



# CALIFORNIA SDM® SYSTEM

## SDM VERSION 3.5 PENDING UPDATES

The Structured Decision Making® (SDM) assessment tools are refined over time through continuous user feedback, changes in statutes and regulations, and periodic research and evaluation.

This document outlines the pending updates to the California SDM® assessments in the policy and procedures (P&P) manual. These updates were developed in consultation with key stakeholders—including the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), tribal representatives, training partners, and county child welfare staff and administrators—through a series of statewide workgroups incorporating policy and data review and user feedback.

**The pending updates are planned to go live in WebSDM on January 2, 2024, following the state’s release of an accompanying ACL.** Statewide Core Team members are asked to ensure that all program managers who work directly with staff and supervisors who use SDM assessments daily are aware of these updates and have discussed the major changes with their teams, including consideration for any areas of needed policy or practice alignment.

The following tables describe the updates to each assessment, listing the area of the tool and a short description of the change.

### GENERAL

AREA OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION OF ASSESSMENT UPDATE
Household definition	Definition is updated to clarify examples in which non-residents may qualify as household members. It does not functionally change who is considered to be a member of a household, but it seeks to add clarity and examples to support accurate assessment of a child’s current household.
Glossary of SDM terms	Addition of a glossary is aimed at better defining important terms used across the suite of SDM assessments.
SDM practice foundations	A set of SDM practice foundations has been added to support consistency in the use of SDM assessments.

## SDM HOTLINE TOOLS

**Reference:** Pending [SDM Hotline Tools Policy & Procedures](#)

AREA OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION OF ASSESSMENT UPDATE
Header prompt regarding American Indian/Alaskan Native ancestry and collaborative assessment with tribe(s)	Added header prompts the worker to consider “reason to know” or “reason to believe” to support collaborative decision making at screening. This update increases alignment with Assembly Bill (AB) 3176 requirements for the collaborative assessment for tribal children to begin as early as possible. Corresponding definitions and policy guidance are added.
Preliminary screening item: No child under age 18	Updated definition of “no child under age 18” seeks to clarify that allegations of harm to nonminor dependents should not be evaluated out. This update aligns with Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) 16504 (c).
<b>Physical abuse:</b> Caregiver action that likely caused or will cause injury	<p>Example related to dangerous behavior in the immediate proximity of the child.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Updates describe any household violence by one or more adult household members occurring in ways that the child could be injured, instead of focusing exclusively on incidents related to domestic violence.</li> </ul>
<b>Emotional abuse:</b> Emotional harm related to domestic violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Item stem has been updated, changing “exposure to domestic violence” to “emotional harm related to domestic violence.”</li> <li>Updates to item definition and threshold further clarify the intent for worker to assess impact on child/emotional harm.</li> </ul>
<b>General neglect</b>	Note supporting alignment with AB 2085, specifying that “General neglect” does not include a caregiver’s economic disadvantage.
<b>General neglect:</b> Inadequate medical/mental health care	Revisions to definition clarify expected threshold, specifying that the lack of medical care is causing the child’s condition to deteriorate.
<b>General neglect:</b> Failure to protect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Update specifies that concerns related to domestic violence should be assessed under emotional abuse and physical abuse items.</li> <li>Example related to sexual exploitation by a third party requires worker to assess for knowledge of protective action by caregiver.</li> </ul>
<b>Threat of neglect:</b> Substance-affected newborn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Item stem has been updated, changing “infant exposed to drug/alcohol” to “substance-affected newborn.”</li> <li>Updated item and definition aligns policy changes enacted through amendments to the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act (CARA) and the corresponding guidance set forth in <a href="#">ACL 17-92</a> and <a href="#">ACL 20-122</a> related to infants affected by substance use and plans of safe care.</li> </ul>
<b>Sexual exploitation</b>	Definitions in failure to protect and the sexual exploitation item prompt the screener to assess any protective actions the caregiver may have taken. This will avoid adding allegations against a caregiver when harm is alleged by a third-party perpetrator and the caregiver was unable to protect due to circumstances beyond their control. When the caregiver has been unable to protect, concerns about commercial sexual exploitation of a child (CSEC) may be screened in for a response using the sexual exploitation item regarding a third-party perpetrator.
Tribal agreement	New section of the assessment tracks tribal agreement with the screening decision when known.
Override to in-person response	“Interview per local protocol” definition has been updated and expanded to include tribal agency request.

## SDM SAFETY ASSESSMENT

**Reference:** Pending [SDM Safety Assessment Policy & Procedures](#)

AREA OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION OF ASSESSMENT UPDATE
<p><b>Safety assessment completion policy:</b> Which cases</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revisions to safety assessment completion policy add clarification that a safety assessment is not appropriate for the following exceptions.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» An in-person response is required for an incident involving <i>only</i> a third-party perpetrator of sexual exploitation, and there are no allegations regarding the caregiver.</li> <li>» Child fatality is suspected to be a result of abuse or neglect AND there are no remaining minor children in the household.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Header prompt: Allegation household</p>	<p>SDM policy clarifies that safety assessments must be completed on allegation households. When responding “no” to the question “Were there allegations in this household?” an automated prompt in WebSDM will link the worker to SDM policy stating that a safety assessment also must be completed on the allegation household.</p>
<p>Header prompt: American Indian/Alaskan Native ancestry and collaborative assessment with tribe(s)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revisions to stem question increase alignment with California policy and Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) policy following the ancestry of the child (versus the caregiver).               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Additional prompts within this question support worker in identifying “reason to know” or “reason to believe.”</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Secondary prompt aligns with AB 3176 requirements for collaboration during assessment process when “reason to know” or “reason to believe” exists. Update prompts worker to consider and track contact and collaboration with tribe(s) to support shared decision making and collaborative assessment.</li> </ul>
<p>Safety threat 1: Physical harm, substance-affected infant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Item stem has been updated from “drug-/alcohol-exposed infant” to “substance-affected infant.”</li> <li>• Updates align with the Comprehensive Addiction Recovery Act (CARA) (<a href="#">PL 114-198</a>, <a href="#">ACL 17-92</a>, and <a href="#">PC 11165.13</a>).</li> <li>• Revised item stem and definition clarify that for the item to be selected, the threshold of imminent danger must be met, as opposed to past evidence of harm.</li> <li>• In-home protective interventions 1 and 2 have been updated to include reference to plans of safe care and to utilize network members in monitoring impact of use on child safety.</li> </ul>
<p>Safety threat 2: Sexual abuse</p>	<p>Sexual abuse and sexual exploitation are now two separate subitems on safety threat 2 to support improved assessment and data collection.</p>
<p>Safety threat 3: Immediate needs not met</p>	<p>Statewide data indicate that safety threat 3 continues to be the most prevalent safety threat in removal households, for concerns that may largely be associated with lack of resources/poverty. Updates align with changes to the penal code implemented through AB 2085 specifying general neglect to not include a caregiver’s economic disadvantage.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety threat 3 has been updated to include the threshold of imminent danger of serious harm <i>within the item stem</i>.</li> <li>• Items are broken out into categories to support improved data collection and closer examination of the way this safety threat is being selected.</li> <li>• Definitional changes reinforce threshold of imminent danger, and a note clarifies that the item should not be selected based on poverty alone.</li> </ul>

AREA OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION OF ASSESSMENT UPDATE
NEW: Safety threat 9: Domestic violence poses imminent danger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This new safety threat (9) has been added to support correct use and application of concerns related to domestic violence; these were previously embedded within safety threat 1 (physical harm) and safety threat 5 (emotional harm). Subitems are added to track physical harm versus emotional harm.</li> <li>New definition aligns more closely with survivor-centered practice, the Integrated Core Practice Model, and Safety-Organized Practice, applying SDM definitions based on perpetrator behavior. A note has been added to safety threat 6 (failure to protect) to clarify that concerns related to domestic violence should be assessed under safety threat 9, and an example related to domestic violence is removed from failure to protect.</li> </ul>
REMOVED: Safety threat 9: Current circumstance combined with past history	A review of data flagged this item as significantly over-selected for American Indian/Alaskan Native households in California, and Evident Change testing and review of definitions indicate similar concerns across jurisdictions with this item in place. This safety threat has been removed from California’s assessment, and workers considering removal based on past harm and circumstances not already described in safety threats 1–9 should be captured under safety threat 10, which requires an explanation and supervisor approval.
Caregiver complicating behaviors	Updates build consistency across all definitions to focus on present tense.
Placement interventions	Small language changes to interventions related to use of tribal resources and plans of safe care.
Placement interventions 11 and 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Revisions more closely align with California practice related to exigency and seeking warrants.</li> <li>Intervention 11 has been updated for use when a household has been assessed as unsafe and a warrant or detention order will be sought immediately per local policy.</li> <li>Intervention 12 tracks when a child is placed in protective custody.</li> </ul>
Tribal agreement	New section of the assessment tracks tribal agreement with the safety decision when known.

Note: All updates to California’s SDM safety assessment listed above are focused on the SDM safety assessment for use in home-based settings with the legal caregiver.

The **SDM Safety Assessment for Congregate Care Settings** is expected to be implemented statewide as a part of the SDM V3.5 updates. More information on that assessment can be found [here](#), including a Pre-Implementation Checklist and Policy Scan that should be shared now with any unit responsible for investigating allegations in out-of-home care.

## SDM RISK ASSESSMENT

**Reference:** Pending [SDM Risk Policy & Procedures](#)

Note: All updates to California’s SDM risk assessment in V3.5 are focused on risk policy. Changes to the actuarial risk items and weighting require an updated risk validation.

AREA OF REVISION	DESCRIPTION OF ASSESSMENT UPDATE
<b>SDM risk assessment policy and procedures:</b> Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Updates to the description of SDM actuarial risk, clarifying what it measures and what it does and does not tell us.</li> </ul>
<b>SDM risk assessment policy and procedures:</b> Which cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Revisions clarify that risk assessments should not be completed for the following. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Sexual exploitation referrals involving only third-party perpetrators</li> <li>» Child fatality with no other child in the home</li> <li>» Allegations in out-of-home care</li> </ul> </li> <li>Requirement to complete a new risk assessment for new referrals on open cases is removed, as this is not clearly connected to a decision point.</li> </ul>
<b>SDM risk assessment policy and procedures:</b> Recommended decision, case promotion guidance, and planned intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recommended decision is now displayed as a matrix showing the intersection of safety and risk.</li> <li>Recommended decision for families classified as high/very high risk and safe is updated to expand service intervention options to better align with Family First Prevention Services Act and an expanded prevention continuum.</li> <li>Updated data fields will support tracking and evaluation of the planned intervention post-investigation, including referrals to community services.</li> </ul>

## SDM FSNA/CSNA

The SDM family strengths and needs assessment (FSNA) and child strengths and needs assessment (CSNA) are no longer updated as an active part of the California SDM suite of tools. The current version is available for county use during the transition period to full implementation of the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment as the [state-approved tool](#) guiding assessment of child strengths and needs.

## SDM REUNIFICATION REASSESSMENT

Reference: Pending [SDM Reunification Reassessment Policy & Procedures](#)

AREA OF REVISION	DESCRIPTION OF ASSESSMENT UPDATE
<b>SDM reunification reassessment policy and procedures:</b> When	Updated reunification completion policy is simplified to require completion of the reunification reassessment to assess a safe return home at a minimum of every six months from the point of removal. This change de-links SDM policy for completion of the assessment from court and case plan progress.
<b>Policy override: Visitation is supervised for safety</b>	Definition is updated to clarify that this override should not be applied if supervised visits are still in place solely due to court delays and the child is otherwise safe during visits.