



Practice Guidelines

Assessing Safety in Families Experiencing Domestic Violence

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Talk to children in a neutral and safe setting.

- Develop rapport with the child before asking about violence in the home. For instance, ask about their favorite subject in school, what they do for fun, or what they like to eat.
- When asking the child about DV, start with general statements that explain to the child that all parents have disagreements or arguments.
- Validate **the child's** feelings about the violence he/she has witnessed and assure the child that it is not his/her fault.
- Ask children about their current and past pets. How the pets were cared for can provide insight into family functioning.
- During the interview, ask questions to help determine what happens during a DV episode to help them stay safe.
- Ask developmentally appropriate questions.

Sources: *Safe and Together Model*: endingviolence.com; *Child Protection in Families Experiencing Domestic Violence*[2003] Children's Bureau, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect; *Tips for Supporting Children and Youth Exposed to Domestic Violence: What You Might See and What You Can Do*. National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health

Adult victims often have protective capacity to provide safety and stability for their children.

Domestic violence can pose dangers to both the children and the adult victim. However, many adult victims are protective of their children and can be supported to **ensure the children's safety** and prevent removal to out-of-home care. Examples of behaviors that demonstrate protective capacity include, but are not limited to:

- The adult victim has been consistent in sending the children to a safe place when violence erupts.
- The adult victim has a history of calling law enforcement, filing orders of protection, or leaving the home to protect him/herself and the children.
- The adult victim provides the children stability by maintaining routines, involving them in extracurricular activities, and having consistent household rules and discipline.
- The adult victim assures the children that the violence is not their fault, and allows them to express their feelings.
- The adult victim has actively sought formal or informal supports to **address the children's needs**.

During the safety assessment, look for attitudes and beliefs that are common among perpetrators of domestic violence.

- There is a pattern of control over the adult victim demonstrated by verbal abuse, isolation, domination, and retaliation.
- The perpetrator feels entitled and focuses on family life meeting his/her personal needs.
- The perpetrator is often self-centered and may have exaggerated views of his/her own importance.
- The perpetrator believes he/she is superior to the adult victim and treats the victim with harsh criticism, humiliation, and punishment.
- The adult victim is seen as a possession and violence may escalate if the victim tries to leave the relationship.
- The perpetrator justifies abuse as a sign of love and is kind and generous during or shortly after an abusive episode.

Perpetrators of domestic violence may also demonstrate protective capacities to be encouraged and strengthened.

- The perpetrator is able to provide a safe environment for the child. For instance, violence does not occur when the children are in the home.
- The perpetrator can identify the impact of the abusive behavior on the children, such as acknowledging that a child's withdrawn demeanor may be due to fear or anxiety as a result of violence in the home.
- The perpetrator demonstrates the ability to meet the needs of the children over personal needs, such as cancelling plans with friends to stay home with an ill child.
- The perpetrator is supportive of the children's relationship with the other parent. For instance, by not undermining the other parent's authority and not interfering with individual quality time between the child and the other parent.

Interview adult victims alone.

- Arrange a meeting when the alleged perpetrator is not at home, at a neutral location, or a location the victim identifies.
- Acknowledge their reluctance to engage because they fear loss of their child or further violence.
- Build rapport by acknowledging their feelings, express an understanding that the domestic abuse is not their fault, and demonstrate concern for their safety and well-being.
- Communicate to the victim the threats to child safety that must be addressed. Work together to create a plan that will keep the child safe. If the child cannot be safe in the home, work with the victim to determine a safe place for the child to go or a place for the child and victim to go together.

Focus on behaviors.

Consider that some abusive persons will be cooperative and charming during the interview. Don't rely solely on these impressions. Make sure to also:

- Consider police, doctor or hospital records that corroborate the allegations.
- Focus on behaviors and the degree to which the person takes responsibility for his/her actions.
- Remain respectful and non-confrontational. Ask for his/her perspective on events.

Domestic violence occurs in all socio-economic classes, races, and cultures. Sometimes, cultural factors can create additional barriers to achieving safety for the adult victim and children.

- The adult victim may have cultural or religious values regarding family relationships and marriage that make it difficult to leave the perpetrator or separate the children from their parent.
- Do not assume an adult victim of domestic violence is unwilling to protect the child because he/she failed to call law enforcement or apply for social supports from government agencies. Factors such as a fear of the criminal legal system or deportation may influence their decisions.

Children exposed to domestic violence can be supported by the Child Safety Specialist in many ways.

- Provide reassurance to young children when they are fearful.
- Listen to school-aged children and answer questions truthfully and simply.
- Assure school-aged children that everyone is working together to keep the family safe.
- Help school-aged children to name their feelings and find ways to express them through play, drawing, and talking.
- Give adolescents the opportunity to talk about their concerns and receive honest answers to their questions.
- Recognize that even independent teens need extra support following a traumatic event.
- Be supportive but answer carefully, in a way that does not interfere with any criminal investigation or endanger the adult victim or the child.

Domestic violence cases can present a risk to Child Safety Specialists. To enhance personal safety:

- Interview the alleged perpetrator in a public place or the office. If this is not possible, ask a co-worker, supervisor, or police officer to be present.
- Be aware of the surroundings when leaving an interview or office. Park in a safe place.
- Notify co-workers when a potentially dangerous person is coming to the office and ask for the building security to be nearby, if possible.
- If working in the field with a potentially violent person, notify coworkers or a supervisor of where you are going and when you are expected back.
- Make sure there is access to an exit when interviewing the person.
- Avoid debates and confrontations with the person.
- Use techniques to de-escalate an angry person. Listen, acknowledge their concerns, express empathy for their situation, remain calm, and do not engage in arguments. If concerned for your safety, quickly end the interview and leave.

Resources for assessment and family support

- Use questions from the *Family Centered Strengths and Risk Assessment Interview and Documentation Guide* in the DCS Policy Manual to assess the presence of domestic violence in a family.
- Learn about the local DV program, or partner with an advocate in the community to which you can refer adult victims.
- Arizona Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence: www.acesdv.org
- National 24 hour Domestic Violence Hotline 800-799-7233
- Maricopa County Domestic Violence Line (For shelter information and other resources) 480-890-3039.
- National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: www.ncadv.org
- Address Confidentiality Program: <https://www.azsos.gov/services/acp>
Enacted to provide a confidential address for victims of domestic violence; refer to Chapter 3, Section 4 in the Policy Manual for specific details.