

CHILD WELFARE SCREENING of DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19

As families are quarantined as a result of the pandemic, child welfare agencies and many others are concerned about increases in family violence. With shelter-at-home policies in place, it can be challenging or impossible for child welfare staff to have safe, private contact with family members to talk about possible domestic violence (DV) and child abuse. Gathering as much information as possible while screening child abuse reports is more important than ever, both to understand risk and to maximize opportunities for safe contact with any known or suspected survivors of family violence, as well as with people who use violence. When the usual collateral sources of information may not be available, it is helpful to think creatively and engage new partners to gather information and make decisions about whether a report of domestic violence should be screened in

for investigation and what level of response is needed. Following are tips and suggestions for gathering information about strengths and resources available to the family, as well as information about risk and stressors.

- To promote the safety of child welfare workers and the family, ask the reporter questions about the presence of COVID symptoms in family members, whether the family has been following stay-at-home guidelines, and whether and where the family has traveled recently. Pass the information along to anyone who may need to respond to the home in person. (See <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html> for more information.)



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- Screen for domestic violence if it is not a part of the original child abuse report. Examples of questions include:
 - Do you have any concerns about someone physically hurting a child or an adult who lives in the home? Do you have any concerns about someone being controlling or abusive to a child or an adult who lives in the home? Can you provide details about what’s happening?
 - Are you aware of any escalation of these behaviors since the family has been sheltered together due to COVID?
 - Are there any *other* reasons you’re more worried now about family members’ safety or well-being than before they were sheltering in place together?
- If concerns related to DV have been identified, inquire about who lives in the home and their current routines. This will help to identify opportunities for others (an investigator, a family member who may be part of a safety plan, etc.) to have safe contact with adult and child survivors. Questions may include:
 - Is there a time when one of the adults is away from the home (e.g., working, picking up food from a food bank on a regular schedule, dropping kids off with a family member at a specific time, etc.?)
 - Is a teacher or a doctor seeing a child during video calls or other opportunities?
- When concerns about DV exist, consult with a child welfare domestic violence specialist (or other DV resource, as available) as soon as possible to discuss potential responses based on what is known and unknown, as well as important considerations related to screening decisions for families experiencing domestic violence.
- If the family has recently been involved in child welfare, contact the previous worker to see if they have additional information relevant to understanding current risk, family functioning or options for making safe contact.
- To gain additional information related to the screening decision and family safety, consider reaching out to the resources below, as available. If confidentiality is a barrier, engage supervisors and managers in problem-solving around information-sharing with the goal of supporting the safety of adult and child survivors during restrictions related to COVID-19.
- Reach out to local DV programs to ask if they have contact with the adult survivor or could provide additional assistance with the screening decision. Additional assistance could include help with planning for safe contact between the caseworker and the adult survivor, assessing the current level of risk and accessing needed resources for the family, or sharing how to contact supportive family or friends.

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- Explore options for contacting the family's known service providers, and ask about family members' resilience, access to supports, current level of stress, and any recent escalation of stressors. This information can not only help you understand current risk, but also help you identify existing plans (or a need for a plan) to reduce risk by decreasing COVID-related stressors.
- Engage local battering intervention programs (when available) to learn whether they know the person reported to be using violence, and if so, learn more about their pattern of abuse and their strengths.
- Reach out to public health officials to determine whether anyone living in the home has been asked to quarantine for COVID exposure or a positive test.¹
- Collaborate with law enforcement and probation to gather information that may be useful to understanding risk, such as:
 - Past or recent calls to the address for domestic disturbances (whether or not an arrest was made)
 - Outstanding arrest warrants for violence or related charges
 - Criminal history
 - Conditions/restrictions for probation or parole
- Reach out to anyone else who might help you get as clear a picture as possible about both current concerns **and** the family's strengths and resources (local health professionals, educators, coaches, etc.) – to inform decisions about whether a response to the home is needed.

For tips on investigating DV during COVID, see [Tip Sheet 3](#).



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1. See <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/covid-19-hipaa-and-first-responders-508.pdf>.