

Guidance on the Virginia Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) “30 day” Timeframe

Many of the items on the CANS are rated using the previous 30 days as the timeframe for assessment. For these items, assessors must be careful not to focus on just the prior 30 day time period and ensure they are following the below key principles of the CANS to create an accurate assessment. The focus is always on the child and family, not on the services or the system. Please especially note #4 and #6.

Key Principles of the CANS

1. Items were selected because they are each relevant to service/treatment planning. An item exists because it may lead you down a different pathway in terms of planning actions.

2. Each item uses a 4 (“0-3”) level rating system. The levels are designed to translate immediately into action levels. Different action levels exist for needs and strengths.

3. Before establishing the action levels, cultural and developmental factors must be considered.

For example, a three year old who has anger control issues is developmentally appropriate; a fifteen year old throwing a temper tantrum is not displaying appropriate developmental behavior.

4. Ratings should describe the child, not the child in services. If an intervention is present that is masking a need, but must stay in place, that is factored into the rating and would result in the rating of an “actionable” item need. (i.e., a “2” or “3”)

Example: a child is doing well while taking a psychotropic medication. The medication is needed to help the child maintain the current level of successful functioning. The medication is “masking” the need the child has. If it is taken away, the need emerges.

5. The ratings are generally “agnostic as to etiology”. In other words, this is a descriptive tool. It is about the “what” not the “why”. CANS describes what is happening with the child and family, but does not seek to assign a cause for a behavior or situation. Only two items, Adjustment to Trauma and Social Behavior, have any cause-effect judgments.

Note: This aspect of the CANS assists in working with families. Stigma comes with the “why” not the “what.” Families describe what has happened without feeling judged and then develop their own hypotheses as to the causes.

6. A 30 day window is used for ratings in order to make sure assessments stay “fresh” and relevant to the child or youth’s present circumstances. However, the action levels can be used to override the thirty day rating period.

The following examples illustrate the importance of capturing a true picture of the child's needs although they are currently "masked" by services in place. The 30-day window is a factor in the decision regarding the rating, but not the sole determinant.

Example

Andrew, who is diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder and attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, is being stepped down from a residential treatment facility to a group home. His behavior has improved markedly in the six months he has been in the residential program, particular in the last month or two. His foster care worker when completing the CANS considers only the last thirty days. Andrew has demonstrated only a few and minor aggressive behaviors or impulsive outbursts during that time. The worker consequently rates the child as a "1" on the Impulse/Hyperactivity and Oppositional items. Is this accurate? No.

Why?

There are two reasons why this rating is inaccurate. First, refer to #4 of the Key Principles. The child has been in a structured treatment problem which is currently meeting the needs of the child in these areas. The needs still exist. Remember you are rating the child, not the child in services. The assessor must consider the child's behavior and situation prior to placement as well as his behavior in the past 30 days. What would the child's behavior likely be if the current structural supports and behavioral interventions were removed?

Secondly, the 0-3 ratings are "action" items; not simply a scale indicating a level of severity of behavior. Rating a "0" is incorrect because there is a known need. A "1" is inappropriate because this is not "watchful waiting/prevention" to see if an area needs to be addressed. Interventions are already in place. This child should be rated a "2" or possibly even a "3" based on the particular individual circumstances.

Example

Jessica is a teen-ager who has run multiple times over the last two years, usually back to her family's old neighborhood. The court places her in secure detention for a month for delinquent acts. Because Jessica has not run away in the last 30 days, should the probation officer assume there is no need on this item at the time she leaves detention?

No. This child would be at a high risk for running based on her history. She has simply been unable to act on this need or demonstrate the behavior when in detention. The probation officer must consider her previous behavior and factor in the likelihood that the need and behavior still exist.

Professional judgment and common sense should always factor into rating the CANS.

Action Levels for Need Items-Scoring

The description of the Action levels may be found in the CANS Comprehensive and Reassessment Versions (Ages 5-17) Users' Guide and the "Virginia Glossary of Items" on both the CSA website www.csa.virginia.gov (CANS folder) or on the Communimetrics website www.communimetrics.com/VirginiaCSA/Default.aspx under "Resources."

"0" No Evidence-This rating indicates there is no need to believe that a particular need exists. It does not state that the need categorically does not exist; it merely indicates that based on current assessment information there is no reason to address this need.

For example-Does Johnny smoke weed? He says he doesn't; his mother says he doesn't; no one else has expressed any concern. Does this mean that Johnny is not smoking weed? NO, but we have no reason to believe that he does AND we would certainly not refer him to a program for substance abuse problems... where he will meet other youth who do smoke weed.

"1" Watchful Waiting/Prevention-This level of rating indicates that you need to keep an eye on this area or think about putting in place some preventive actions to make sure things do not get worse.

For example: A child has been suicidal in the past. We know that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, and that such behavior may recur under stress, so you would want to keep an eye on it from a preventive point of view.

"2" Action Needed-This level of rating implies that something must be done to address the identified need. The need is sufficiently problematic that it is interfering in the child or family's life in a notable way.

"3" Immediate/Intensive Action Needed-This level indicates a need that requires immediate or intensive effort to address. Dangerous or disabling levels of needs are rated with this level. A child who is not attending school at all or an acutely suicidal youth would be rated a "3" on the relevant need.

For questions, contact the Virginia Office of Comprehensive Services at (804) 662-9815.

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