



Domestic Violence and the Child Welfare Professional: Tips for Assessment

The Domestic Violence and the Child Welfare Professional series supports caseworkers in responding to families experiencing domestic violence and child maltreatment. The series includes six tip sheets that provide core practice considerations. This tip sheet—the second in the series—supplies assessment information useful for understanding abuse tactics, protecting the safety of survivors, and planning for services that engage each family member (Carter, 2003). The tips in this series are based on a compilation of research and promising practices.

Assessment: The Cornerstone of Case Planning

When domestic violence is identified, an assessment protocol allows caseworkers to evaluate patterns of behavior, lethality, and the safety needs of child and adult survivors. Assessments are instrumental in determining family dynamics and can serve as the basis for recommendations for court orders. Courts regularly rely on child welfare professionals to offer input on domestic violence cases and to have the necessary training to assess its impact on children (Ganley, 2016). Quality assessments reflect respectful and trusting relationships and knowledge of cultural competence (DeBoard-Lucas, Wasserman, Groves, & Bair-Merritt, 2013; Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, 2010).

While the tips below reflect research and practice knowledge from the field, caseworkers are advised to follow agency policies and protocols and the guidance of their supervisors in conducting casework.



Tips for Assessment

1. Start by building relationships in order to build a better assessment.
2. Assess for a pattern of coercive control. Where there are concerns that both partners are abusive, attempt to determine if one partner has more control and what behaviors they use to maintain that control.
3. Identify patterns of abusive behaviors by engaging the survivor, the children, and collateral contacts and by consulting current and past child protective services (CPS) case and law enforcement records.
4. Don't assume perpetrator or survivor roles based on gender, ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, or stature.
5. Don't assume the accounts you learn from perpetrators or survivors will be the entirety of what is needed for an assessment. Perpetrators are often unreliable sources of information. Survivors may be unwilling or unable to share information with child welfare.
6. Assess survivors' protective efforts, strengths, parenting abilities, and relationships with their children.
7. Assess the potential risk posed by a perpetrator. Include indicators of lethality, such as threats to kill, use of weapons, strangulation, severe injuries, sexual violence, and access to guns. Ask the survivor for specifics about threats from the perpetrator. Threats vary and may include threats to kill, harm, take the children, and/or commit suicide.
8. Assess how the children are impacted by the domestic violence.
9. Consult with others in your agency (such as supervisors, managers, or domestic violence professionals), internal domestic violence consultants, and peer or domestic violence advocates in your community if you're uncertain about your assessment.

References

- Arizona Department of Child Safety. (2016). *Family centered strengths and risk assessment and documentation guide*. <https://docslib.org/Family-Centered-Strengths-and-Risks-Assessment>
- Carter, L. (2003). *Family team conferences in domestic violence cases: Guidelines for practice* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Family Violence Prevention Fund. <http://www.childwelfaregroup.org/documents/FTCinDVCasesFVPP.pdf>
- DeBoard-Lucas, R., Wasserman, K., Groves, B. M., Bair-Merritt, M. (2013). *Promising futures: 16 trauma-informed, evidence-based recommendations for advocates working with children exposed to intimate partner violence*. Washington, DC: Futures Without Violence. <http://promising.futureswithoutviolence.org/files/2012/07/16-Evidence-Based-Strategies-for-Advocates.pdf>
- Ganley, A. (2016). Domestic violence: The what, why, and who, as relevant to criminal and civil court domestic violence cases. In *Domestic Violence Manual for Judges*. Olympia, WA: Administrative Office of the Courts. <http://www.courts.wa.gov/content/manuals/domViol/chapter2.pdf>
- Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. (2016). *Social worker's practice guide to domestic violence*. Olympia, WA: Children's Administration. <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/22-1314.pdf>