

# Understanding Vulnerability and Incidents

## INTRODUCTION:

This note serves to help bridge the gap between the [Child Protection Data Categorisation Guidance](#), which informed the development of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the global [Child Protection Case Management Forms](#).

Colleagues working in country operations who have been utilising the updated forms have asked what the distinctions between vulnerability and incident are, and why they now appear in separate columns rather than a long list (mainly in form 1B – Rapid Registration and Assessment). This guidance has been developed to answer this query to help colleagues explain to case workers why this is and what it means.

### 1. Risk

The equation **Risk = Vulnerability x Safety Threat (Incident)** is a fundamental concept in child protection case management, explaining how threats intensify existing vulnerabilities and expose children to risks that impact their well-being.

**Risk is determined by two key components: safety threats and vulnerability.**



A **safety threat** arises from an incident that exposes a child to violence, exploitation, abuse, or neglect and is influenced by factors such as location, frequency, continuity, and the presence of perpetrators.



**Vulnerability**, on the other hand, stems from child-specific characteristics and environmental factors, including household and care arrangements, that increase a child's exposure to risk.



**IMPORTANT:** Some vulnerabilities alone will trigger child protection case management (even without an incident reported), for example, if a child is unaccompanied and has no care. All incidents will require case management.

### Example:

- **Vulnerability:** A 14-year-old girl, unaccompanied, with no access to education, living in an informal settlement.
- **Incident:** She is sexually assaulted by an employer while working.
- **Risk:** High, because her vulnerabilities (age, unaccompanied status, informal living/working conditions) increase exposure to threats and reduce protective factors.

## 2. Vulnerability

### Definition

Vulnerability refers to **child-specific characteristics** and **environmental or care-related factors** that increase the likelihood of harm or exposure to safety threats.

### Purpose in Case Management

- Identifies factors that may **heighten risk** or **reduce protection capacity**.
- Helps profile children's needs and potential risks, even **before** a harmful event occurs.
- *May* trigger case management services.

We say **MAY** because some characteristics alone may trigger case management, this may for example result from an inadequate care arrangement, or in the case of a child who is marked as being married.

**For example:** Not all care arrangements alone will require case management services, for example a separated child who is well taken care of by a relative might not be prioritised for case management. Conversely, an unaccompanied child without any parental care will require immediate action through case management and subsequent care placement. At the same time a separated child who is well cared for may not enter case management because of their care arrangement, but rather because they are the victim of an incident.

Situation	Type	Triggers Case Management?	Why / Guidance
A child who as not adult caregiver (unaccompanied child)	Vulnerability	✓ Yes	The child has no responsible adult; this is a vulnerability — requires case management.
A child who is living with a caring family member (separated child)	Vulnerability	✗ No (monitor only)	The child has stable care and safety, there is limited risk, — can be monitored through community networks.
A child with disability who receives consistent family support	Vulnerability	✗ No (monitor or refer to specialised services)	The child is cared for by family — case management not required unless an incident or change in childcare for example, occurs.
A child with disability is abandoned or neglected by family	Vulnerability and Incident	✓ Yes	The child is neglected, this a threat — requires case management.
An unaccompanied adolescent in an informal shelter is exposed to sexual violence	Vulnerability and Incident	✓ Yes	The child has no responsible adult, this is a vulnerability, and is exposed to violence, this is a threat — requires case management.
A child who is care for by their family is exposed to physical violence in her community	Incident	✓ Yes	The child is cared for by family but is exposed to violence this is a threat — requires case management.

## Main Categories of Vulnerabilities

- Child Characteristics**
  - Age, gender, nationality, displacement status, disability, education status, justice system contact, pregnancy, etc.
- Household Characteristics**
  - Family composition, living conditions, socio-economic status, and support networks.
- Care Arrangements**
  - Who is responsible for the child's care (parents, kinship care, foster care, child-headed household, no care arrangement, etc.).

## Key Points

- Vulnerabilities **do not automatically equal harm** but **increase exposure to risk**.
- They are often **internal barriers** to protection.
- They may exist **independently of incidents**.
- Addressing vulnerabilities can **prevent or mitigate risks**.

## 3. Incident

### Definition

An incident refers to a **specific event** or situation in which a child is **exposed to violence, exploitation, abuse, or neglect**.

### Purpose in Case Management

- Triggers protection actions and access/referral to services.
- It is used to **document and respond** to harmful events experienced by the child.
- A child may experience **multiple incidents** over time.

### Key Attributes of Incidents

- **Type of incident** (e.g., neglect, psychological abuse, physical violence, sexual violence, exploitation, deprivation of liberty, recruitment/use by armed groups and forces<sup>1</sup>).
- **Location** (home, school, camp, workplace, detention, digital spaces, etc.)
- **Frequency** (one-time or repeated).
- **Perpetrator** (known or unknown, including caregivers, peers, employers, armed groups, etc.).

### Key Points

- Incidents are the **initial reason for case management**.
- Multiple children can experience the same event, but each child's **incident is recorded individually**.
- Incidents are **events**, not characteristics.

**Whilst not all vulnerabilities may trigger case management, any incident would.**

## 4. Forms

### NOTE!!!!

In the [Child Protection Case Management Forms](#), both incidents and vulnerabilities are documented in the RISKS section. Whilst several data points on the child's vulnerabilities may also be documented in other parts of the forms, key child protection vulnerabilities, which often trigger case management, are listed here to ensure we are collecting quantitative data on them.

These have been split into *different columns* to allow us to better collect data which allows us to better inform program planning and review including the needs for relevant services. A column has been

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<sup>1</sup> The recruitment and use in armed groups and forces is here to ensure that this incident triggers child protection case management along-side related monitoring and reporting mechanism work.

included also to document clearly the relationship with the justice system, as this is something that was flagged for several children to be key (for example detention of migrant and asylum-seeking children).

## Child Protection Case Management Form 1B:

### 1. CHILD PROTECTION RISKS

Briefly describe the child's situation and document additional observations which can support risk assessment? (this can include care arrangements, health,)

**\*If this is a case of rape or sexual assault, make sure to address urgent needs that require an immediate response and check in with your supervisor for support**

**Child protection risks identified** (select all that apply) - **please avoid editing drop down, avoid adding any category which may be similar or part of these dropdown categories**

Incidents	Vulnerabilities	Status in relation to the justice system
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physical violence or abuse against a child</li> <li>Psychological violence or abuse against a child</li> <li>Sexual violence or abuse against a child *</li> <li>Neglect of the child</li> <li>Exploitation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Economic exploitation</li> <li>Harmful or hazardous labour</li> <li>Sexual exploitation</li> </ul> </li> <li>Child in conflict with the law or detained</li> <li>Recruitment and use by armed forces and groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unaccompanied Child</li> <li>Separated Child</li> <li>Child marriage</li> <li>Psychological distress (moderate to severe)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No contact with the justice system</li> <li>Child in contact with the justice system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The child is victim of an offence</li> <li>The child is witness of an offence</li> <li>The child is in conflict with the law</li> </ul> </li> <li>Child detained</li> </ul>

**NOTE:** you may not see all the vulnerabilities, incidents that you would expect, please refer to the definitions in the Guidance note as you will see some have been grouped.

**Please refer to the following documents for additional information:**

- [2nd edition](#), at page section 2.1.1.D ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA, RISK AND PRIORITISATION, pages 36-40, and SECTION 3.4, pages 85-87.
- [Inter-agency Child Protection Data Categorisation Guidance](#) in its entirety.