

Chapter 19

OBSERVING FAMILY INTERACTIONS

19-1. Purpose. Conducting interviews in the home where the maltreatment is alleged to have occurred provides the investigator the opportunity to personally observe family interactions and the family conditions to which the children are routinely exposed. While it is possible for the investigator to occasionally observe family interaction patterns in other settings (e.g., at school, daycare, etc.), family members are usually more comfortable or relaxed at home and more likely to display the most authentic behaviors, actions and attitudes toward each other in the investigator's presence. Direct observation of family interactions reveals essential information related to a host of relationship dynamics including the protective vigilance of family members, style of communication, power and control dynamics and observation of parenting skills as actually applied, not just described by parents and caregivers.

19-2. Parent-Child Interactions.

a. The most important interaction pattern the investigator should focus on is the nature of the parent-child relationship. Careful observation of attachment and interaction dynamics helps the investigator understand child and adult functioning, as well as provide insights into general parenting and parental disciplinary practices and behavior management. Observation of the parent-child dynamic provides the best platform for the investigator to make a determination about the parent's overall protective capacity. While collateral sources can and do provide credible information on families, nothing can substitute for an investigator personally observing firsthand the caregiver's demonstration of actions and behaviors to manage identified threats of danger in relation to a child's vulnerability.

b. Observing the following critical parent-child interactions will assist the investigator in evaluating protective capacities:

- (1) Child displays behaviors that seem to provoke strong reactions from parent.
- (2) Parent ignores inconsequential behavior or appropriately responds to child's "acting out."
- (3) Child has difficulty verbalizing or communicating needs to parent.
- (4) Parent easily recognizes child's needs and responds accordingly.
- (5) Child demonstrates little self-control and repeatedly has to be re-directed by parent.
- (6) Child plays by himself or with siblings/friends age appropriately.
- (7) Child responds much more favorably to one family member.
- (8) Family members appropriately express affection for each other.
- (9) Parent demonstrates good / poor communication or social skills.
- (10) Parent is very attentive / ignores or is very inattentive to child's expressed or observable needs.
- (11) Parent consistently / inconsistently applies discipline or guidance to the child.
- (12) Parent reacts impulsively to situations or circumstances in the home.

(13) Parent demonstrates adequate coping skills in handling unexpected challenges.

19-3. Adult Interactions.

a. The second category of interactions the investigator should closely observe while in the home related to protective vigilance is how the identified alleged maltreating caregiver and non-maltreating parent (and other adult caregivers) relate to each other. Unfortunately, parents and caregivers can acknowledge and verbalize threats to children without being able to sufficiently carry out their protective role in keeping children safe from acknowledged threats. This incongruity between the verbal acknowledgment and the parent actually taking action to protect makes the investigator's direct observation of parental protective vigilance extremely important.

b. The following interpersonal and relationship dynamics can help the investigator determine whether an adult caregiver has sufficient protective capacity to manage out-of-control behaviors, actions or conditions identified in the home:

(1) One individual appears much more dominant or controlling in the relationship (i.e., interrupts conversations, challenges partner's statements, exhibits dismissive "non-verbals" in response to other person's comments – rolling of eyes, smirks, etc.).

(2) The non-maltreating caregiver appears very self-confident and self-assured.

(3) The adult relationship appears volatile and "all consuming" leaving inadequate time or energy for non-maltreating parent to address child's needs.

(4) The non-maltreating parent attempts to demonstrate effective parenting efforts, but is undermined by the alleged maltreating caregiver.

(5) Only one individual appears to be effective in disciplining and managing child behavior.

(6) A co-dependent, high/low functioning dynamic appears to exist between the individuals with significant caregiver responsibility, with the identified alleged maltreating caregiver not being held accountable for inappropriate or irresponsible behavior(s) by the higher functioning, more capable adult.

19-4. Supervisor. When initiated, the Supervisor Consultation should affirm:

a. To the extent possible, the investigator has corroborated information collected from collateral contacts and family interviews with direct observation of the family in the home setting.

b. The investigator accurately identifies patterns and interaction dynamics directly observed in the family (e.g., "the children only respond to or obey one parent when their behavior is being addressed" or, "the parents repeatedly criticize and disparage each other during arguments in front of the children", etc.).

19-5. Documentation.

a. The investigator will document all information obtained through direct observation in case notes within two business days.

b. The supervisor will document the consultation using the supervisor consultation page hyperlink in the investigation module within two business days.

