child(ren).
- Understanding their child(ren)'s developmental and therapeutic needs.
- Learning positive and effective parenting skills and receive peer parenting support.
- Developing a plan for integration back into the community.

Questions to consider for assessment of foster/pre-adoptive parents' needs:

- Are each foster/pre-adoptive parent's needs, related to their ability to provide appropriate care and supervision to ensure the safety and well-being of the child(ren) placed in their care, clearly identified? For example, the foster parents usually take older children and they agreed to take a younger child who has a high level of activity and temper tantrums. Does the

assessment identify whether this was discussed and addressed with the caregiver, and identified as a potential challenge or caregiver need?

- Were each foster/pre-adoptive parent's perspectives regarding what they view as their needs to provide appropriate care and supervision identified and considered in the assessment?
- Were each foster/pre-adoptive parent's needs assessed on an ongoing basis, as needed?

Examples of foster/pre-adoptive parent needs:

- Having the means to care for their child/youth (e.g., clothing, transportation).
- Having education and support to meet individual and often complex child needs.
- Having time for self-care and respite from the continual child/parenting responsibility.

Provision of Appropriate Services

Item 12 of the OSRI requires reviewers to determine how the agency ensures provision of appropriate services to meet the identified needs of children, parents, and foster/pre-adoptive parents. Reviewers' determination of the appropriateness of the provided services is based on considering a number of factors, including but not limited to whether services are/were:

- Informed by a comprehensive family assessment;
- Tailored to address the unique needs and underlying conditions affecting the child(ren)'s safety, permanency, and well-being;
- Designed to enhance the parents' strengths and capacities to provide safe care and support their child's well-being;
- Culturally appropriate (e.g., providers who speak the family's language);
- Accessible to the family (e.g., none/short waitlists, ease of transportation, flexible hours for employed parents);

Considerations for addressing services under OSRI Item 12 (Assessment of Needs and Services) and Item 2 (Services to Family to Protect Child(ren) in the Home and Prevent Removal or Re-Entry Into Foster Care)

While there are distinctions between services best captured under OSRI Item 2 (services to prevent foster care entry/re-entry) versus Well-Being items (e.g., OSRI Item 12), there may be circumstances that require reviewers to consider when the same services are relevant to both Item 2 and the Well-Being items. For example, substance use treatment and domestic violence services may be provided to parents with dual (or multiple) explicit goals of preventing the foster care entry/re-entry of a child (OSRI Item 2) *and* meeting their well-being needs associated with mental/behavioral health, social functioning, and capacity to develop and sustain nonviolent relationships (OSRI Sub-Item 12B). Another consideration is whether case-specific circumstances at different points in time during the PUR are the basis for the same service (or same type of service) being addressed under both OSRI Items 2 and 12. See the [OSRI Item 2 Reviewer Brief](#) for more information.

- Provided in a setting that is the most effective and responsive to the needs; and
- Monitored and adjusted, as needed, based on an ongoing assessment of needs of the child and family.

Questions for reviewers to consider in determining the appropriateness of services:

- Are the services, traditional or non-traditional, tailored to the unique characteristics and needs of the individuals and family?
- Are there identified or perceived challenges/barriers to providing a service?
- In what ways has the agency monitored the services to ensure that individual and family needs are being met?
- What is the perspective of the parents, children, and foster/pre-adoptive parents regarding the appropriateness, helpfulness, and accessibility of services?
- What identified needs are not being met, and why?

As a reviewer, be attentive to concerted efforts and work done to ensure that non-custodial parents are involved in comprehensive assessment and service need identification and are asked to share their perspectives on the helpfulness and accessibility of services for them. and their families.

Examples of appropriate services to meet identified needs:

- A mother of a newborn who has a significant substance use problem affecting her capacity to safely parent is provided a substance use assessment and residential inpatient treatment at a facility for parents and their children.
- A father with a history of escalating domestic violence is provided batterers' treatment in an evening program in which he can participate after work.
- A child needs to develop a new connection to their Tribe. The child participates in Tribal activities, including language classes to build a connection to their Tribe and learn about their Native American culture and history.
- An elementary school-aged child who experienced physical abuse is exhibiting disruptive behavior at home and school. The Spanish-speaking parents are provided in-home interactive parent coaching to learn strategies to enhance their parent-child relationship, appropriately respond to disruptive behaviors, and promote positive behaviors and interactions. A Spanish-speaking in-home clinician is identified to work with the family.
- A youth aged 17 who is engaged in independent living services expresses interest in attending college. The Independent Living Outreach Worker assists the youth with improving college aptitude test scores, visiting colleges, writing the admission essay, applying for financial aid, and exploring criteria to participate in the extended foster care program.

- A child who needs to develop social skills with peers is asked about talents, interests, and willingness to participate in an after-school group activity. Based on the child's responses and the parents'/foster parents' schedules, the child joins a basketball league that helps build self-esteem and social skills with peers.

Summary

Comprehensive and accurate assessment of the underlying needs of children, parents, and families and caregivers, and provision of appropriate services to address those needs, are among the most important and fundamental case practices in child welfare. The quality and strength of these practices affects positive and timely outcomes for children and families. The process requires thoughtful consideration of an individual's and family's strengths, histories, circumstances, underlying and unique needs, and individualized services, resources, and supports. It is a continuous and evolving process that requires honest and open dialogue, concerted efforts to individualize and implement service provision, and flexibility to adjust based on new insights, information, and changing circumstances. Meaningful and authentic engagement and partnership with children, youth, parents, and caregivers in the process will enhance their capacity and is associated with positive outcomes for children and families. Reviewers will want to consider how thoroughly and accurately the assessment identified needs and whether the agency provided appropriate services. The questions provided in this brief will help reviewers examine case practice strengths and areas needing improvement that are addressed through Item 12 of the OSRI.