



National Family Preservation Network

Safe children. Strong families.

Overview of Assessment Tools

What are the NCFAS assessment tools?

The North Carolina Family Assessment Scales (NCFAS) measure family functioning from the perspective of the worker most involved with the family. The original NCFAS was developed in 1998 by Dr. Ray Kirk at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill.

Subsequent versions of the NCFAS scales were developed by Dr. Kirk in cooperation with the National Family Preservation Network (NFPN). The matrix below shows the scale name, domains, and their evolution:

NCFAS, NCFAS-R, NCFAS-G, NCFAS-G+R, T/WB Domains Matrix
(R = Reunification, G = General, T/WB = Trauma/Well-Being)

Domain Scales	NCFAS	NCFAS-R	NCFAS-G	NCFAS-G+R	T/WB
Environment	X	X	X	X	
Parental Capability	X	X	X	X	
Family Interactions	X	X	X	X	
Family Safety	X	X	X	X	
Child Well-Being	X	X	X	X	
Caregiver/Child Ambivalence		X		X	
Readiness for Reunification		X		X	
Social/Community Life			X	X	
Self-Sufficiency			X	X	
Family Health			X	X	
Trauma					X
Post-Trauma Well-Being					X

Where are the NCFAS tools in use?

Over 1,000 agencies in the U.S. and 20 other countries use one or more of the NCFAS tools. Spanish versions of all the tools are also included in this number.

Are the NCFAS scales valid and reliable?

Numerous studies have established reliability and validity of the scales. A summary of research reports is available on the NFPN website. Visit: <http://www.nfpn.org/assessment-tools/ncfases-scale-development-report>

What organizations recommend use of the tool?

- ❑ In 2006, the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) Research Team at Berkeley reviewed 85 assessment instruments and found the NCFAS and NCFAS-R to be the most promising for use in child welfare settings (<http://www.nfpn.org/articles/top-assessment-tools-for-cws>).
- ❑ Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) has endorsed the NCFAS-R in its “Research to Practice Initiative.”
- ❑ The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (CEBC) gives the NCFAS its highest rating for assessment tools with demonstrated reliability and validity (<http://www.cebc4cw.org/assessment-tool/north-carolina-family-assessment-scale/>).

How does the tool work?

A six-point scale ranging from clear strength to serious problem provides definitions for three of the points. There is no mid-point on the scale; Baseline/Adequate (zero) means that the family is functioning at a level where there is no legal, ethical, or moral reason for intervention.

Sample Definition from the NCFAS Environment Domain

3. Safety in the Community	
Clear Strength (+2)	Refers to a safe and secure neighborhood for the children. Parents can allow children to play outside without fear. Neighbors look out for each other (i.e., neighborhood watch).
Baseline/Adequate (0)	Refers to minor disturbances in the neighborhood, but disturbances do not prevent family members and children from spending time outside in the community.
Serious Problem (-3)	Refers to many disturbances such as fights and/or outbursts in the neighborhood. The neighborhood is not safe for children to play outdoors or walk to the bus or to school. Evidence of violence, boarded up or barred windows, gun fire, the use of alcohol or drugs, and/or drug trafficking in the neighborhood. Neighbors fearful of getting involved.

Ratings are assigned after the worker has had time to obtain sufficient information about the family, primarily through home visits. There are 5–7 subscales per domain that are rated by the worker and then used to determine an overall domain rating. The domain rating is *not* the average of subscale ratings—domain ratings are based on the worker’s overall perspective of the family’s functioning. The worker completes Intake and Closure ratings and may also complete Interim ratings depending on how long the case is open.

Sample Rating Form from the NCFAS

A. Environment

	Not Applic.	Clear Strength	Mild Strength	Baseline/ Adequate	Mild Problem	Moderate Problem	Serious Problem	Unknown
1. Overall Environment								
Intake	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
Closure	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
2. Housing Stability								
Intake	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
Closure	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
3. Safety in the Community								
Intake	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
Closure	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
4. Habitability of Housing								
Intake	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
Closure	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
5. Income/Employment								
Intake	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
Closure	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
6. Financial Management								
Intake	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
Closure	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
7. Food and Nutrition								
Intake	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
Closure	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
8. Personal Hygiene								
Intake	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
Closure	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
9. Transportation								
Intake	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
Closure	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
10. Learning Environment								
Intake	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK
Closure	N/A	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	UK

Sample domains, subscales, and definitions for each of the available NCFAS scales are posted on the NFPN website. Visit: <http://www.nfpn.org/assessment-tools>

What about inter-rater reliability?

The NCFAS tools are not dependent on inter-rater reliability. They are dependent on *intra*-rater reliability, meaning the consistency by the worker in rating a family using the scale definitions. Reliability is based on the same worker completing the Intake and Closure ratings.

How are workers trained to use the tools?

Every NCFAS tool includes a comprehensive training package that contains:

- Scale and Definitions (*may be reproduced as needed*)
- License to Use the Assessment Tool (*issued to the purchasing agency based on the number of workers who will use the tool and includes replacement workers*)
- Case Study with Sample Ratings
- Case Plan Form (*may be reproduced as needed*)
- PowerPoint Presentation for Staff Training
- Training Handouts
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Database Software for Family Assessments (*Windows computers only*)
- Training Video or Recording of a Training Webinar (*online viewing or DVD/CD-ROM*)

How does the tool benefit the worker who uses it?

After assigning the Intake domain ratings, the worker enters the ratings on the Case Plan form. The worker determines priority for intervention based on the lowest ratings and develops goals and identifies needed services based on these ratings. Family strengths identified in the assessment are employed to help the family learn new ways of working together successfully. Some workers use the domain ratings and goals as the basis for court reports.

At case termination, the worker assigns the Closure ratings and compares them to the Intake ratings. Negative ratings (negative movement on the scale between intake and closure) or ratings in the moderate/serious problem range at closure indicate the need for additional services.

How does the assessment tool benefit the *referring* worker?

By reviewing the Intake/Closure ratings, the referring worker can quickly see where the family has made progress and where additional services are still needed. Improved family functioning ratings are highly associated with keeping families intact or successfully reunifying them.

Research conducted on intensive in-home services found that families with lower ratings at case closure continued to struggle mainly in the areas of Parental Capabilities and Child Well-Being. Any negative change in Child Well-Being was associated with a very high probability of placement.

Research on families receiving intensive reunification services found higher percentages of reunifying (as compared to intact) families with moderate or serious problems or negative change at case closure. In addition, *any* moderate or serious problem domain rating at case closure was associated with high probability of out-of-home placement.

Thus, the referring worker has data available from an evidence-based tool and evidence-based findings to serve as a guide for determining the need for additional services, including step-down services, and for making placement decisions.

How does the assessment tool benefit administrators?

In addition to assisting the worker with case planning and making decisions, the tool is also designed to serve as a data collection instrument. A database is provided with the tool and workers can enter domain ratings for each family as well as obtain reports. Workers can export the data into a spreadsheet such as Excel in order to provide administrators with aggregate data on families.

The findings from this data may result in better targeting of families to be served (intake ratings are too high), establishing services that are lacking (closure ratings are consistently low for specific domains), and identifying families most in need of step-down services (negative closure ratings or ratings in the moderate/serious problem range). The ratings can also be used to identify areas for worker training (goals are missing for domains with low ratings, high ratings do not match family outcomes, many ratings are missing or marked unknown). It is essential that supervisors discuss ratings with workers on a regular basis to ensure that the tool is being used effectively.

What is the Trauma/Post-Trauma Well-Being tool?

The two most recent domains that have been added to the NCFAS family of tools are Trauma and Post-Trauma Well-Being (T/WB).

The *Trauma* domain assists workers to become aware of the symptoms and indicators of trauma and to assess for trauma and the degree of severity. The *Trauma* domain comprises the following subscales:

- Traumatic Sexual Abuse of Child(ren)
- Traumatic Physical Abuse of Child(ren)
- Traumatic Neglect of Child(ren)
- Traumatic Emotional/Psychological Abuse of Child(ren)
- Parent/Caregiver Trauma
- Overall Trauma

The *Post-Trauma Well-Being* domain is distinguished from the NCFAS Child Well-Being domain in that it focuses specifically on recovery and healing of children after trauma has occurred, on the status of the parent/caregiver following trauma to the parent/caregiver and/or the child, and on the parent/caregiver's ability to support the child during the recovery/healing period.

The *Post-Trauma Well-Being* domain comprises the following subscales:

- Post-Traumatic Cognitive and Physical Well-Being of Child(ren)
- Post-Traumatic Emotional/Psychological Well-Being of Child(ren)
- Post-Traumatic Social Functioning of Child(ren)
- Post-Trauma Parent/Caregiver Support of Child(ren)
- Post-Trauma Parent/Caregiver Well-Being
- Overall Post-Trauma Well-Being

Where do I obtain more information about the NCFAS tools?

The National Family Preservation Network (NFPN) owns the copyright and is the sole distributor of the NCFAS-R, NCFAS-G, NCFAS-G+R, and T/WB assessment tools, license for use, and training packages. More information about all of the available tools (including Spanish versions) is posted on NFPN's website. Visit: <http://www.nfpn.org/assessment-tools>