

Practice Considerations for Conducting Family Meetings With Families Affected by Domestic Violence (DV)

Family Meetings are used for engagement, assessment, and/or planning in child welfare cases. However, when one partner in a relationship has used a pattern of violent and abusive behaviors to control or create fear in the other partner, a Family Meeting, if it is not managed carefully, may make things worse for the non-offending parent (NOP) and/or the child(ren).

Workers must understand and be informed by the NOP's perception of whether she¹ and her child(ren) will be safe before, during, and after the meeting. If she indicates it will not be safe to hold a Family Meeting at that time, do not hold the meeting. As the case progresses over time, circumstances and the NOP's perception of safety may change in ways that would make a Family Meeting possible. As a worker establishes relationships with family members and develops a deeper understanding of the family's situation, decisions about whether, when, and how to conduct Family Meetings should be made with the ongoing, active participation of the NOP and careful consideration of the impact of such a meeting on safety. In some DV situations, it may **never** be possible to safely hold a Family Meeting.

PRACTICE TIP: Remember that in a domestic violence situation, the non-offending parent is the expert on the situation. She is your best source of information about the behavior of the DV offender and about whether and how to engage him.

Domestic violence (DV) often co-occurs with other issues such as child abuse or substance abuse. It also may be a contributing factor to issues such as parental depression, substance abuse, and medical or educational neglect of a child. If DV is not identified in these situations, a Family Meeting to address the known child welfare concerns is unlikely to result in a safe, sustainable plan because the DV offender's violence, threats, and restrictions on the non-offending parent (NOP) have not been considered in developing the plan.

Domestic violence does not automatically rule out a Family Meeting, as the level of violence and its impact on NOPs and children varies significantly from family to family. **In many domestic violence situations, however, a meeting with both the NOP and the DV offender will NOT be possible.** An NOP's age, culture, immigration status, class background, prior experience with authority figures, and other factors may affect her willingness to trust you enough to disclose abuse and to express concerns about any plan that you may suggest, including a plan to conduct a Family Meeting. Non-offending parents should **never** be penalized for declining a Family Meeting, regardless of whether you fully understand their concerns or reasons for doing so.

¹ 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.

Should a Family Meeting be held?

1. Family Meetings with both the NOP and the DV offender present should **not** be conducted in DV cases involving higher levels of violence or coercive control (see table below). In these situations, a Family Meeting with the NOP and her support system – excluding the DV offender – may help the NOP and the child(ren) stay safe by building their support network and developing a DV safety plan.

Indicators of Potential for Serious or Increasing Violence in DV Situations	
Remember that any violence or abuse, regardless of severity, may have a significant impact on the NOP and/or the child(ren) – this must be explored on a case-by-case basis. Following are indicators of serious or increasing violence and/or danger – items 5 to 18 are most acute ² .	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Abuse is accompanied by episodic or binge use of drugs or alcohol. 2. DV offender’s criminal record shows more than one order of protection against him or orders of protection from multiple partners. 3. Indications of DV offender’s increasing instability (recent unemployment, signs of depression, or trauma) 4. Even if abuse is not severe, it does not stop 5. Serious physical violence (punching, kicking, cuts, bruises, burns, broken bones, head injury, internal injury, permanent injury, wounds from use of weapons) 6. DV offender forces or coerces NOP to have unwanted sex. 7. DV offender owns a gun. 8. DV offender has used or threatened to use a weapon against NOP. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. NOP has left or is planning to leave (may be in shelter or looking for shelter). 10. DV offender has avoided arrest for DV. 11. DV offender is not the parent of the child(ren). 12. Intrusive control of NOP (controls car, money, relationships, etc) 13. Acute jealousy coupled with abuse (irrational accusations of infidelity, spies on, stalks, monitors NOP, destroys property). DV offender says “If I can’t have you, no one will.” 14. Behaviors continue after separation or divorce. 15. Abuse is increasing in frequency or severity. 16. Escalating response to “trigger” events (e.g., separation, NOP leaving or becoming more independent) 17. Threats to kill or hurt child(ren) 18. Threats to kill or hurt the NOP

If any of these indicators are present, consider seeking consultation from a DV advocate and/or talk with a supervisor if you are unclear about how to proceed.

2. Discuss with the NOP the advisability and potential impact of holding a separate meeting with the DV offender. Ultimately, effective work in DV cases requires efforts to hold DV offenders accountable and engage them in order to motivate them to change their behaviors. If that has not happened or has not been possible, despite your best efforts, a separate Family Meeting with the DV offender and his support system may help. Even if a Family Meeting cannot be held with the DV offender

² Campbell, J.C., Webster, D., Koziol-McLain, J., Block, C., Campbell, D., Curry, M., Gary, F., Glass, N. McFarlane, J., Sachs, C., Sharps, P., Ulrich, Y., Wilt, S.A., Manganello, J., Xu, X., Schollenberger, J., Frye, W., Laughon, K. (2003). “Risk Factors for Femicide in Abusive Relationships: Results from a multisite case control study.” *American Journal of Public Health*, 93. See also Mederos, F. (2004) “Accountability and Connection with Abusive Men: A New Child Welfare Response to Increasing Family Safety”. Family Violence Prevention Fund: pp 34-40.

present, you still need to determine, with NOP input, ways to engage him as the father of the child(ren).

3. Remember, there may be DV cases in which **no** Family Meeting can be conducted safely.
4. Family Meetings with both the NOP and the DV offender present may be appropriate for a DV situation that does not create immediate or impending danger of serious harm to the child(ren) **and**:
 - The meeting does not violate a restraining order or other written or verbal court orders that prohibit contact between the parties;
 - The NOP says she is not afraid for herself or her child(ren), has no concerns about you talking to her partner about holding a Family Meeting, and behaves in ways that indicate no fear of the DV offender;
 - The child(ren) expresses no fear of the DV offender;
 - The DV offender has been engaged with no escalation of abuse to the family;
 - The NOP has provided input about how to approach the DV offender during the Family Meeting;
 - The DV offender doesn't have a criminal record involving violence; and
 - There is no indication of current substance abuse on the part of the DV offender.
5. Steps to take when considering whether a Family Meeting may be a useful strategy:
 - If DV hasn't already been identified, explore whether this may be an underlying issue, even when child welfare concerns are identified as something *other than* exposure to DV. These concerns may be medical or educational neglect, lack of supervision, parental depression, substance abuse, and other problems within families for which DV may be a contributing factor.
 - If DV is known or suspected, look for evidence of harm or impact on the child(ren)'s functioning.
 - If DV is identified, work privately with the NOP and be guided by her assessment of her personal safety. Try to move, over time, toward engagement

CAUTION

- Highly intrusive control and/or extreme jealousy are indicators of significant potential for serious violence, even in the absence of prior violent behaviors.
- A man who makes overt statements justifying abuse ("I hit her because she wouldn't cook me food") is not necessarily more dangerous than one who offers other explanations ("I just lost it"). Assessments must focus on the **behaviors** and **impact** on the family.
- Avoid accepting culturally based excuses for violence and abuse (e.g., "All Dominican men hit their wives.")

and accountability for the DV offender, particularly if he is a parent of the child(ren) or if the NOP plans to remain in the relationship.

- If DV is identified, solicit help from a local DV program to develop a dynamic and responsive DV safety plan as circumstances change.
6. Children are safer when natural networks of support (extended family, neighbors, teachers, faith communities, family friends, coaches, community elders, etc.) are knowledgeable and involved in plans to keep them safe. In some DV cases, the NOP and the child(ren) may be very isolated or may only have access to the extended family of the DV offender. Preparation for a potential Family Meeting should include thoughtful exploration of these relationships and how they might **help or hinder** efforts of the NOP and others to keep the NOP and child(ren) safe together.
 7. Before, during, and after the Family Meeting, workers and other professionals should send appropriate messages to adults about the right of all individuals to feel safe at home, the belief that families and individuals can make changes to promote the safety and well-being of children, and the help that is available to support those changes. (*Refer to “Helpful Things to Say to or Ask a Domestic Violence Offender” and “Helpful Things to Say to or Ask a Non-offending Parent.”*)
 8. Explore the importance of the relationship between the DV offender and the NOP. Find out whether he is meeting concrete needs that we may be able to help provide, such as food, housing, money, child care, and/or transportation. People stay in abusive relationships for many different reasons, and it actually may be safer for them to remain in the relationship than to leave it. Developing rapport with the NOP is critical to obtaining accurate information about safety. That rapport depends on your willingness to really hear her reasons for staying in the relationship – and to refrain from judging those reasons.

Before a Family Meeting

1. **Review all available reports and documentation.** Look for any indications of violence or of one partner controlling or creating fear in the other partner in an intimate relationship. If there are indications that a person is violent or controlling with his partner, talk to the non-offending parent first.
2. **Ask all parents/caretakers about behaviors that indicate DV.** If you have not already assessed **all** family members for DV, do so *before* referring them for a Family Meeting. Talk to both children and adults. Questions should be asked at the beginning of your involvement with the family, whenever family composition has changed, whenever DV is suspected, prior to a Family Meeting, and on a periodic basis during your involvement with the family. (*Refer to “Identifying Domestic Violence” for questions that can be used with adults and children/youth.*)

3. **Be honest.** Discuss the limits of confidentiality at the outset of your conversation. Explain to the NOP that you will make every effort to avoid sharing her disclosures with her partner or other family members. Also explain that if you become aware of information from the NOP or child(ren) that must be shared with the DV offender, you will notify her in advance and conduct DV safety planning. **Acknowledge that involvement with the child welfare system can increase danger in the family.**
4. **Talk privately and respectfully with each parent/caretaker.** An adult should **never** be questioned in the presence of his or her partner, ex-partner, or the child(ren)'s other parent. Maintain a non-judgmental stance. Avoid confrontations and assumptions so you can establish rapport with the adults and engage them to create additional safety for the child(ren). When meeting in the family's home, these conversations should occur **only** when the partner is not present and the child(ren) cannot overhear them.
5. **Use gender-neutral language.** If you don't know who the person's partner is, do not make assumptions about sexual orientation.
6. Ask the NOP (and the DV offender, when it is safe to do so) what steps have been taken in the past to protect the child(ren) from exposure to DV. These steps might include:

- Complying with the partner's demands to avoid a physical assault.
- Telling the child(ren) to go into another room when a fight begins.
- Teaching the child(ren) how to call 911.
- Giving the child(ren) permission to leave the house and go to a neighbor or nearby relative.

PRACTICE TIP: Non-offending parents use many strategies to keep themselves and their children safe. Remember that what may look like inaction on her part – such as complying with the demands of the DV offender – may be a strategy for staying safe and keeping her child(ren) safe.

- Even if these actions have not been sufficient to provide safety, they represent efforts to keep the child(ren) safe and are the point where you can begin to build additional safety for the child(ren). (**Note:** This is **not** intended to place sole responsibility for child safety on the NOP, but is part of assessment and planning for future safety. Many NOPs, and some DV offenders, take steps to keep children from being exposed to domestic violence. These prior acts of protection need to be acknowledged and built upon.)
7. **Ask the NOP for permission to talk to the child(ren) privately.** If a child resists or seems uncomfortable with a private conversation, talk to him or her in the presence of the NOP, but **not** the DV offender.
 8. If you identify DV as a dynamic in the family, **be careful not to use victim-blaming language.** If the NOP seeks help and gets a response that she perceives to be victim-blaming, unhelpful, or dangerous, she will be less likely to seek help

again. Convey messages that are non-judgmental, non-blaming and non-shaming. Victim-blaming language can include comments such as “When you and your partner engaged in domestic violence . . .” or “Why did he hit you?” or “It seems that you are choosing your partner over your child(ren).” (Refer to “Helpful Things to Say to or Ask a Non-offending Parent.”)

9. **Be prepared to talk about the potential impact of DV on the child.** If you suspect DV, offer information to both parents about the possible impact of exposure to DV on children, and then ask them about their own child(ren). This can be a powerful motivator for them to engage with you.
10. **If DV is identified for the first time** in a conversation about scheduling a Family Meeting:
 - **Slow down** and assess the possible impact of a Family Meeting on safety of the NOP and the child(ren). Safety is paramount, and the NOP is the most knowledgeable person about her safety and that of her child(ren).
 - Ask the NOP if she thinks it will be safe to conduct a Family Meeting with her partner present. If she says that a Family Meeting cannot be conducted safely, explore with her other options for engaging him as a parent.
 - If she indicates that a Family Meeting will or may be dangerous for her or the child, forego the meeting until she says it is safe to hold one.
 - If she thinks a meeting will be safe, plan with her for what can be discussed and what must be avoided in the conversation with the partner present.
 - Explore with her whether a Family Meeting held with the DV offender can result in a realistic plan in the context of possible DV after the meeting.
 - **Incorporate the new information into your assessment** of safety, the family’s strengths and needs, and family functioning. How does your understanding of the situation change?
11. **Discuss with the NOP other options for Family Meetings.** These could include separate meetings with her and with the DV offender, or a single meeting with the DV offender participating in part of the meeting by phone or in some other way. Devise a plan for explaining this to the DV offender in a way that doesn’t make things worse for the NOP or the child(ren).
 - The NOP may indicate that separate meetings would not be culturally appropriate (*e.g., the DV offender cannot be excluded without disrespecting his position within the family*). In this case, take whatever time is needed to explore whether a Family Meeting would be helpful or might make things worse.
 - If appropriate, offer the DV offender the option of a separate Family Meeting. If this option is used, view this meeting as an opportunity to engage him and

motivate change and participation in services rather than as a means for creating an alternative plan for the family or child.

12. Seek guidance in supervision throughout the process of exploring whether a Family Meeting should be held in a DV situation.
13. If a Family Meeting is scheduled, inform the facilitator in advance of the existence of DV and the specifics of any safety plan that has been developed with the NOP. As needed, make additional plans with the facilitator and other professionals to promote safety, and inform the NOP.
14. **Encourage family members to invite support people** to their meeting(s). Explore with the NOP how these individuals have supported her, or whether they have aligned themselves with the DV offender. If they will not be supportive of the NOP and child safety, consider inviting them to a separate meeting with the DV offender.
 - It may be helpful to include service providers (both formal and informal) and a DV service provider (check with the NOP first) to promote consistent communication about plans and to build support for the plan.
 - Include child welfare agency staff (supervisors or managers) who need to approve plans or who can give permission to use creative and effective plans to create safety.
15. **Be prepared to describe available resources and supports.** Based on individual needs and community resources, be prepared to describe a range of services, such as local DV programs, batterer intervention programs, responsible fatherhood programs, parenting programs, trauma-informed services, and others. Programs for DV offenders should at least hold them accountable for their abuse and provide education on domestic violence. Help individuals make contact with service providers. Seek out culturally specific service organizations while being sensitive to the NOP's and the family's desire for privacy within their cultural community. Be prepared to assist with services for multiple or co-occurring issues.

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., he 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.).

In the Family Meeting

1. **Whether or not DV has been identified, do a brief and private safety check-in** with each adult immediately before the meeting begins. Ask: (1) Are there any court orders (written or verbal) prohibiting contact between any of the participants? (2) Do you have **any** concerns regarding your personal safety in the meeting or as a result of the meeting?
 - If DV has been identified and both partners are present (or someone aligned with the DV offender is present) give the NOP a code word or phrase that can be used at any time to signal the caseworker or facilitator to stop the meeting. This can be as simple as “I need to use the restroom.”
2. **If DV is disclosed** (or professionals see “red flags,” including verbal and nonverbal signs such as heightened tension/anxiety/fear; the NOP is silent and/or appears to be uncooperative, resistant, etc.) **for the first time during the meeting itself, the facilitator should quickly move to “take a break.”** During the break, agency staff should meet with each adult separately to determine whether and how to proceed.
 - If the NOP says it will **not** be safe to continue, ask her whether she would prefer to end the meeting or to move into two separate meetings (if this is logistically possible). Follow her lead – if she says the meeting needs to end, notify the other participants and say something like, “We have an emergency on another case that we need to handle. Can we contact you about rescheduling?”
 - If the NOP wants to continue by having two separate meetings, use time in the meeting with the NOP to explore how she thinks her partner will respond to what transpired in the joint meeting, and develop a DV safety plan accordingly.
 - If the NOP wants to proceed with the joint meeting, use the following strategies:
 - Maintain a respectful tone in the meeting.
 - Avoid talking about the DV offender’s violence against the NOP unless he brings it up. **If he does bring it up**, stay focused on talking to him. Do not ask the NOP to comment on, confirm, or describe details of what he is saying. Provide information/education about the impact of DV on children and ask him about the impact on the child(ren) in his home. Try to engage him as a father.
 - If a plan for child safety must be developed, make a **short-term** plan at the end of the meeting. Plans that are developed without a clear understanding and consideration of the extent and impact of DV are not likely to be sustainable over a longer period of time.

- As soon as possible after the meeting, talk privately with the NOP about her situation and how the child welfare case can proceed with the least possible danger/risk to her and her child(ren).
3. In any Family Meeting where DV has been identified or is a concern, **focus the conversation on the reason for the family’s involvement with the system**—the behaviors or functioning of the child who is at risk. Be prepared to share information about the potential negative impact of exposure to violence on children, talk about specific behaviors of the child in question, and explore in detail any strategies the parent(s) or other family members have used to protect the child from harm or exposure to DV.
 4. If there are two separate meetings:
 - **Spend time with the NOP planning for the meeting with the DV offender.** Ask for help in understanding what can and cannot be discussed, how best to “reach” him, what his strengths are as a parent and partner, and what might help motivate him to make changes.
 - Develop a DV safety plan that can be implemented after the meeting if necessary.
 - Make a plan to safely check in with the NOP after the meeting to determine if she has any fears for her safety or the safety of the child(ren).
 - After the meeting with the DV offender, let the NOP know how the meeting went and whether there are any new or heightened concerns about her safety or safety of the child(ren).
 5. If the DV offender was not present at a Family Meeting, set up a time to debrief him about the meeting (be careful about sharing information that may affect the safety of the NOP or the child[ren]). Offer to connect him with services. Work with the NOP to make a plan for this conversation, but do not ask her to arrange it. You should perform this task directly with the DV offender.

After the Family Meeting

1. **Check in with the NOP as planned to ask about the impact of the meeting on safety.** If there are new or heightened fears about the safety of the NOP or the child(ren), update domestic violence safety plans, explore options to promote immediate safety as needed, and/or connect her to supportive services as quickly as possible.
2. **Continue to work closely with the NOP** to stay informed about what is happening in the family as a result of child welfare intervention. If the DV offender is the father of the child(ren) and/or the family plans to remain together, try to engage him,

hold him accountable for the violence/abuse, and help him understand the impact of his behavior on his family.

3. Use care when determining how and when to share plans developed in the meeting with other family members. **Do not share the NOP's or the child(ren)'s DV safety plan with the DV offender.**
4. **DV safety plans do not need to be documented in the case record**, except for aspects of the plan that directly relate to keeping the child(ren) safe.
5. Continue to seek guidance in supervision.