



April 07, 2025

Talk to Children and Youth in a Neutral and Safe Setting

- Develop rapport with the child(ren) before asking about violence in the home. For instance, ask about their favorite school subject, what they do for fun, or what they like to eat.
- Ask developmentally appropriate questions to gather information about whether domestic violence is occurring in the home. The questions should be more general to begin with, becoming more specific as you gather detailed information about possible domestic violence within the family. Here are some examples of general questions:
 - ▶ What makes you mad/sad in your family?
 - ▶ Who helps you when you are scared?
 - ▶ What helps you feel safe at home?
 - ▶ Which of your parents makes decisions; takes you to school; takes you to the doctor?
 - ▶ Does anyone in your house hit each other?
 - ▶ What does it look like when your mom and dad don't get along or argue? Do they fight with words, fists, or objects?
 - ▶ Are you afraid of anyone in the home?
- Ask children about their current and past pets. How the pets are currently treated or have been treated in the past can provide insight into family dynamics.
- Ask whether the children have attempted to intervene when the parent that causes harm directs violence toward the non-offending parent.

Assessing Safety in Families Experiencing Domestic Violence

Many parents experiencing domestic violence have the ability to provide safety and stability for their children.

Domestic violence can pose dangers to children and the non-offending parent. However, many non-offending parents are protective of their children and can be supported to ensure the children's safety and prevent removal to out-of-home care. It is important to consider both parents' protective capacities, actions, and strengths. Most non-offending parents have plans for their safety and the safety of their children (Children's Bureau). Examples of behaviors that demonstrate protective capacity include, but are not limited to:

- The non-offending parent sends the children to a safe place when violence erupts.
- The non-offending parent establishes protective measures for themselves and their children.
- The non-offending parent provides the children stability by maintaining household routines.
- The non-offending parent assures the children that the violence is not their fault and supports them in expressing their feelings.

During the safety assessment, look and listen for beliefs and behaviors that are common among people who cause harm.

- There is a pattern of control over the non-offending parent demonstrated by such actions as verbal abuse, isolation, domination, retaliation, and financial control.
- The parent who harms engages in excessive monitoring of the location, e-mail, internet use, and text messages of the non-offending parent.
- The parent who harms is the sole decision maker, speaks for the other parent, or there are nonverbal cues to the non-offending parent to limit their communication.
- The parent who harms may accept or justify violence or aggression in the household.
- The parent who harms feels entitled and focuses on family life to meet their personal needs.
- The parent causing harm is often self-centered and may have exaggerated views of their own importance.
- Some parents who harm will be cooperative and charming during the interview. Don't rely solely on these impressions.
- Focus on behaviors and the degree to which the person takes responsibility for their actions.
- The parent causing harm believes they are superior to the non-offending parent and treats the non-offending parent with harsh criticism, humiliation, and punishment.
- The person who harms will usually deny responsibility of abuse and will often blame the non-offending parent.
- The non-offending parent is seen as a possession and violence may escalate if the non-offending parent tries to leave the relationship.
- The parent causing harm justifies violence as a sign of love. He or she may present as kind and generous during or shortly after a violent episode.

- Ask what happens during and after the parent that causes harm uses abusive behaviors (verbal or physical abuse).
- Ask the children how they feel about the parent who causes harm using abusive behaviors.
- Ask what the children do to take care of themselves and/or their siblings.
- Ask what the children do to try and feel safe when their parents argue or fight.
- Ask the children whom they can talk to about the abuse or violence they have experienced.
- Validate the child's feelings about the violence they have witnessed and assure the child that it is not their fault.

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; Colorado Department of Human Services (2013)

The person who causes harm can also have protective capacities to be encouraged and strengthened.

Gather information to observe whether any of the following are occurring:

- The parent who causes harm is able to provide a safe environment for the child. For instance, the parent acts thoughtfully, avoids impulsive responses that could lead to harm, and thinks before they take action when the children are in the home. The parent who harms 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 abuse in the home.
- The parent who harms 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 parent who causes harm spends quality time and resources to parenting the children.
- The parent who harms 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.

Domestic violence occurs in all socioeconomic levels, races, and cultures.

Gather information to assess how the family's status, race or culture might influence family dynamics and parental behaviors.

- Non-offending parents may have cultural or religious values regarding family relationships and marriage that make it difficult to leave the parent causing harm or to separate the children from their parent.
- Non-offending parents might be reluctant to involve law enforcement or community support if they fear their culture or background is not understood, or they fear this will bring shame or harm to their community or family.
- Factors such as a fear of the criminal legal system, deportation, or loss of community support may influence a parent's decisions. For example, the non-offending parent might be reliant on the offending parent for immigration status.
- Don't make an assumption based on the community and financial status about whether domestic violence is occurring, or that the non-offending parent has access to resources.

Specialists should account for cultural factors that create unique obstacles faced by non-offending parents who are of minority, ethnic, racial, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or immigration status.

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

- Be supportive but discuss the matter carefully, in a way that does not interfere with any criminal investigation or endanger the non-offending parent or the child.
- Do not provide more information to a child than necessary as to not increase trauma.
- Try not to villainize one parent over the other. Acknowledge that the child may have an allegiance to the perpetrator, despite the abusive behavior, which may make it difficult for them to talk about what happened.
- Be aware and prepared for the children to take responsibility for the abuse.
- 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 seemingly independent teens may need extra support following a traumatic event.
- Assess each child independently, including level of vulnerability and severity of harm.

Resources for assessment and family support

Interview non-offending parents alone.

- Arrange a meeting when the alleged parent causing harm is not at home, at a neutral location, or a location the non-offending parent identifies.
 - The goal of interviewing a non-offending parent is to learn, from their perspective, such information as:
 - ▶ The history of the relationship with their partner.
 - ▶ What types of coercive, controlling, and abusive behaviors the parent who harms uses.
 - ▶ The impact of the parent who harm's abusive behavior on the children.
 - ▶ How the family responds to the abuse and their survival and coping strategies.
 - ▶ The range of actions taken by the non-offending parent to protect and care for the children.
 - ▶ What the non-offending parent needs to be safe and protect the children.
 - Validate any fears they may have about DCS involvement. Build rapport by acknowledging their feelings and demonstrate concern for their safety and well-being. Maintain a strength-based focus.
 - Communicate to the non-offending parent that the person who harms is accountable for their behavior of harming.
 - Work together to create a plan that will keep the child safe. If the child cannot be safe in the home, work with the non-offending parent to determine a safe place for the child to go or a place for the child and non-offending parent to go together.
 - Make sure to also consider police, doctor, or hospital records that corroborate the statements made by the non-offending parent.
- Learn about the local DV program, or partner with an advocate in the community to which you can refer non-offending parents.
 - Arizona Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence: www.acesdv.org
 - Arizona Sexual and Domestic Violence Helpline: (602) 279-2980
 - National 24-hour Domestic Violence Hotline: (800) 799-7233
 - Maricopa County Domestic Violence Hotline (For shelter information and other resources): (480) 890-3039 or (844) 723-3387
 - National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: www.ncadv.org
 - Prevent IPV tools for social change- BLOOM365: 1-888-606-4673 (HOPE)
 - One N Ten: (602) 279-0894; <https://oneten.org/>
 - National Teen Dating Abuse Hotline, Textline, and Chatline: (866) 331-9474; TTY (866) 331-8453; Text LOVE IS to 22522
 - 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: Contact with Children, Parents and Out of Home Caregivers](#) in the Policy Manual for specific details.