



If domestic violence (DV) has not already been identified, the following questions should be used at these points in the family's involvement with child welfare:

1. As part of the initial safety assessment by a child protection (CPS) investigator or Family Assessment Response (FAR) worker.
2. As part of the assessment of the initial risk and family functioning by CPS/FAR and other child welfare caseworkers.
3. When any "red flags" are observed that lead you to suspect DV, such as:
  - An individual who has been cooperative and open becomes uncooperative for no apparent reason
  - One partner constantly defers to the other in interviews
  - Unexplained injuries to an adult
  - Holes in walls, broken furniture; etc.
4. When there is a change in the composition of the family living in the home (e.g., the mother's boyfriend moves in).
5. Prior to scheduling a Family Meeting.
6. Prior to contacting a father or other family member who has not been a regular part of the child(ren)'s life.
7. Prior to notifying a grandparent or another relative that a child is being removed from the care of his or her parent(s), in order to determine whether the relative is a suitable resource for the child as an alternative to foster care.
8. At regular intervals throughout the period of the family's involvement with the child welfare agency.

Asking questions in a non-judgmental way at these key junctures gives family members multiple opportunities to talk about domestic violence in their family as they develop trust with their worker, even if they have chosen **not** to disclose it in the past.

## Questions for Adults:

**Parents/caretakers should always be asked *privately* about domestic violence** – never with their partners present. Ask open-ended, non-judgmental questions. Introduce the issue with a neutral statement, such as:

*“I’d like to ask you a few questions about the relationships in your family. We ask these questions of all parents and caretakers to understand how we can best serve families. We know that our being involved with your family can create additional stress and may make things more stressful for you or your child(ren). If you’re concerned about your partner’s response to us being involved, I’ll make every effort not to share what you say with your partner or other family members. I’ll use information from other sources, such as police reports, criminal records, neighbors, service providers, schools, and doctors to talk to your partner, if possible. If, down the road, it becomes necessary to share what you have told us with your partner, I will let you know in advance and we can talk about ways to try to keep you safe.”*

When talking to individuals who are not the primary caretakers/parents of the child (e.g., extended family members or neighbors), ask them the same basic questions about the relationship between the adults involved in the child welfare case (e.g., “Do you ever see or worry about these dynamics in your son’s relationship with the mother of his children?”).

### Basic Questions

1. What do arguments or fights look like between you and your partner?
2. In some relationships, people are extremely jealous or controlling. They might, for example, accuse their partners of cheating; prevent them from going to work, school, church or other places; cut them off from friends or family; constantly call or text them to check up on them; etc. Does anything like this happen in your relationship? If yes, please explain.
3. Sometimes people in a relationship make their partners feel afraid or scared. They might, for example, intimidate them, break or throw out their possessions, threaten to hurt them or someone they care about, hurt their pets, or physically attack them. Does anything like this happen in your relationship? If yes, please explain.
4. In some relationships, people try to make their partners feel bad about themselves or put them down a lot. They might, for example, call their partners names, constantly criticize them, tell them they’re stupid, or make them feel like problems are all their fault. Does anything like this happen in your relationship? If yes, please explain.
5. Has there ever been physical fighting – hitting, pushing, shoving, biting, pinching, punching, etc. – in your relationship? If yes, please describe.
  - Who was hurt during the fighting? Who did the hurting?
  - If both partners hurt each other, who was hurt the most?

- Have there ever been marks, cuts, bruises, or more serious injuries? If yes, describe.
  - Has anyone ever needed medical care as a result of the fighting? If yes, describe.
  - Have things in the house been thrown or broken during the fighting?
6. In some relationships, people coerce or force their partners to have sex or to do something sexual that they don't want to do. Does anything like that happen in your relationship?
  7. Have you or your partner ever threatened to kill the other person? Have either of you ever threatened to commit suicide?

**If responses to 1-7 indicate further questions are warranted, continue as appropriate\* :**

*Ask adults about impact on the child(ren)*

1. Did your child(ren) ever see any of the fighting?
2. Did the children hear the fighting? How much of the fighting do you think they heard? Do you think they just heard yelling or could hear what was being said?
3. Did your children find out about the fighting afterward? How did they react? How do you think your children have been affected by this?
4. Has your child(ren) ever been hurt, including accidentally, during a fight? If yes, describe. Has the child(ren) ever tried to stop or come between you during the fighting?
5. Has your partner ever threatened to hurt, kill, or take the child(ren) away?
6. Is your partner the father\*\* of some or all of your children? If he isn't the father of all the children, how does this impact on his relationship with them?
7. Is your child(ren) anxious or fearful of leaving you? Does the child(ren) find it difficult not being near you? Does the child(ren) sometimes want to stay home from school or not go out and play in order to be with you?

**PRACTICE TIP:** Remember that the non-offending parent is the expert on the situation. She is often your best source of information, and is more likely to trust you if you approach her with respect and without judgment.

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\* Refer to "Helpful Things to Say to or Ask a Non-offending Parent" and "Helpful Things to Say to or Ask a DV Offender" for additional suggestions on how to explore domestic violence issues or talk with adults about where domestic violence has already been identified.

\*\* The use of gendered pronouns in this document reflects the reality that women are most often the victims of domestic violence, and men are most often the perpetrators of domestic violence. However, domestic violence occurs in gay and lesbian relationships and can be equally dangerous in a same-sex relationship as in a heterosexual relationship. Less frequently, a woman may be violent and abusive with a male partner. Change pronouns as needed.

8. Has your partner undermined or interfered with your parenting? Has he encouraged the child(ren) to treat you disrespectfully or ignore what you say? Has he encouraged the child(ren) to call you names or to laugh at you?
9. Has your child(ren) had any physical, emotional, behavioral problems at home, school, or day care? Describe.

*Ask the non-offending parent (NOP) about help-seeking and supportive resources*

1. What has worked in the past to help you and your child(ren) feel safe?
2. Where have you looked for help? (*family, friends, police, social worker, court, clergy.*) How have these individuals been helpful to you and your child(ren)? Could they be part of a plan to help you feel safe now?
3. What else have you done to try to be safe and keep your child(ren) safe? Examples include:
  - Left temporarily or moved out of the home
  - Stayed home all the time
  - Quit a job
  - Went to counseling
  - Complied with the abusive partner's wishes
  - Talked to or tried to reason with the abusive partner
  - Asked someone else to talk to him
  - Avoided talking to friends or family about the situation
  - Changed behavior, appearance or interaction with friends
  - Made a plan with my child(ren) for what to do if an incident occurred, such as going to another room, into a closet, or to a neighbor's house.
  - Told the child(ren) the domestic violence wasn't his or her fault
  - Pressed charges or obtained an order of protection
  - Filed for divorce
  - Went into a shelter
  - Filed for custody
  - Sent the child(ren) to stay with a relative for a period of time

**PRACTICE TIP:** Remember that an abused person may be working to stay safe by **not** taking action that she thinks would escalate the violence or abuse. *This may include talking to or cooperating with a child welfare worker. Another version of this is the non-offending parent "running interference" for the DV offender with the worker.*

*If responses indicate an immediate or impending danger of serious harm to the child(ren) or danger to the NOP:*

1. Put a child welfare safety plan with controlling interventions into place:
  - Explore with the NOP **all** options to create safety, and work in partnership to agree on a plan. Try to get the endangered adult and child(ren) connected to a local DV program or DV services immediately.
  - Ask, “Are you and your child(ren) safe tonight? Tomorrow? For the next few days?” **Contact your local DV program or hotline for assistance with DV safety planning.** If necessary, brainstorm alternative sleeping arrangements with a friend or relative the DV offender doesn’t know, the emergency shelter system, and, if no other safe alternative can be found, provide financial assistance for a hotel stay.
  - If the relationship has ended, inquire about threats or stalking behavior and make sure the DV safety plan addresses this situation. The most dangerous time in an abusive relationship may be after the relationship has ended.
2. If there is immediate or impending danger of serious harm to the child(ren), and no safety plan can be put into place with the NOP, consult with a supervisor to explore safe placement options.
3. If, as a last resort, the child(ren) must be removed from the NOP’s care, conduct safety planning with her for her own safety. Removal of the child(ren) can increase danger to her.
4. Reinforce critical messages for NOP: it’s not your fault, you did the right thing by seeking help, your safety and that of your child(ren) is our primary concern, we will do everything we can to keep your family safe and together, help is available.

*If responses indicate DV, but there is no immediate or impending danger of serious harm to the child(ren):*

1. Provide information about domestic violence services and discuss referrals for services.
2. Reinforce critical messages for NOP: your safety and that of your child(ren) is our primary concern, we will do everything we can to keep your family safe and together, help is available.
3. Reinforce critical messages for the DV offender: you are important to your family, your behavior is your responsibility, we will support your efforts to change your behavior, the safety of the child(ren) is of primary importance, help is available.
4. Update the DV safety plan as circumstances and interventions change.
5. Continue to meet privately with the NOP to explore the impact of the child welfare intervention on safety.

6. Consult with your supervisor and/or a local DV advocate as needed.

#### CAUTION

- Do **not** refer DV offenders to “anger management” programs, which do not involve reflection on beliefs about relationships. DV offenders often identify NOP behaviors as “triggers” for violence to avoid taking responsibility for their behavior.
- In general, do **not** refer for couples counseling, because this assumes there is some mutuality in the relationship. This referral is appropriate **only** when the therapist is highly skilled at handling DV (i.e., her or she has private contact information to confirm safety, knows the context of violence and controlling behaviors, acknowledges the DV offender’s responsibility, is aware of how the DV offender may invite collusion, etc.).

### Questions for Children and Youth:

Engaging children takes patience and sensitivity. Each child should be interviewed separately and should be approached using developmentally appropriate language. Use simple, clear words; encourage questions; ask for examples; and use a calm, reassuring tone of voice. Pay attention to body language, both yours and the child’s. Meet with the child alone if possible, in a quiet and confidential room. **Do not** question a child with the DV offender present. The child may be offered markers/crayons and paper, play dough, a sand table or other tactile materials to play with to help reduce his or her anxiety level while talking to you. Keep in mind the following:

- **Working with children requires a different set of skills than working with adults.** While some children will be very open about what is happening or has happened at home, others may not trust adults or may be afraid to disclose the abuse. They may worry that they will get their caregivers or themselves in trouble, they will lose their family, or they will put their parents, siblings, or themselves in further danger by telling the truth. These are all legitimate concerns.
- **Create a “safe space” for children to share information.** Interview the child privately, let him or her take the lead in the interview, be patient with the child’s form of storytelling, and allow her or him to share information in an age-appropriate manner. It may take several meetings to establish a connection so the child will begin to talk about her or his experience. If the child cannot tolerate a private interview, include the NOP – but **never** the DV offender.
- **Do not “pepper” the child with questions, and avoid asking leading questions.** Remember that the child is being asked about potentially traumatic events, and proceed with appropriate sensitivity.
- **Children do not think in a linear fashion, like adults.** Children’s stories may be expressed indirectly through storytelling, play-acting, drawing, or other means. It may take longer to get information from them and their stories may not make sense sequentially. Use the Three Houses tool to help get children’s perspectives on both their worries and what they like about their families.

- **Remember that children may not have an accurate understanding of the dynamics between adults.** For example, a child may identify the NOP as the person who “started the fight” because she hit the DV offender, but not be able to articulate the DV offender’s pattern of behaviors that led to that specific incident. When interviewing young children, view their answers and explanations as information that needs to be verified in some other way.
- **Any feelings children have about the domestic violence are appropriate.** Some children believe that telling anyone about the domestic violence is a betrayal of their parent/caregiver. Assure the child that it is OK to talk about what is happening or has happened in her or his home, and whatever feelings he or she is having about the abuse are OK, including anger or protectiveness toward either parent/caregiver.

*Basic Questions (adapt to the child’s developmental level)*

After developing a rapport with the child, say: “I’d like to ask you some questions that we ask of all of the kids. It’s important that you answer me as honestly as you can. I will try to keep whatever you tell me private, if you want me to. The only time I have to share what you tell me with someone else is if you are getting hurt and I have to tell someone who can help you be safe.”

1. All families have arguments and fights sometimes. What happens in your house when the grown-ups argue or fight?
2. Do you ever feel scared when grown-ups/your parents fight? Can you tell me who scares you? Can you tell me what scares you?
3. Do the grownups in your family/house ever yell or scream or say mean things to each other? *(If yes, proceed.)*
  - Can you tell me what kinds of things they yell or say? Remember, it’s OK to say anything here, even words you’re not usually supposed to use.
  - Does anyone ever say they are going to hurt someone? *(If yes, elicit explanation.)*
4. Do the grown-ups in your house ever hurt each other by pushing, hitting or throwing things? Does anyone get hurt in other ways? *(If yes, proceed.)*
  - Who gets hurt? Who does the hurting?
  - Have you seen this happen? Did you hear it? How did you know about it?
  - Can you tell me what happened?

*If the child responds “yes” to 3 or 4, continue:*

1. When these things *(use the child’s words)* happened, what did *(the person being hurt)* do?
2. What did you do? How did you feel? *(Assure the child that all feelings are OK and normal.)*
3. Did *(the person being hurt)* ever get badly hurt? How did she get hurt? Did she go to the doctor or hospital?

4. Did you ever get hurt when the grown-ups were fighting? Did your brothers or sisters get hurt? *(If yes, elicit description.)*
5. What have the grown-ups done to try to keep you safe from the fighting? What have your brothers and sisters done to try to help you feel safe?
6. Do you ever think about or worry about the grown-ups fighting when you are in school, at church, or playing with your friends?
7. Do you ever get stomachaches or headaches, have nightmares, or have trouble sleeping?
8. What do you think will happen if your parent finds out you told me about this? How will *(name each parent/relevant adult)* react? *(Assess level of child's fear of each adult.)*

*If the child has indicated exposure to violence at home:*

- Thank the child for being honest with you. Tell the child that he or she did the right thing by telling you, and that you are going to try to get help for the family so people will stop hurting each other.
- Let the child know that fighting between grown-ups is never a child's fault.
- Don't voice judgments about the adults. Any feelings the child has toward parents/caretakers are normal.
- If the child has disclosed that one parent is abusive and another parent is not, meet with the non-offending parent **before** you meet with the DV offender, and conduct domestic violence safety planning. **Do not** inform the DV offender of the disclosure unless safety planning has been conducted.
- If the child has disclosed violence, ask the child at the end of the interview how she or he is feeling after having this talk. Ask if he or she is very worried about the things you have talked about. If you are concerned that disclosure may have triggered traumatic memories, consult with a supervisor.
- Consult a supervisor when considering next steps. A supervisor or a local domestic violence program should assist with DV safety planning or exploring options for safety. *(See CPS Manual, Chapter 4, Section D, on safety and risk assessment.)*
- Before notifying any parent, caretaker, or family member that DV has been disclosed, consider how this might impact the safety of the child, based on his or her answer to Question 8 in the previous section. Conduct child welfare safety planning as needed. In addition, consider how sharing a disclosure might affect the safety of the NOP and conduct DV safety planning as needed.