Overview of Assessment Tools

What is the NCFAS Assessment Tool?
The North Carolina Family Assessment Scale (NCFAS) measures family functioning from the perspective of the worker most involved with the family. The tool includes 5 domains that look at the family as a whole in terms of environment, parental capabilities, family interactions, family safety, and child well-being. The NCFAS was developed by Dr. Ray Kirk at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill.

There are several versions of the NCFAS that were developed by Dr. Kirk in cooperation with the National Family Preservation Network (NFPN): the NCFAS-G (includes the NCFAS plus three additional domains of social/community life, self-sufficiency, and health); the NCFAS-R (includes the NCFAS plus two additional domains related to reunification—parent/child ambivalence and readiness for reunification); and the NCFAS-G+R (includes all 10 domains previously described).

NCFAS, NCFAS-R, NCFAS-G, NCFAS-G+R Domains Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain Scales</th>
<th>NCFAS</th>
<th>NCFAS-R</th>
<th>NCFAS-G</th>
<th>NCFAS-G+R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Capability</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Interactions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Safety</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Well-Being</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caregiver/Child Ambivalence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness for Reunification</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Community Life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Sufficiency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where is the NCFAS in use?
Over 500 agencies in the USA, Canada, and Australia use the NCFAS and its related versions.
Is the NCFAS a valid and reliable tool?
Yes. Reliability and validity have been established for the NCFAS, NCFAS-G, and NCFAS-R. Research reports are available online at www.nfpn.org.

What organizations recommend use of the tool?
In 2006, the Bay Area Social Services Consortium 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. CWLA has endorsed the NCFAS-R in its Research to Practice Initiative. The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare gives the NCFAS its highest rating for assessment tools with demonstrated reliability and validity.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. Safety in the Community</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+2 Clear Strength</td>
<td>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).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 Baseline/Adequate</td>
<td>Refers to minor disturbances in the neighborhood, but disturbances do not prevent family members and children from spending time outside in the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3 Serious Problem</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ratings are assigned after the worker has had time to obtain sufficient information about the family, primarily through home visits. Each set of subscales is rated 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Domain/Subscale Title</th>
<th>Not Applic.</th>
<th>Clear Strength</th>
<th>Mild Strength</th>
<th>Baseline/Adequate</th>
<th>Mild Problem</th>
<th>Moderate Problem</th>
<th>Serious Problem</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Intake (I)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>+1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Closure (C)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>+1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### What about inter-rater reliability?

The NCFAS is not dependent on inter-rater reliability. It is dependent on *intra*-rater reliability, meaning the consistency in rating a family by an individual worker using the scale definitions. Reliability is based on the same worker conducting the opening and closure ratings.

### How does the tool benefit the worker who uses it?

After assigning the intake domain ratings, the worker enters them on a case summary/plan form. The lowest ratings are prioritized and addressed by setting goals and identifying needed services. Family strengths identified in the assessment are employed to help the family learn new ways of working together successfully. Many workers use the domain ratings and goals as the basis for the case plan and 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 the agency?
In addition to assisting the worker in planning and making decisions, the tool is also designed to serve as a data collection instrument. A CD database is provided with the tool and workers can enter domain ratings for each family as well as obtain reports on the number and percent of families at each domain. The worker’s agency (or referring agency) can import the data into a spreadsheet such as Excel in order to obtain aggregate data on families. This data may include:

- The number and percent of families at or above baseline at intake/closing.
- The number and percent of families with negative change or moderate/serious problems remaining at case closure.

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 go over ratings with workers and ensure that the tool is being used effectively.

Where do I obtain more information about the NCFAS and related tools?
The National Family Preservation Network is the sole distributor of the NCFAS family of tools, license for use, and training packages. Please visit the Web site at www.nfpn.org.

Attachment: NCFAS-G+R Domains and Sample Subscales
## NCFAS-G+R Domains and Sample Subscales

### A. Environment
7 subscales

**Sample subscales:**
- Housing Stability
- Safety in the Community

### B. Parental Capabilities
8 subscales

**Sample Subscales:**
- Supervision of Child(ren)
- Disciplinary Practices

### C. Family Interactions
8 subscales

**Sample Subscales:**
- Bonding with Child(ren)
- Communication with Child(ren)

### D. Family Safety
8 subscales

**Sample Subscales:**
- Absence/Presence of Domestic Violence Between Parents/Caregivers
- Absence/Presence of Other Family Conflict

### E. Child Well-Being
7 subscales

**Sample Subscales:**
- Child(ren)’s Behavior
- School Performance

### F. Social/Community Life
6 subscales

**Sample Subscales:**
- Social Relationships
- Relationships with Child Care, Schools, and Extracurricular Services

### G. Self-Sufficiency
6 subscales

**Sample Subscales:**
- Caregiver Employment
- Family Income

### H. Family Health
8 subscales

**Sample Subscales:**
- Parent(s)/Caregiver(s)’s Physical Health
- Parent(s)/Caregiver(s)’s Disability

### I. Caregiver/Child Ambivalence
6 subscales

**Sample Subscales:**
- Parent/Caregiver Ambivalence Towards Child
- Child Ambivalence Towards Parent/Caregiver

### J. Readiness for Reunification
6 subscales

**Sample Subscales:**
- Resolution of Significant CPS Risk Factors
- Completion of Case Service Plans