

CHILD WELFARE INVESTIGATIONS *with* FAMILIES IMPACTED *by* DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19

Restrictions regarding physical distancing and the stress of infection from unknown sources can be unnerving and make children, families, *and* the child welfare workforce feel vulnerable. Investigating suspected child abuse and neglect when there are concerns about domestic violence (DV) requires special attention under normal circumstances. Under the current crisis, more preparation and extra precautions are necessary. The following suggestions can help child welfare first responders promote safety and minimize negative and traumatic impacts on child and adult survivors of DV while completing factfinding and risk assessment.

See Tip Sheet #2 on **Child Welfare Screening of Domestic Violence During COVID-19** at www.DVChildWelfare.org for additional strategies for gathering information to plan a safe investigation, which may not have been completed due to local screening protocols.

PREPARATION

Before responding to the home, gather as much information as possible, and line up all the resources that may be necessary.

Collaborate with domestic violence experts as early as possible

- Connect with a child welfare DV specialist (or other DV resource, as available) as **early** as possible in the investigation. This is especially critical during the pandemic because access to the family may be limited to a single in-person contact, leaving no opportunity for safe follow-up. Together with the DV consultant, sort out what is known and unknown — about current danger or risk; any shelter-in-place-related escalation of danger or risk, or tactics in use to control survivors; acts of protection, etc.
- If a DV specialist is not available in your jurisdiction, ask for help from a program manager or an advocate at your local DV agency. Ask if they have any contact with the



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adult survivor that would help you make a plan for safe contact with that person or with supportive family. A local DV expert may also be able to help you assess the current level of risk and access needed resources for the family.

- If confidentiality is a barrier, engage supervisors and managers in problem-solving around information-sharing with the goal of helping survivors be safe during restrictions related to COVID-19.
- When allowed by local public health restrictions, conduct the investigation home visit in pairs, with a DV specialist if possible, to maximize the opportunity for private contact with each parent. If the risk of harm from DV appears high, consult with a supervisor or manager about whether there can be an exception to any COVID-related limitations on two people conducting a home visit. If danger appears imminent, consider contacting local law enforcement for assistance.

Reach out to other sources of information and assistance

- Consider what other resources are available, and gather as much information as you can to help you assess danger and risk, as well as indicators of acts of protection or strengths of family members. Because repeated private, safe contact with survivors may be difficult during COVID restrictions, it will be helpful to have as complete a picture as possible before

responding to the home. Think critically about the information gathered – how is it relevant to understanding the current situation?

- See Tip Sheet #2 on **Child Welfare Screening of Domestic Violence During COVID-19** at www.DVChildWelfare.org for other possible sources of information.

Gather Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and prepare materials

- See <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/non-covid-19-client-interaction.html> for current guidance on PPE. If possible, take extra PPE to leave with the family.
- Create question cards written clearly and in different languages that can be silently shown to an adult survivor if it is hard to find privacy for an interview. Question cards should include:
 - Are you being physically hurt by your partner?
 - Do you need medical assistance?
 - Does your partner monitor your texts and phone calls?
 - Do you have any time alone? Write down on my pad here when and where we could talk privately.

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- On a scale from 0 – 10, how much danger are you in? 0 = no danger at all. 10 = I fear for my life and need to get out of this house with my kids.
 - Who knows about your situation that I can check in with about your safety? Write their names and numbers on this card. (If meeting via videoconference – “Please text their name and number to me, or please write their name and number in the chat box.”)
 - If you need emergency help after I leave – text or tell me on the phone – “Masks please,” and I’ll contact the police to respond.
 - Take a list of local resources to give to the family — food pantries, sources of help with bills, information about tenants’ rights under COVID, crisis hotlines, telehealth services, etc.
- Plan a strengths-based, stress-reduction approach***
- Consider how an investigation during the pandemic may unintentionally compromise the safety of the children or adult survivor by contributing to or exacerbating the burden or stress the family is already experiencing. **Aim to reduce the potential harm or additional stress that an investigation response might cause.**
 - During physical distancing restrictions, it is likely that all family members will be present during a home visit. It is important to take a strengths-based approach¹ in interactions with all family members, including the person alleged to have used violence. Prepare questions to engage individuals as *parents* who may be experiencing significant stressors due to COVID. If you have any concerns related to talking with the person alleged to be using violence, consult with a DV specialist (or similar resource) and your supervisor to help you prepare for the interaction.
 - Strive to provide the family with concrete resources that meet immediate needs, such as food, gift cards, PPE, and transportation vouchers for essential workers.

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RESPONSE TO THE HOME

Aim to reduce the potential harm to the family that an investigation response might cause, and use COVID-19 safety precautions.²

- Unless screening and response decisions require an unannounced visit, call the family to schedule a home visit, gather initial information about their well-being, and ask about who is living in the home. Inquire whether family members are working and ask about the nature and schedules of their jobs to determine when private contact may be possible. Explore whether their workplace is supportive of their well-being and taking precautions to ensure their safety. (If the home visit needs to be made on an emergency basis without calling first, conduct this inquiry before entering the home.)

If people in the home have been diagnosed or exposed to COVID, follow the guidance provided by your agency and OSHA: <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/covid-19/standards.html>

- Once in the home, ask where you can meet separately with each parent. To avoid escalation of tensions, which could increase risk, explain the need for separate meetings as agency policy or “what my supervisor requires me to do.” Begin by acknowledging how stressful these times are for everyone, and ask family

members about their most significant current stressors and what resources would help.

Talking with the adult survivor

- Explore how things are going in the home generally and how each parent is handling the current situation (e.g., sheltering in place, homeschooling, etc.). In addition to gathering information related to the allegation, address immediate concerns by providing resources and emotional support.
- Look for evidence that an adult survivor may be taking steps to stay safe and to keep children safe during the quarantine. This may include behaviors that may be concerning in isolation, but for families impacted by DV can be efforts to mitigate risk. For example, the adult survivor may placate their partner, take the blame for what’s happening, or physically discipline the kids before their partner can do something worse.
- Explore current safety. Use the question cards you prepared if there is not ample privacy to ask questions and talk safely out loud.
- Obtain a list of extended family and social supports who may be important for an emergency placement plan or ongoing safety planning. Ask if these helpers can pass information or messages between you and the survivor during the quarantine.

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- As a resource for family members, see Calling All Families and Friends of Families Experiencing Violence at Home: https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/Futures_Resources_updated.pdf
 - Share a local hotline number – suggest saving the number under the name of a “friend.”
 - Explore how best to engage the person using violence as a parent. What are they doing well while sheltering at home? How are they showing love for their child? What are they doing to manage stress?
- Talking with the person using violence:**
- Begin by exploring what they need to be able to feel more successful and effective while caring for their families in this pandemic. Invite them to tell you about what they’re managing well, and about what they’re struggling with in dealing with current stressors, and their children and family’s needs. Use this as a segue to discuss the allegations in the report.
 - During this time, when services are harder to access, a child welfare investigator should be prepared for crisis management. When people are required to be in the home together for extended periods, it is essential that an investigator avoid taking a confrontational approach with the person alleged to be using violence, as this could increase tensions in the home and put the adult and child survivors in the home at greater risk.
- Be prepared with strategies for de-escalating a person who becomes agitated. Strategies to consider include:
 - Allow the person to express their emotions, including anger and frustration.
 - Use relaxed body language and a respectful tone to convey a non-judgmental stance and try to establish rapport.
 - Name their emotions you observe and express understanding – “I can hear that you’re really angry about having to talk about this in such a difficult time. It sounds like you’re under tremendous stress, and afraid that your loved ones may get sick.”
 - Offer emotional support, ask how they cope with stress, and offer additional coping strategies (e.g., taking a walk, exercising, talking to a family member, etc.). Emphasize that experiencing stress is normal and that using positive

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coping strategies can show their children a good example of how adults manage stress, and help them to avoid negative consequences of using violence (e.g., getting arrested, being removed from their family, etc.). Ask the person to commit to a specific plan to deal with stressors, and strategize about how the worker will know that the plan is working.

- If the person was attending a BIP or fatherhood program before the pandemic, ask the program to have regular, at least weekly, contact with the person.

If a child must be removed from the home

- If removal of a child from the home is needed, consider all options that meet public health requirements and strive to minimize additional trauma to children, who may already be traumatized by having to shelter in place with a person causing them or their parent harm.
 - Explore placement with family members first^{3,4} — and where possible, initiate the process for obtaining approvals for exceptions to policy (e.g., exceptions to space requirements).
 - Consult with a child welfare legal team to explore obtaining a restraining order

on behalf of a child to avoid removal from their survivor parent or one that requires the person causing harm to leave the home.

- Plan to give children who need to be quarantined a mobile phone, so they can have daily contact with people who matter to them and regular contact with their social worker. See: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/letter_on_federal_funds.pdf

Offer resources

- Offer resources which may help them – some are listed below.
 - No-sewing required homemade masks — suggest it as a family activity: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html>
 - National Meal Finder for Children and Families: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/meals4kids>
 - Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope With the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf

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- Coronavirus Tips & Resources for Parents, Children, Educators & Others: <https://preventchildabuse.org/coronavirus-resources/>
- Resources to Support Youth and Families During the Coronavirus COVID-19 Outbreak: <https://youth.gov/feature-article/covid-coronavirus-resources>
- Resources for Survivors, and Safety Plans & Self-Care: <https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/get-updates-information-covid-19/>



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1. <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Strengthening-Families-COVID-tool-for-workers-FINAL.pdf>

2. See <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/non-covid-19-client-interaction.html> for current guidance on PPE.

3. See Children's Bureau guidance for COVID-19 at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/stafford_act.pdf

4. See COVID-19 Fact Sheet for Grandfamilies and Multigenerational Families at <https://www.gu.org/app/uploads/2020/03/COVID-19-Fact-Sheet-3-17-20.pdf>

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