



Domestic Violence and the Child Welfare Professional: Tips on Engaging Families

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 final one of the series—offers suggestions for collaborating with families to open dialogue, develop trusted alliances, and promote better outcomes. The tips in this series are based on a compilation of research and promising practices.

Engagement: Strategies that Promote Positive Outcomes

Domestic violence literature supports, overall, a collaborative approach to overcoming barriers to engaging families (Carter, 2003; DeBoard-Lucas, Wasserman, Groves, & Bair-Merritt, 2013). Engagement requires empathy for perpetrators and survivors and an understanding of how to support children and youth to mitigate the impact of trauma (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014; Washington Department of Social and Health Services, 2016). Appropriate engagement techniques can strengthen the relationship between child welfare organizations and the families they serve. As engagement increases, so does the safety of survivors (Blumenfield, 2015).

While the tips 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 Engaging Survivors

1. Refrain from using blaming or judging language and sharing personal feelings or information with the survivor about the perpetrator.
2. Validate strengths, including any observed positive parenting or protective efforts.
3. Recognize that you may have reactions to learning about violence. It's important to avoid showing those reactions through body language or facial expressions.
4. Ask what actions worked in the past to keep the survivor and children safe and what supports their family and community can offer.
5. Ask questions to better understand the survivor's story, the context of her/his circumstances and decisions, and the survivor's hopes are the relationship with the perpetrator.
6. Ask open-ended questions about the abuse. Ask about controlling and possessive behaviors, name calling, or verbal abuse before asking about physical abuse and threats.
7. Ask what would be helpful to the survivor and the children.
8. Ask about any experiences the children have had or changes the survivor has observed that may be a result of the abuse.
9. Be honest about confidentiality, the role of child welfare, and any benefits and limitations to sharing information about domestic violence with child welfare.
10. Be honest about the possibility or likelihood of removal without using it as a threat or to gain compliance of the survivor.



Tips for Engaging Perpetrators

1. When safe to do so, engage with perpetrators and their supports, including providers, regularly throughout the life of the case.
2. Observe perpetrators with their children, if they have access, and conduct home visits.
3. Attempt to learn about the perpetrator before initial engagement. Determine whether a history of threats or violence with child welfare, law enforcement, or community agencies exists.
4. Evaluate your own safety, realizing that not all perpetrators are dangerous to child welfare workers. If there is a safety concern, consult with your supervisor and develop a strategy for your safety.
5. Ask perpetrators about the type of parent they would like to be and what they are willing to do to be a safer person for their child(ren).

6. Be aware of a perpetrator's attempts to manipulate by blaming the survivor and attempting to gain support for abusive behavior.
7. Never share personal information or personal feelings about the survivor with the perpetrator.
8. Engage in an intentional and focused way on the perpetrator's behaviors, and point out contradictions compared to their stated values.
9. Remember to engage perpetrators as parents. When appropriate, ask about their understanding of the children's education, medical needs, routines, and personalities.
10. Ask the perpetrator to sign a case plan and refer back to the plan in all engagements to monitor behavioral change. Have a signed case plan or protective plan with perpetrators, and use the plan throughout the life of the case to monitor and discuss the perpetrator's behavioral changes.



Tips for Engaging Children

1. Ask a combination of direct questions and open-ended questions to give children multiple pathways to express themselves.
2. Remember that children may not respond in the way you would expect. Empower children to talk about what they've experienced, but remember that children have a range of emotions about their parents and may have changing or unexpected ways in which they respond to talking about their families or the domestic violence.
3. Ask the children how they feel in age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate ways. Ask verbally, using a feelings chart, art, or play-based strategies.
4. Ask children about what helps them feel safe, and incorporate this information into a safety plan.
5. Assess whether children hold themselves responsible for intervening, or not, in the violence, and correct any misconceptions.
6. Remind children that domestic violence is never their fault.
7. Ask children about their hopes and worries for their family.
8. Never make promises that cannot be kept, including those about safety.
9. End each engagement with a child in a way that leaves the child with a sense of hope.

References

- Blumenfield, S. (2015). *Guide for engaging & supporting parents affected by domestic violence: Enhancing parenting capacity & strengthening parent-child bonds*. Chicago, IL: National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health. http://www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/NCDVTMH_GuideEngagingSupportingParents.pdf
- Carter, L. S. (2003, October). *Family team conferences in domestic violence cases: Guidelines for practice*. San Francisco, CA: Family Violence Prevention Fund. Retrieved from <http://www.childwelfaregroup.org/documents/FTCinDVCasesFVPF.pdf>
- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2014). *Domestic violence: A primer for child welfare professionals*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/domestic-violence/>
- 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>
- 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/publications/documents/22-1314.pdf>

