

Reviewer Brief - Understanding the Federal Expectations for Rating Cases

The Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) Onsite Review Instrument and Instructions (OSRI) is the only official instrument to be used in rating a case for CFSR determinations of substantial conformity. This tool gives reviewers participating in the CFSRs a brief overview of the practices that may lead to a Strength rating in a case and the expectations or special considerations reviewers should give to particular case circumstances in evaluating the ratings for a case. The OSRI contains the questions, applicability notes, instructions, and definitions, which provide more detailed information.

Safety Outcome 1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.

Timeliness of Initiating Investigations of Reports of Child Maltreatment (Item 1)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether responses to all accepted child maltreatment reports received during the period under review were initiated, and face-to-face contact with the child(ren) made, within the time frames established by agency policies or state statutes.

Strength Rating Defined

- Timely face-to-face contact with children occurred on all investigations and/or assessments during the period under review (within state policy guidelines) AND
- All investigations and/or assessments during the period under review were initiated timely (within state policy guidelines).
- OR, if policy guidelines could not be met, it was due to circumstances beyond the control of the agency.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

Circumstances beyond the control of the agency may include:

- Other agencies (such as law enforcement) causing delays
- Child/family not located despite documented efforts to locate them

If the state has a policy that allows for exceptions to the face-to-face contact time frames when the child is in the hospital (or other specific circumstances), reviewers should rate the item based on the state's policy requirements.

Safety Outcome 2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.

Services to Family to Protect Children in the Home and Prevent Removal or Re-Entry Into Foster Care (Item 2)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether, during the period under review, the agency made concerted efforts to provide services to the family to prevent children’s entry into foster care or re-entry after a reunification.

Strength Rating Defined

- In cases where safety issues were present, safety-related services were offered to families to prevent removal of children during the period under review.
- OR, if safety-related services were not offered, this was because the safety issues warranted immediate removal of the child.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

This item is solely focused on rating the provision of appropriate safety-related services in response to safety concerns. If implementing a safety plan was the only provision needed to ensure the children’s safety rather than safety-related services, this item should be rated as Not Applicable (NA) and the safety plan should be assessed in Risk and Safety Assessment and Management (Item 3).

Concerted efforts include working to engage families in needed safety-related services, and facilitating a family’s access to those services.

Risk and Safety Assessment and Management (Item 3)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether, during the period under review, the agency made concerted efforts to assess and address the risk and safety concerns relating to the child(ren) in their own homes or while in foster care.

Strength Rating Defined

- For cases with risk and/or safety concerns present during the period under review, the agency conducted initial and/or ongoing assessments of all children in the family during the period under review, unless the time frame and circumstances did not warrant ongoing assessments.
- The assessments were of good quality, accurately identifying risk and safety concerns, and they occurred at key junctures of the case.
- If safety concerns were identified during the period under review, the agency adequately addressed concerns and/or responded by developing and monitoring appropriate safety plans that ensured the children’s safety.

- There were no repeat maltreatment and/or recurring safety concerns within 6 months of a report substantiated and/or accepted during the period under review.
- Additionally, for foster care cases, there were no safety concerns related to visitation with parents or family members during the period under review and there were no safety concerns related to the child's foster care placement during the period under review.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

Consider worker visitation practices (Caseworker Visits With Child [Item 14] and Caseworker Visits With Parents [Item 15]) when assessing this item. Although a rating on this item does not need to be consistent with the ratings on worker visits, reviewers should consider whether the frequency and quality of worker visits with children and/or parents supported quality assessments of risk and safety.

Documentation of completed assessments in a case record alone is not enough to make a determination that this item could be rated as a Strength. Reviewers must also determine the quality of assessments, assess whether there were any concerns present during the period under review, and evaluate whether the agency responded appropriately to any concerns.

Permanency Outcome 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.

Stability of Foster Care Placement (Item 4)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether the child in foster care is in a stable placement at the time of the onsite review and that any changes in placement that occurred during the period under review were in the best interests of the child and consistent with achieving the child's permanency goal(s).

Strength Rating Defined

- A child only experienced one placement setting during the period under review, and that placement is stable.
- OR, the child's current placement is stable and every placement made for the child during the period under review was based on the needs of the child and/or to promote the accomplishment of case goals.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

None.

Permanency Goal for Child (Item 5)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether appropriate permanency goals were established for the child in a timely manner.

Strength Rating Defined

- The child's permanency goal(s) was/were documented in the case file (unless case was opened for fewer than 60 days).
- Permanency goals during the period under review were established timely (assess timeliness by considering the length of time in foster care and the circumstances of the case).
- Permanency goals during the period under review were appropriate for the child's needs and considering the circumstances of the case.
- Requirements were met (as applicable) for termination of parental rights under the Adoption and Safe Families Act.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

Although this item is not focused on *achievement* of permanency goals, it does require the reviewer to consider whether the agency was conducting appropriate permanency planning for the child *since he or she entered foster care* and to assess the impact of those efforts during the period under review. The item is rated based on goals in place during the period under review, but reviewers must also document and consider how long the child was in foster care before a goal was established in determining the timely establishment and appropriateness of the goals.

For example, in the case of a child who had been in foster care with a goal of reunification for several years before the period under review and the goal is changed to adoption at some point during the period under review, the agency's continuation of the reunification goal during the period under review would be considered not appropriate and the establishment of the adoption goal would not be considered timely.

Achieving Reunification, Guardianship, Adoption, or Other Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (Item 6)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether concerted efforts were made, or are being made, during the period under review to achieve reunification, guardianship, adoption, or other planned permanent living arrangement.

Strength Rating Defined

- During the period under review, the agency made concerted efforts to achieve timely permanency for the child.
- OR, for children with the goal of "other planned permanent living arrangement," during the period under review, the agency made concerted efforts to place the child in a living arrangement that could be considered permanent until discharge from foster care.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

Generally, "timely achievement" is considered to have occurred within 12 months for the goal of reunification, within 18 months for the goal of guardianship, or within 24 months for the goal of

adoption. However, the focus of this item is on assessing the efforts that were made to achieve permanency rather than on meeting the specific time frames noted for each goal. For example, if a child was reunified at the 12th month, but could have been reunified sooner had concerted efforts been made, the item could be rated as an Area Needing Improvement. Similarly, if a child did not achieve adoption within 24 months, but the agency and court had been making concerted efforts to achieve the goal of adoption despite circumstances beyond their control that caused a delay, the item could be rated as a Strength.

Concerted efforts toward achieving permanency may include:

- Actively and effectively implementing concurrent planning. Specifically, this means actively working on a second permanency goal simultaneously with the goal of reunification such that there is progress made to have that second goal for permanency achieved quickly should reunification not work out.
- Regularly assessing the safety of the home and family to which the child is to return. This includes utilizing appropriate safety plans and safety-related services to allow reunification to occur timely and safely rather than waiting until all risk and safety concerns are fully resolved before reunification occurs.
- Ensuring appropriate services are provided in a timely manner for parents seeking to achieve reunification
- In cases of adoption, conducting mediation with the child's parents, as appropriate, to work toward obtaining voluntary terminations and avoiding lengthy court trials
- Considering open adoptions, when in the child's best interest
- Addressing any concerns a child, youth, or prospective adoptive family may have about adoption through specific discussions or counseling
- Conducting searches for absent parents and relatives early on and periodically throughout the case
- Establishing paternity early on in cases, as applicable
- Initiating child-specific recruitment efforts to identify permanent placements
- Ensuring that permanency hearings are held timely, and thoroughly address the issues in the case and the child's need for permanency
- Ensuring home studies or other legal processes required to finalize permanency happen timely
- Finalizing the permanency of a placement for youth with a goal of Other Planned Permanent Living Arrangement through written agreements

Permanency Outcome 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.

Placement With Siblings (Item 7)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether, during the period under review, concerted efforts were made to ensure that siblings in foster care are placed together unless a separation was necessary to meet the needs of one of the siblings.

Strength Rating Defined

During the period under review, siblings in foster care are placed together unless separation was necessary to meet the needs of one of the siblings. If separation was necessary, the circumstances are reconsidered over time to determine whether separation needs to continue.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

Concerted efforts to place siblings together may include:

- Asking the children/family about potential placement resources who may accept a sibling group (e.g., relatives and/or fictive kin) and following up with searches and assessments
- Searching for resource homes that can accommodate the sibling group
- For cases where valid reasons for separation exist, providing any services or making arrangements to support the eventual placement of the siblings together

Visiting With Parents and Siblings in Foster Care (Item 8)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether, during the period under review, concerted efforts were made to ensure that visitation between a child in foster care and his or her mother, father, and siblings is of sufficient frequency and quality to promote continuity in the child's relationship with these close family members.

Strength Rating Defined

- During the period under review, the child had visitation with parents/caregivers and siblings (as applicable) that was of good quality and at a frequency that promoted continuity in their relationships.
- Frequency of visits is determined based on the child's needs and the circumstances of the case and not on state policy or resource availability.
- Decisions about supervision during visits, location, length, etc., are made in such a way that supports a positive visitation experience for the child and ensures quality interactions with parents/siblings.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

Concerted efforts to ensure frequent, quality visitation may include:

- Creating a visitation plan with the family that outlines details for frequency, location, duration, etc.
- Engaging relatives or kin in supporting visitation by providing transportation or assisting with supervision
- Providing transportation services for parents and children to attend visits
- Assessing the feasibility and appropriateness of visitation in prison facilities for incarcerated parents
- Discussing visitation with parents/child to assess whether frequency and quality are meeting their needs
- Facilitating the most frequent visitation possible while ensuring the child's safety

Preserving Connections (Item 9)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether, during the period under review, concerted efforts were made to maintain the child's connections to his or her neighborhood, community, faith, extended family, Tribe, school, and friends.

Strength Rating Defined

- During the period under review, the child's important connections (neighborhood, community, faith, school, extended family, Tribe, and friends) that they had before entering care were identified and maintained.
- For a child who is a member of, or eligible for membership in, a federally recognized Indian Tribe:
 - If the child entered foster care during the period under review and/or had a termination-of-parental-rights hearing during the period under review, the Tribe was provided timely notification of its right to intervene in any state court proceedings reviewing an involuntary foster care placement or termination of parental rights.
 - The child was placed in foster care in accordance with Indian Child Welfare Act placement preferences, or concerted efforts were made to do so.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

Concerted efforts to preserve connections may include:

- Having discussions with the child and family, or others who are familiar with the child, in order to identify the child's most important connections

- Making efforts to maintain the child in the same school, if it is in the child's best interests to do so
- Ensuring the child has visits or contact with extended family members and siblings who are not in foster care
- Placing the child in a foster home that is located in the same community they lived in previously
- Taking the child to any religious activities he or she used to attend or connecting the child to a faith community with which he or she identifies
- For a child of Native American heritage, ensuring participation in tribal activities he or she had been involved in
- Providing information to foster parents about the child's cultural heritage and any cultural needs or preferences that should be maintained

Relative Placement (Item 10)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether, during the period under review, concerted efforts were made to place the child with relatives when appropriate.

Strength Rating Defined

- Unless the child required a specialized placement that precluded placement with relatives, or the identity of relatives is unknown despite concerted efforts to locate them:
 - During the period under review, the child was placed with relatives and the placement was stable.
 - OR, concerted efforts were made to identify, locate, inform, and evaluate paternal and maternal relatives as potential placement resources for the child, as appropriate, during the period under review.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

Concerted efforts to identify, locate, inform, and evaluate relatives as placement resources may include:

- Asking the child and parents/caretakers about relatives
- Sending letters to relatives to inform them of the child's status in foster care and need for placement
- Conducting home studies of relatives
- For cases where the whereabouts of the parents/caretakers are unknown and therefore relatives are unknown, evidence that the agency made a sufficient inquiry into the parents' identity, location, and status. Agencies are expected to use viable sources of

information such as parent locator services, case files, and central registries. In some situations, posting a legal advertisement in a newspaper might be the reasonable approach if lesser methods have failed to yield results, as would contacting the parents at the last known addresses or phone numbers.

- For cases that have been opened for some time, if concerted efforts were made before the period under review, evidence that any relatives who were previously ruled out were reconsidered (if appropriate) during the period under review

Relationship of Child in Care With Parents (Item 11)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether, during the period under review, concerted efforts were made to promote, support, and/or maintain positive relationships between the child in foster care and his or her mother and father or other primary caregiver(s) from whom the child had been removed through activities other than just arranging for visitation.

Strength Rating Defined

Concerted efforts were made during the period under review to promote, support, and otherwise maintain a positive and nurturing relationship between the child in foster care and the parents/caretakers from whom he or she was removed by encouraging and facilitating activities and interactions that go beyond just arranging for visitation.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

Concerted efforts may include:

- Encouraging a parent's participation in school-related activities, doctor's appointments for the child, or engagement in after-school activities
- Providing or arranging transportation so that parents can participate in activities with the child
- Providing opportunities for therapeutic situations to strengthen the relationship
- Encouraging foster parents to serve as mentors/role models for parents
- Encouraging/facilitating communication with parents who do not live near the child and/or are unable to have frequent face-to-face visitation

Well-Being Outcome 1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.

Needs and Services of Child, Parents, and Foster Parents (Item 12)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether, during the period under review, the agency (1) made concerted efforts to assess the needs of children, parents, and foster parents (both initially, if the child entered foster care or the case was opened during the period under review, 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) provided the appropriate services.

Strength Rating Defined

- Concerted efforts were made during the period under review to accurately and comprehensively assess the needs of the children, parents, and foster parents initially (for cases that opened during the period under review) and periodically on an ongoing basis (as needed) to update assessment information relevant to ongoing case planning.
 - Assessment of needs for the children does not include education, physical health, and mental/behavioral health (including substance abuse)
 - Assessment of needs for parents refers to a determination of what the parents need to provide appropriate care and supervision and to ensure the safety and well-being of their children
 - Assessment of needs for foster parents refers to a determination of what the foster parents need to provide appropriate care and supervision to the child in their home
- Concerted efforts were made during the period under review to provide appropriate services to the children, parents, and foster parents that were matched to needs identified in assessments.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

Concerted efforts to locate parents may include:

- Contacting the parents at the last known addresses or phone numbers
- Using the federal parent locator service, reviewing case files/central registries
- Asking about relatives and making efforts to contact any identified relatives
- Asking the children's current/previous schools for parent information
- Posting a legal advertisement in a newspaper (after all other search methods have been exhausted)

Concerted efforts to assess needs may include:

- Conducting formal assessments through a contracted provider or another agency
- Conducting informal but thorough assessments using interviews with the child, family, and service providers
- Spending adequate time engaging with the child, parents, and foster parents to gain an in-depth understanding of their needs

- Using screening and assessment tools to assess specific issues such as domestic violence, substance abuse, cognitive abilities, or parenting skills

Concerted efforts to provide appropriate services may include:

- Ensuring accessibility of needed services by providing for transportation
- Monitoring service participation to ensure that the services are meeting needs
- Ensuring availability of services by removing or addressing any barriers to participation, such as waitlists or scheduling conflicts
- Ensuring that services are matched to the parents needs and are culturally appropriate

Reviewers should not rate a parent for this item if, during the entire period under review, the case file documented that it was not in the child’s best interests to involve the parent in case planning. In such a situation, the item questions are not applicable. This would include cases in which there are ongoing safety threats that could emotionally or physically re-traumatize the child and that cannot be mitigated by the agency or other interventions. Typically, both the agency and court are involved in making this determination.

Child and Family Involvement in Case Planning (Item 13)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether, during the period under review, concerted efforts were made (or are being made) to involve parents and children (if developmentally appropriate) in the case planning process on an ongoing basis.

Strength Rating Defined

During the period under review, concerted efforts were made to actively involve the children (if developmentally appropriate) and parents/caretakers in case planning activities.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

Concerted efforts to engage families in case planning may include:

- Having age-appropriate discussions with children and explaining case plans in language they understand
- Ensuring children understand permanency goals and changes made to goals
- Discussing family strengths and needs with children and parents
- Evaluating other case plan goals and progress in services with both children and parents
- Ensuring that case planning meetings are arranged based on the family’s availability and are utilized to engage the family in case planning discussions

Caseworker Visits With Child (Item 14)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether the frequency and quality of visits between caseworkers and the child(ren) in the case are sufficient to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of the child and promote achievement of case goals.

Strength Rating Defined

During the period under review, the caseworker visited the children (for in-home cases, all children must be visited) frequently enough to adequately assess their safety, promote timely achievement of case goals, and support their well-being. The visits were of good quality, with discussions focusing on the children's needs, services, and case plan goals. The children were visited alone, and the length and location of visits was conducive to open, honest, and thorough conversations.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

Typically, visit frequency must be at least monthly for a Strength rating, unless there is substantial justification for less frequent visits.

Caseworker Visits With Parents (Item 15)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether, during the period under review, the frequency and quality of visits between caseworkers and the mothers and fathers of the child(ren) are sufficient to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of the child(ren) and promote achievement of case goals.

Strength Rating Defined

During the period under review, the caseworker visited the parents frequently enough to monitor their progress in services, promote timely achievement of case goals, and effectively address their children's safety, permanency, and well-being needs. The visits were of good quality, with discussions focusing on the parent's and children's needs, services, and case plan goals. The length and location of visits were conducive to open, honest, and thorough conversations.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

Typically, visit frequency must be at least monthly for a Strength rating, unless there is substantial justification for less frequent visits, which could vary depending on the circumstances of the case. For example, for parents who are incarcerated, efforts should be made to arrange face-to-face contact; however, this may not be permitted or viable in a facility that is out of state. A similar situation would be parents who live out of state. In lieu of face-to-face visits, the agency's efforts to maintain monthly communication with the parent via phone calls and/or letters should be considered.

If the case goal is not to place the child with that parent permanently, monthly face-to-face contact is not always required for a Strength rating, and frequency should be determined based on the circumstances of the case and needs of the children.

Well-Being Outcome 2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.

Educational Needs of the Child (Item 16)

Purpose of Assessment: To assess whether, during the period under review, the agency made concerted efforts to assess children's educational needs at the initial contact with the child (if the case was opened during the period under review) or on an ongoing basis (if the case was opened before the period under review), and whether identified needs were appropriately addressed in case planning and case management activities.

Strength Rating Defined

Concerted efforts were made during the period under review to assess the children's educational needs initially (if the case was opened during the period under review) or on an ongoing basis and to provide appropriate services to address needs.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

In-home cases are only applicable for this item if (1) educational issues are relevant to the reason for the agency's involvement with the family and/or (2) it is reasonable to expect that the agency would address educational issues given the circumstances of the case.

The focus of this item is on agency efforts, even if those efforts were not fully successful due to factors beyond the agency's control.

Concerted efforts to assess needs may include:

- Having an educational assessment conducted by the school
- Conducting an informal assessment based on interviews with the child, parents/caretakers, and/or foster parents

Concerted efforts to provide services may include:

- Advocating for services on behalf of the child (by the caseworker and/or foster parents)

Well-Being Outcome 3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.

Physical Health of the Child (Item 17)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether, during the period under review, the agency addressed the physical health needs of the children, including dental health needs.

Strength Rating Defined

- During the period under review, the children’s physical health and dental needs were accurately assessed initially (if the case was opened during the period under review) and on an ongoing basis, and any needed services were provided.
- In addition, for foster care cases, if the child was prescribed medication for physical health issues, the agency provided appropriate oversight for appropriate use and monitoring of medications.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

In-home cases are only applicable for this item if (1) physical health issues were relevant to the reason for the agency’s involvement with the family, and/or (2) it is reasonable to expect that the agency would address physical health issues given the circumstances of the case.

Mental/Behavioral Health of the Child (Item 18)

Purpose of Assessment: To determine whether, during the period under review, the agency addressed the mental/behavioral health needs of the children.

Strength Rating Defined

- During the period under review, the children’s mental and/or behavioral health needs were accurately assessed initially (if the case was opened during the period under review) and on an ongoing basis, and any needed services were provided.
- In addition, for foster care cases, if the child was prescribed medication for mental health issues, the agency provided appropriate oversight for appropriate use and monitoring of medications.

Concerted Efforts Required and/or Special Considerations in Rating

In-home cases are only applicable for this item if (1) mental/behavioral health issues were relevant to the reason for the agency’s involvement with the family, and/or (2) it is reasonable to expect that the agency would address mental/behavioral health issues given the circumstances of the case.