

# Domestic Violence Handbook for Wisconsin Child Welfare Professionals

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This Handbook was written as a revision of the 2010 version, titled *Domestic Violence Handbook for Wisconsin Child Protective Services Workers*. This revised Handbook was authored by the Domestic Violence-Child Welfare Workgroup, an interdisciplinary workgroup comprised of individuals from domestic violence programs, the child welfare profession, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) and End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin. The following individuals comprise membership of the Domestic Violence-Child Welfare Workgroup that authored this Handbook:

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# Introduction

This Handbook is intended to serve as a desk guide for Child Welfare (CW) professionals who are working with families experiencing domestic violence. In this Handbook, the term “CW” includes professionals who work Child Protective Services (CPS) and youth justice systems. The Handbook supplements the PDS pre-service module on domestic violence and complements, but does not replace, the [Wisconsin Department of Children and Families’ Policy Standards](#).

As a general foundation, this Handbook offers information on understanding and identifying domestic violence and includes a summary of resources that you can offer to domestic violence survivors. More specifically, the Handbook also provides important insights on how domestic violence affects children and survivor parents<sup>1</sup> in the context of providing CW services with a family. If you are working with a family where safety concerns have been determined to be present and related to domestic violence, this Handbook is intended as a resource. On the other hand, you may be working with a family for a different presenting reason and only later uncover dynamics of domestic violence that are simultaneously affecting safety – this Handbook can be a resource for those situations, too. This Handbook takes into account that families experiencing domestic violence will have different fact-specific needs, and a CW professional who is working with that family will be best equipped to determine which of these best practices may have the best outcomes for that particular family.

## Guiding Principles

The guiding principles that inform this Handbook should also be a consideration for any CW professional working with a family affected by domestic violence.

The role of CW is to support and empower families to keep their children safe

- CW professionals should prioritize, as much as safety allows, maintaining family unity
- The role of a domestic violence advocate is to provide resources for survivors’ short- and long-term safety to support survivors toward empowerment
- CW professionals *and* domestic violence advocates share the goal of supporting family safety
- Increasing safety for a survivor parent<sup>2</sup> will also improve their ability to keep their children safe; survivors are usually protective parents whose protective capacities increase alongside their own empowerment

These principles underly the content found in the rest of this Handbook. The guiding principles serve as a sound foundation for any CW professional working with families experiencing domestic violence.

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<sup>1</sup> In this Handbook, we use the term “survivor parent” when talking about a parent who has experienced domestic violence and is not the maltreater or alleged maltreater. We recognize that most survivors are protective parents, but we do not use that word, though it may be more common in the CW context, because this Handbook focuses on the domestic violence context of a family.

## Background

For CW professionals, understanding what domestic violence is and the scope of the problem is crucial background that informs work with families who have experienced domestic violence. This Handbook uses the following definition of domestic violence<sup>3</sup>:

Domestic violence is an ongoing pattern of related behaviors – which may include physical violence, threats, sexual violence, stalking, intimidation, coercion, verbal abuse, emotional abuse, financial abuse, and spiritual abuse – that one person in a relationship uses against another as a means of control. A harm doer of domestic violence typically considers themselves entitled to have their needs met first within the family.

Domestic violence is about dynamics of power and control. Harm doers<sup>4</sup> may leverage their privileges to gain and maintain power and control over another person in a relationship. Domestic violence is caused by one person’s belief that they have the right to control their partner.

Domestic violence occurs across society, affecting people of all races, ages, socioeconomic statuses, sexualities, etc. Importantly, domestic violence can take different forms and affect survivors differently based on their identities.<sup>5</sup> Domestic violence often causes trauma that impacts how survivors react, and it has a pervasive effect on entire families.

To contextualize the issue of domestic violence, it is estimated that 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have experienced some form of physical violence by an intimate partner.<sup>6</sup> However, domestic violence statistics likely fail to capture the true frequency of the issue. For many survivors, reporting the abuse they experience is difficult for a multitude of reasons, such as fear of retaliation, fear of law enforcement involvement, fear of children being removed, or not identifying the behavior as abusive. Additionally, some survivors may seek to protect the harm doer from legal system involvement, and still want to preserve the relationship with harm doer.

For underserved survivors – such as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (“BIPOC”); lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, Two Spirit, plus (“LGBTQIA2S+”); immigrant; and male survivors – there may be even greater barriers to reporting, leading to further underestimates of domestic violence prevalence. While the statistics available likely underestimate domestic violence rates, the numbers do shed light on the magnitude of the issue.

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<sup>3</sup> This Handbook’s definition of domestic violence is aligned with the definition found in DCF’s Pre-Service Module on Domestic Violence.

<sup>4</sup> In this Handbook, in consistency with DCF’s language, we use the term “harm doer,” to describe a person who commits domestic violence against another. You may see the term “abuser” or “person who uses harm” in other contexts, including when working with a domestic violence program. Importantly, the harm doer is not necessarily a parent.

<sup>5</sup> While domestic violence can affect minors in dating relationships, this issue is not covered in depth in this Handbook. CW professionals typically would not assess teen dating violence (i.e., violence in a relationship between two minor teens).

<sup>6</sup> National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, *Statistics* (2022) <https://ncadv.org/STATISTICS> (citing CDC, *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey* (2010)).

Now, with an understanding of the large-scale problem of domestic violence, we turn to the importance of recognizing the drastic effects that domestic violence has on the individuals and families in these situations. Below are some examples of behaviors that different family members may display that could indicate the presence of domestic violence. When these behaviors are part of an ongoing pattern, it can be a strong indicator of domestic violence. However, due to the intricacies and complexities of family dynamics and relationships, the presence of these behaviors does not always mean that domestic violence is present. On the other hand, the absence of these behaviors should not be interpreted as meaning the family does not have domestic violence dynamics and should not be used to minimize a family's experiences.

Children may be exposed to domestic violence in different ways, such as witnessing or overhearing abuse, witnessing law enforcement involvement because of abuse, interacting with law enforcement because of abuse, living in a household with extreme tension due to abuse, and even intervening to try to stop the abuse. When children are exposed to domestic violence, it can be very traumatic. Trauma can have immediate and long-term impacts on children. Trauma can result in behavioral, social, and emotional changes in children. For example:

- **Demonstrating behavior regression.** A child who has been exposed to domestic violence may begin to display behaviors they had previously outgrown. *For example, a child may wet the bed or begin sucking their thumb again.*
- **Showing behavior changes in school.** When children experience trauma at home, their behavior may change at school, such as becoming quiet and withdrawn or becoming impulsive and disruptive. *For example, a child may stop participating in class and be withdrawn from their peers.*
- **Displaying physical signs of trauma.** A child who has witnessed or intervened in abuse may show physical signs of abuse, including bruising from direct violence or being tired from being unable to sleep because of hearing abuse taking place. *For example, a child may start falling asleep in school because of the impact of domestic violence on their sleep schedule.*
- **Aligning with the harm doer.** A child may try to avoid maltreatment by aligning with the harm doer. *For example, a child may mimic the harm doer's negative talk about a survivor parent to try to gain the harm doer's approval.*
- **Isolating and disconnecting socially.** A child who has been exposed to domestic violence may self-isolate, becoming disconnected from others who could have provided emotional support. *For example, a child may withdraw from their relationships with other trusted adults – such as family members, coaches, and school personnel – becoming more reserved and less likely to share their perspective.*
- **Taking on increased responsibility.** A child who has been exposed to domestic violence may take on greater responsibilities in the family than a child their age normally would. *For example, a child may act more independently, making their own meals and putting themselves to bed at a young age.*
- **Over-achieving.** A child who has been exposed to domestic violence may display perfectionism or anxiety and an intense drive toward achievement and success. *For example, a child may push themselves to extremes in academics or athletics and display anxiety or distress when they experience setbacks.*

Harm doers may be parents who are involved in the CW process. When this is the case, here are some behaviors to be aware of that may indicate domestic violence in the family:

- **Being an authoritarian household figure.** The harm doer may be strict and intolerant, even viewing children as their possessions. *For example, a harm doer may set strict requirements and be inflexible when the children and other parent do not adhere to them.*
- **Having minimal involvement with the children.** The harm doer may not interact with the children much at all, leaving the survivor parent to take all the parental responsibility. *For example, the harm doer may never take care of the child's nutritional or sleep needs and have no clue how to do so. For another example, a harm doer may have little contact with the children yet still criticize the other parent's choices.*
- **Manipulating the children.** The harm doer may do whatever the child wants, even when not in the child's best interest, to gain the child's favor and contrast this with the survivor parent. *For example, a harm doer may allow the child to skip school to do fun things, resulting in the child seeing the harm doer as the "fun parent" in contrast to the survivor parent who enforces rules.*
- **Undermining the survivor parent.** The harm doer may tell the child that rules set by the survivor parent do not matter, may criticize the survivor parent's intelligence, appearance, or other attributes. *For example, the harm doer may tell the child that the survivor parent cannot set the rules, such as a bedtime, because the survivor parent is "not smart enough."*
- **Performing well under observation.** The harm doer may look like an excellent parent when being observed, such as by CW professionals or court staff. *For example, the harm doer might be very involved in playing with the child and meeting their needs during supervised visitation.*

Likewise, domestic violence survivors may be parents working with CW professionals. Sometimes, the strategies survivor parents use to try to keep themselves and their children safe do not look like safe parenting. However, it may in fact be the *safest* parenting possible – this is because survivor parents know their harm doers best, and survivor parents are doing the best they can to protect their family. For example, a survivor parent may use some of the following strategies:

- **Placating or agreeing with the harm doer.** By placating or going along with the harm doer, a survivor parent might be minimizing harm. *For example, the survivor parent may not agree with the harm doer's decision to spank the child but allows it to happen because otherwise the harm doer will use even more severe physical punishment in retaliation against the child and/or survivor parent.*
- **Encouraging the harm doer's substance use.** A survivor parent may mitigate the risk of abuse by encouraging the harm doer's substance use, making the harm doer more docile or even incapacitated. *For example, a survivor parent may make alcoholic drinks for the harm doer, knowing that if the harm doer passes out, then the harm doer will not commit acts of violence against the survivor parent or child.*
- **Allowing the child large degrees of independence.** A survivor parent may allow the child to have large degrees of independence, including time without parental supervision, to avoid the child being present for abusive incidents. *For example, the survivor parent might encourage the child to go to the park alone when the survivor parent predicts the harm doer is going to use violence, thus preventing the child from being the target of the violence or witnessing violence.*



- **Staying with an abusive partner.** A survivor parent’s decision to stay with their abuser may be due to safety considerations. In fact, leaving a relationship with domestic violence may be the most dangerous time for a survivor.<sup>7</sup> *For example, staying in a relationship where violence occurs may maintain financial and housing stability, as well as their child’s connection to other social supports such as friends, extended family, school, and community resources. Additionally, the survivor parent may fear that if they separate from their partner, they may not be able to monitor their harm doer’s contact with the child.*
- **Over-achieving.** The survivor parent may display perfectionism or anxiety and an intense drive toward achievement and success. *For example, a survivor parent may cope with anxiety and trauma by putting increased energy into their work and other obligations, such as adding work hours, gaining promotions, or seeking ever-increasing responsibility.*

The next sections will provide you with practical tools to use to identify and address domestic violence while providing CW services to families.

## Practice Applications: Access

You can learn more about assessing for domestic violence during the Access stage of the child protective services intervention process by reviewing the DCF’s [Child Protective Services Access & Initial Assessment Standards](#), specifically in Appendix 3.

As a reminder, a child or family’s participation in the [Safe at Home program](#) must be documented in eWiSACWIS if such information is known when the report is received. If a report is screened-in, the report must exclude the participant’s physical address and shall retain the Safe at Home documentation, including the household identification number. [Child Protective Services Access & Initial Assessment Standards](#) have additional information and requirements regarding Safe at Home program participants.

The decision to screen out a report at Access is not intended to minimize the seriousness of domestic violence. However, other agencies and programs may be more appropriate to respond to support the survivor parent or hold the harm doer accountable. You may want to refer the caller who has reported a family to CW to community resources referenced in the Resources section of this handbook.

## Practice Applications: Initial Assessment

You can learn more about assessing for domestic violence during the Initial Assessment stage of the child protective services intervention process by reviewing the Department of Children and Families’ [Child Protective Services Access & Initial Assessment Standards](#), specifically in Appendix 3. Here, we provide additional practice guidance for CW professionals who are interviewing a survivor parent as part of the Initial Assessment stage.

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<sup>7</sup> See National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. *Why Do Victims Stay?* <https://ncadv.org/why-do-victims-stay>. (“One study found in interviews with men who have killed their wives that either threats of separation by their partner or actual separations were most often the precipitating events that lead to the murder.” (Citing U.S. Department of Justice. *Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence*. (2000).))

## Interviews with Survivor Parents

This section will walk through considerations for all phases of your interview with a survivor parent. There are decisions you can make before the interview begins to help support a survivor parent. Consider the following:

**Setting.** Ensure the setting is safe and accessible for the survivor parent. Options may include your office, the survivor parent's home, or alternative locations where the survivor parent feels comfortable. Assess these options to determine which is safest. For instance, if the harm doer may be present at the survivor parent's home, that may not be a safe option.

**Choice.** Allow choice and freedom within the setting. For example, perhaps the survivor parent can choose between sitting at a table, sitting on a couch, or even standing to have more movement in your office space. Allowing a survivor parent to make these decisions may help them to feel more at ease.

**Privacy.** Ensure privacy. Make sure that you know who else is present and how their presence could affect the survivor parent. For example, the harm doer's presence, or the presence of the harm doer's family members, during an interview may affect a survivor parent's comfort with sharing information freely.

**Accompaniment.** Allow the survivor parent to express their desire for a support person, such as a friend, family member, or domestic violence advocate, to accompany them to the interview.

**Language Access.** As in all cases, it is best for the CW professional to be speaking the same language as the survivor parent being interviewed. If an interpreter needs to be used, make sure the survivor parent is comfortable with the selected interpreter. For small language communities, a survivor parent may know the interpreters, so looking for other interpreter options would be worthwhile.

When the interview begins, set the appropriate tone with the survivor parent.

**Introduction.** Introduce yourself to set the tone for the rest of the interview. Providing your contact information right away prevents a rush at the end if an interview ends suddenly. It is critical to provide your contact information safely. For example, if a harm doer finds a CW professional's business card in the home, the survivor parent could face retaliation. Offer the survivor parent several options, such as taking a photograph of your contact information, writing down only a first name and phone number, saving your information under a disguised contact, or another method that promotes safety.

**Expectations.** Set realistic expectations with the survivor parent to promote trust in the CW system. When you provide the survivor parent with your contact information, make sure to tell them the best way to contact you and how long it typically takes to receive a response. Oftentimes, survivor parents have had bad experiences with systems that fail to follow-through, therefore set a realistic expectation for responses to the survivor parent's contact.

**Transparency.** Ensure that the survivor parent understands the purpose and possible outcomes of the CW system involvement and the role of the CW professional. For example, explain why you are gathering the information, with whom it may be shared, and how the survivor parent can access the information. It is critical for the survivor parent to understand that you as a CW professional are not the survivor parent's domestic violence advocate. Instead, explain what your job is and what the next steps are in the case.

Once you have established expectations for the interview, the next steps with the survivor parent are to gather information.

**Tone.** Use a warm tone and avoid sounding harsh or critical. A survivor parent is more likely to be responsive if they do not feel judged.

**Body language.** Use open body language that shows you are listening and responsive. If you need to take notes, whether by hand or typing, explain that you are doing so and why.

**Open-ended.** Use open-ended questions that allow the survivor parent to tell more of their perspective. Open-ended questions allow for responses with more information than a leading question would allow.

When survivor parents answer questions, they may display trauma responses that you are familiar with from your work with other families. Remember that a survivor parent has likely experienced trauma from domestic violence and may feel retraumatized by CW's involvement with the family. Some of a survivor parent's verbal and nonverbal responses to your interview questions could be trauma responses. Here are some possible responses that you may observe in an interview with a survivor parent.

- **Flat affect or nonchalance**
- **Slow response time**
- **Inaccurate or scattered memory**
- **Protecting the harm doer**
- **Anger**
- **Minimization**
- **Distrust**

For BIPOC survivor parents, there may be additional levels of traumatization and re-traumatization due to negative experiences with service systems and institutional structures with which they have interacted. As we discussed in the [Background section of this handbook](#), survivor parents may use strategies to best protect their children that do not initially appear to be protective. BIPOC survivor parents may have to act even more strategically to best protect their children not only from the harm doer, but also from systems that discriminate.

For instance, a survivor parent may be fearful of law enforcement because of disproportionate policing of BIPOC communities. Likewise, an immigrant survivor parent may be fearful that contact with law enforcement will result in immigration enforcement action being taken against them, especially because harm doers often leverage an undocumented immigrant survivor parent's status against them by threatening the survivor parent with deportation. It is crucial to understand this context throughout your interview.

For example, if you ask a survivor parent whether they ever called law enforcement to get help during an episode of violence, their answer may be "no." It may be helpful to reframe this as an open ended question, such as, "Tell me more about ways you sought safety," to elicit more information about resources that are available to the survivor parent and what resources may feel safest for the survivor parent to access. Exploring through an open-ended question like this could reveal that the survivor parent contacted other resources to support safety, such as a religious or community leader, for help during an episode of violence or that a survivor parent avoided contacting law enforcement for a specific, protective reason.

When a survivor parent answers your questions, be mindful that your responses are offered with appropriate tone and body language and continued conversation to encourage and support a responsive and responsible CW intervention.

## Disclosure

These interview techniques will help a survivor parent to feel more comfortable, and they may support the survivor parent's choice to make a disclosure of domestic violence. A survivor parent may even disclose domestic violence experience even if this was not a precipitating factor in CW intervention. On the other hand, there are many reasons that a survivor parent might not disclose domestic violence during an Initial Assessment interview or at any point during the CW process. When domestic violence was suspected, then regardless of whether a survivor parent explicitly discloses domestic violence has occurred, you should proceed with gathering and assessing information to determine whether there are safety concerns for children in the family home.

If a survivor parent discloses domestic violence, and in particular red flags such as strangulation, stalking, sexual assault, or threats to kill – all factors associated with a greater risk of lethality – then it is all the more important to connect the survivor parent with a domestic violence program. Domestic violence programs may be able to conduct lethality assessments as part of their domestic violence safety planning and connect a survivor parent with other resources to promote safety. You can find tips for interacting with a domestic violence program in the [Working with Domestic Violence Programs section of this Handbook](#).

## Interviews with Others in the Home

For sample questions for interviews with survivor parents, children, and harm doers in a domestic violence situation, review the DCF's [CPS Access & Initial Assessment Standards](#), specifically in Appendix 3.

## Substantiation

In order to substantiate abuse or neglect, the CW professional will gather and assess information that establishes all components of the statutory definitions for each type of maltreatment, as described in [statutes](#) and Standards. For cases where there is domestic violence, refer to the DCF's [CPS Access & Initial Assessment Standards](#), specifically, Appendix 6.

## Practice Applications: Ongoing Services

Ongoing Child Protective Services may be provided after the Initial Assessment. As with all cases, ongoing CW intervention with families experiencing domestic violence requires continued assessment and planning to ensure that case plans are effective, practical, and achievable.

## Case Planning

A case plan outlines the behavioral goals and accompanying services and supports for the parent(s), the children and youth, and the family so that the CW professionals can measure changes in the home. The case plan should reference other resources, such as community supports or perhaps a domestic violence safety plan that a survivor parent developed with a domestic violence advocate. It is important to take care when documenting information in the case plan regarding domestic violence to avoid blame or shame, and to be clear about responsibility and accountability. Below are examples of case plan language to avoid along with examples of more helpful ways to document comparable language. The examples provided are not intended to be a comprehensive representation of how case plans should be written for all families. Case plans should be individualized, and goals should focus on specific behaviors that are realistic and easily understandable. Additionally, they should be measurable so that it is known when the goal has been met.

**Cautionary note:** The example documentation language below references a survivor parent’s domestic violence safety plan, if the parent has one, into the CW case plan. Use of the suggested language should only be done if the survivor parent consents to incorporation of their domestic violence safety plan as developed with a domestic violence advocate. If the survivor parent has not developed a domestic violence safety plan, the CW professional may consider collaborating with a domestic violence advocate to help determine what types of things should be on a family’s case plan when domestic violence is present. As a reminder, if a child welfare professional does consult with a domestic violence advocate without the survivor parent’s involvement, confidentiality must be maintained.

<b>Case Plan Documentation Language that Needs Adjustment</b>	<b>The Issue</b>	<b>Case Plan Documentation Example of goals that could be used</b>	<b>Examples of services that could be associated with the Case Plan Goal</b>
<b>The survivor parent will prevent the children from witnessing domestic violence.</b>	This language holds the survivor parent responsible rather than holding the harm doer responsible for stopping the behavior.	The protective parent will protect the child(ren) from unsafe or violent situations by removing the child(ren) from the environment.	A service associated with this goal could include the domestic violence safety plan the survivor parent developed with a domestic violence advocate. *
<b>The mother will call law enforcement when the abuser violates the restraining order.</b>	This language requires the survivor parent to enforce sanctions against the harm doer, potentially putting the survivor parent at risk of retaliation.	The protective parent will protect the child(ren) from unsafe or violent situations by seeking support from a safe person.	A service associated with this goal could include the domestic violence safety plan the survivor parent developed with a domestic violence advocate. *
<b>The domestic violence will be stopped.</b>	This language does not establish a plan for either parent, and it implies that both parents are responsible for the abuse.	The harm doer will maintain a safe and suitable living environment for the child(ren), including refraining from using physical violence against the other parent.	A service could be a referral for the harm doer to participate in counseling, a support group, or other resources that assists with changing behaviors that result in power and control dynamics in the home.

<p><b>The abuser will attend an anger management program to stop the domestic violence.</b></p>	<p>This language suggests that the pattern of domestic violence is due to the harm doer's anger – it ignores the dynamics of power and control in domestic violence.</p>	<p>The harm doer will have a domestic violence/mental health/substance use assessment and follow the resulting recommendations to understand the patterns of power and control and how their use of violence affects their child(ren)'s safety.</p>	<p>A service associated with this goal could include completing a domestic violence/mental health/substance use assessment.</p> <p>The case plan may need to be revised based on additional recommendations.</p>
<p><b>The parents will attend family therapy/couple's counseling to stop the violence.</b></p>	<p>This language suggests that both parents are equally responsible for stopping the abuse.</p>	<p>The harm doer will have a mental health assessment and follow the resulting recommendations to understand the patterns of power and control and how their use of violence affects their child's safety.</p> <p><b>Note:</b> Following the harm doer's successful demonstration of safe parenting and refraining from violent behavior, then consideration can be given to family therapy if mutually agreed on by both parents. (This should be survivor parent-driven or child-driven.)</p> <p>The harm doer will demonstrate safe parenting and will refrain from violent behavior.</p>	<p>A service associated with this goal could include completing a mental health assessment and creating a plan that attends to the treatment recommendations.</p> <p>The case plan goals may need to be revised depending on the recommendations of the evaluation.</p>

\* A service associated with this goal could include a domestic violence safety plan the survivor parent developed with a domestic violence advocate. As a reminder, a child welfare professional will need a release of information signed by the survivor parent to consult with the DV advocate. If a child welfare professional does consult with a domestic violence advocate without the survivor parent's involvement, the family's confidentiality must be maintained.

## Family Interaction

Domestic violence cases are complex and can affect children on a deep emotional level regardless of whether the child experienced physical harm. Risks to parent survivors of domestic violence and their children increase when there is a major change in family circumstances, such as separation or out-of-home placement of children, perhaps precipitated by a CW case, and the harm doer attempts to regain control over the family. Indeed, risk of homicide increases when a survivor parent leaves or threatens to leave a harm doer.<sup>8</sup> This risk makes it critical for CW professionals to be cognizant of the challenges and potential dangers that survivor parents face when working within a family interaction, often referred to as child visitation, plan and child exchange procedures. For more best practices to support safe family interaction, review the DCF's [Ongoing Service Standards](#).

## Supporting a Child after Exposure to Domestic Violence

When working with a child who has been exposed to domestic violence, supporting their safety and opportunities to heal from trauma are priorities. Your case plan, as CW professional, for a child who has been exposed to domestic violence may be coordinated with the survivor parent's domestic violence safety plan where applicable. Ensure the child's continued safety by establishing protections for any contact the child, and the survivor parent, will continue to have with the harm doer. For instance, plan for safe visitation with the harm doer and safe child exchanges between the survivor parent and harm doer if applicable.

A child who has been exposed to domestic violence will likely benefit from support services with which you connect other children. For example, group or individual counseling, which may be available specifically for children who have been exposed to domestic violence, referrals to community-based enrichment programs, and programming associated with the child's school.

## Supporting a Survivor Parent's Healing and Recovery

Just as you would in providing CW services to any family, including those without domestic violence, it is critical to recognize that CW involvement is a traumatic experience for families. You can use your role to encourage the survivor parent to build on their protective capacities and offer support using a strengths-based perspective. If the survivor parent identifies resources that could benefit the family's healing and recovery process, it may help the survivor parent to access resources and follow-through on using those resources if you are able to assist in coordinating services.

## Supporting a Family by Supporting a Harm Doer through their Change Process

As a CW professional, you can support overall family safety by supporting the harm doer through their change process to stop violence in the home. When working with a family who has experienced domestic violence, some survivor parents may wish to see their harm doer punished. However, to advance overall family functioning and to best ensure child safety, the goal is to increase the harm doer parent's protective capacities. A few steps include:

- Promote understanding of the impacts of domestic violence on children and youth
- Support the harm doer taking responsibility for past domestic violence

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<sup>8</sup> See National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. *Why Do Victims Stay?* <https://ncadv.org/why-do-victims-stay>. ("One study found in interviews with men who have killed their wives that either threats of separation by their partner or actual separations were most often the precipitating events that lead to the murder." (Citing U.S. Department of Justice. *Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence*. (2000).))

- Support the harm doer’s progress to stop using violence by contacting collaterals who can evaluate their behavioral changes
- Coordinate any supportive services or resources that will advance the harm doer’s efforts to stop using violence

Supporting the family will look different for the survivor parent and harm doer parent. Each parent will have different behavioral goals and will need individualized support to further their progress toward these goals.

## **Domestic Violence Safety Planning**

Domestic violence advocates may use the term “safety plan” differently than CW professionals. A domestic violence safety plan is an individualized plan that accounts for a survivor parent’s specific circumstances (e.g., resources available, ages of the survivor parent’s children, etc.) to help survivor parents develop tools in advance of potentially dangerous situations. Safety plans for domestic abuse survivor parents will vary depending on whether survivor parents are separated from the abuser, thinking about leaving, returning to, or remaining in the relationship.

Safety plans are not intended to hold survivor parents responsible for preventing future abuse. Rather, these plans can help survivor parents feel empowered and provide concrete steps to help avoid or minimize harm from abusive action. Ideally, during CW intervention, a survivor parent should be invited to discuss their situation with an advocate from a local domestic violence program to develop a domestic violence safety plan and explore other resources.

During the provision of Ongoing Services, if the survivor parent thinks it would be supportive of their safety, it may be helpful for you as the CW professional to review and understand the survivor parent’s domestic violence safety plan. If the survivor parent is interested, the domestic violence safety plan may add depth, relevance, and service continuity into the case plan developed as part of the CW intervention.

## **Identifying and Managing Safety Threats**

As in any providing CW services to any family, it is critical to assess, plan for, and manage child safety on an ongoing basis. When deciding whether a child is safe or unsafe, domestic violence must be considered. For example, if a threat to a child’s safety has not been identified, but domestic violence is occurring in the family, be sure to still explore options with the survivor parent for the survivor parent’s safety. You can refer the survivor parent to a local domestic violence program and other available resources. When a survivor parent has been identified, demonstrates, and is able to protect the child despite domestic violence, be aware of the complexities of the situation and consult with a supervisor. When a threat to child safety is identified, the survivor parent is a critical person in the safety plan to keep the survivor parent and child in the home together safely, which should be the goal whenever possible.

You can learn more about safety decisions and safety plans by reviewing DCF’s [CPS Safety Intervention Standards](#).



## Working with Domestic Violence Programs

When working with a family where domestic violence dynamics are present it can be very helpful to connect them with a domestic violence program in the survivor parent's area, and in particular with a culturally-specific domestic violence program where applicable. You may find it easiest to refer a survivor parent to a domestic violence program if you are already familiar with the program, its offerings, and some of the program's advocates and other employees.

You can familiarize yourself with domestic violence programs across the state – including tribal programs and culturally-specific programs – by visiting the Get Help page of End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence:

<https://www.endabusewi.org/get-help/>.

Some domestic violence programs are geographically based – these programs provide services for survivors living within a certain county or other geographically defined area. Other domestic violence programs are population-based or culturally-specific – these programs offer services to survivors from specific cultural backgrounds or survivors who have specific needs. For example, in some areas, there are domestic violence programs that focus on Black survivors, Latinx survivors, Indigenous survivors, Asian and Pacific Islander survivors, survivors with specific religious backgrounds, LGBTQIA2S+ survivors, survivors with disabilities, older adult survivors, and more.

Some domestic violence programs may have limitations, often due to funding constraints, on who they can serve based on both geography and population. When working with a family who is experiencing domestic violence, it is most useful to offer both geographic and culturally-specific programs whenever possible; this allows the survivor to choose whichever type of program feels best for them. If you are unable to locate a culturally-specific program to work with a survivor, oftentimes connecting them with their local domestic violence program is the best step to take next and, as relevant and appropriate, can help connect the survivor to a culturally-specific program or a program in the geographic area nearest to the survivor.

### What Domestic Violence Programs May Offer

Each domestic violence program will be unique and may have different offerings and offer resources in different ways. Getting to know local programs will be the best way to have a comprehensive understanding of what services a survivor parent could receive. Some common offerings that domestic violence programs offer include the following:

- **Advocacy:** Domestic violence programs can assist with or help connect survivor parents with other resources for housing needs, employment, educational and financial resources, childcare, medical care, and applying for other services or benefits.
- **Legal advocacy:** Domestic violence programs can provide legal information, provide accompaniment for court appearances, offer assistance with obtaining/enforcing a restraining order, assist a survivor parent with finding a lawyer, and connect survivor parents to other resources, such as address confidentiality through Wisconsin's Safe at Home program.
- **Domestic violence safety planning:** Domestic violence programs can help survivor parents to develop a plan to reduce their risk of harm whether they are remaining in, leaving, or have already left a domestic violence situation. Safety planning could include providing resources such as a cell phone, emergency housing, or crisis counseling.

- **Support groups:** Domestic violence programs may offer support groups where survivors attend virtual or in-person groups to connect with other survivors, share experiences, and receive support from advocates. Some programs may offer specialized support groups for parent survivors, older adult survivors, teen survivors, LGBTQIA2S+ survivors, and survivors from specific cultural groups.
- **Housing:** Domestic violence programs can offer support to survivor parents seeking housing.
  - **Shelter:** Free, secure, emergency shelter and food for survivor parents and their families in crisis.
  - **Temporary housing:** Short-term, emergency stays in non-shelter locations, such as in hotels.
  - **Transitional housing:** Housing with support services and programming to help survivor parents transition to independent housing.
- **Basic necessities:** Domestic violence programs may offer items such as food, clothing, toiletries, and other items that survivor parents and their children need.
- **Child and youth advocacy:** Specific services for children and youth survivors of domestic violence as well as those who witnessed domestic violence against a family member.
- **Crisis counseling:** Domestic violence programs may operate a 24/7 call or text line to support survivors in crisis.
- **Supervised child visits and child placement exchanges:** Domestic violence programs may offer supervision for court-mandated supervised placement with another parent or caregiver and offer supervised child placement exchanges.
- **Working with Harm Doers:** Domestic violence programs may work with harm doers too, as a model to improve overall family safety and reduce harm for survivor parents.

## Partnering with Domestic Violence Programs

For CW professionals involved with a family affected by domestic violence, referring to and partnering with a domestic violence program means that survivor parents and their children can receive a variety of services that meet their specific needs. Domestic violence programs have professional staff who are subject matter experts on domestic violence and support survivor parents. All domestic abuse program staff are trained in domestic violence and are skilled at providing support and advocacy to victims.

Domestic violence programs offer services that are often not available elsewhere in the community. Referring to and collaborating with a domestic violence program can enhance the efforts of CW professionals to meet the needs of families and keep children safe in their homes.

To help you get to know your local domestic violence program, here are some questions you can ask.

- When we know or suspect a family is experiencing domestic violence, how can we best connect the survivor parent with your program? Does a survivor parent need to request services themselves?
- What type of release of information might you require from a CW professional? How do you handle referrals?
- What are your policies on confidentiality and releasing client information?
- What help is available for survivor parents of domestic violence?
- What services are available for children in a domestic violence situation?
- Are there multicultural and multilingual staff at your agency? If not, could you direct a survivor parent to a culturally and linguistically relevant resource?

- What type of housing assistance do you offer? What are the requirements for a survivor parent to receive housing support?
- If you are a shelter-based program, what policies do you have such as the maximum stay? What if the shelter is full? What are the policies in place for residents?
- What is your program’s policy on reporting suspected child abuse and neglect?
- How can we work together to serve families experiencing domestic violence and child maltreatment?

Remember, it may be helpful to begin developing a relationship with a domestic violence program even before you encounter a case where domestic violence is a concern. Like CW professionals, domestic violence programs want to promote the safety and confidentiality of survivor parents and their children. Being proactive in partnering with a domestic violence program can be useful in child safety and family functioning. Always talk to a survivor parent and obtain their permission before making any referral to a domestic violence program or other resource.

## Resources

Families who have experienced domestic violence will often benefit from the community resources you use when working with other families. It may be helpful for you as the CW professional to leverage your existing connections to community programs and resources to help a family who has experienced domestic violence. For example, when relevant, consider connecting families to programming for children, programs associated with a child’s school, employment programs, and housing navigators.

In addition to general community resources, it may be helpful to understand the other systems that families who have experienced domestic violence may encounter, in particular, the legal system.

### Wisconsin Statutes Related to Domestic Violence

There are many statutes related to domestic violence. These tend to use the word “victim” when referring to someone who has experienced domestic violence. Some of the language in this Resources section will mirror statutory language to avoid changing the meaning of the laws.

Below is a table that overviews just some of the laws that you may encounter in the course of working with a family who has experienced domestic violence. Oftentimes, a domestic violence program will have an understanding of statutes that may affect a survivor parent that you are working with in a CW case. Laws do change over time, and so consulting with a domestic violence program will help to ensure your understanding of relevant statutes is up to date.

General Domestic Violence	
<b>Domestic abuse definition:</b> This definition is found in Wisconsin’s criminal code.	<a href="#">968.075(1)(a)</a>
<b>Domestic abuse definition:</b> This definition is found in Wisconsin’s domestic abuse restraining order statute.	<a href="#">813.12(1)(am)</a>
<b>Victim service representative:</b> Victims may have the right to have an advocate present with them in certain court situations.	<a href="#">895.45</a>
Confidentiality	
<b>Non-disclosure:</b> Domestic violence and sexual assault advocates are obligated to refrain from sharing certain information, such as location, about survivors.	<a href="#">995.67</a>
<b>Victim-advocate privilege:</b> A victim has a privilege to refuse to disclose and to prevent others from disclosing information obtained in the course of advocacy.	<a href="#">905.045</a>

Restraining Orders	
<b>Domestic abuse restraining order:</b> May prohibit domestic abuse behavior – including sexual assault and stalking – and other types of contact. The domestic abuse restraining order is suitable for one adult petitioner against another adult (a) with whom the petitioner is or was in a dating relationship, (b) who is a family member, (c) who is a current or former household member, (d) who is a caregiver, (e) who is a former spouse, or (f) with whom the petitioner has a child in common.	<a href="#">813.12</a>
<b>Harassment restraining order:</b> May prohibit harassment and abusive behavior – including domestic abuse, sexual assault, and stalking – and other types of contact. The petitioner can be an adult or child and the respondent can be an adult (with fewer relational requirements than for a domestic abuse restraining order) or a child.	<a href="#">813.125</a>
<b>Child abuse restraining order:</b> May prohibit child abuse behavior and other types of contact by the respondent.	<a href="#">813.122</a>
<b>Individual at risk restraining order:</b> May prohibit abusive behavior and other types of contact by the respondent. Can be sought by and on behalf of petitioners who are an elder adult or an adult at risk.	<a href="#">813.123</a>
Criminal Law	
<b>Mandatory arrest:</b> Law enforcement shall arrest a person if the officer has reasonable grounds to believe that the person is committing or has committed domestic abuse AND (a) there is a reasonable basis for believing that continued domestic abuse against the alleged victim is likely, (b) there is evidence of physical injury to the alleged victim, or (c) the person is the predominant aggressor.	<a href="#">968.075(2)(a)</a>
<b>No dual arrests:</b> If an officer identifies a predominant aggressor in a domestic violence incident, it is generally not appropriate for the officer to arrest anyone under the mandatory arrest provision except the predominant aggressor.	<a href="#">968.075(2)(am)</a>
Family Law	
<b>Domestic violence presumption:</b> If the court finds by a preponderance of the evidence that a party has engaged in a serious incident of interspousal battery or domestic abuse, there is a rebuttable presumption that it is detrimental to the child and contrary to the child’s best interest to award joint or sole legal custody to that party.	<a href="#">767.41(d)</a>

While any of the above statutes could be relevant to a family experiencing domestic violence, a restraining order, in particular, could be used as part of a survivor parent’s domestic violence safety plan that they create with a domestic violence advocate. To learn more about the process of obtaining a restraining order and the strengths and limitations of restraining orders to keep survivor parents and their children safe, you can talk to a domestic violence program. Keep in mind, it would be outside the role of a CW professional to mandate a survivor parent to seek a restraining order.

## Domestic Violence and Confidentiality Laws

All of the statutes above may be helpful resources to you while working with a family experiencing domestic violence. Some statutes that may impact your work most directly are those that govern domestic violence programs’ confidentiality obligations.

First, Wisconsin statutes include the non-disclosure law and advocate-victim privilege law, which are in the table above. The non-disclosure law prevents domestic violence programs from sharing the location of a service recipient. The advocate-victim privilege law gives a victim the privilege to refuse to disclose and prevent disclosure of confidential communications that occurred in the course of services being provided to the victim.

Second, many domestic violence programs receive various forms of federal funding, and this means they are bound to also follow those federal confidentiality laws. For example, programs may receive funding under the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA), the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), and the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA). FVPSA, VAWA, and VOCA each have confidentiality provisions requiring domestic violence programs to protect survivor parents and their families by not disclosing their information without a survivor parent's informed, written consent. Each of the laws varies in its specific language. If a program receives funding from multiple sources, the program must follow the *strictest* confidentiality requirements.

These confidentiality requirements, in addition to ethical and safety considerations, mean that domestic violence programs must be very careful when sharing information about a survivor parent. It may be helpful to understand a domestic violence program's confidentiality policy to improve your collaboration to keep families safer. For example, you may be able to collaborate with a domestic violence program most seamlessly if both you as the CW professional and the domestic violence program have applicable release of information documents from each other.

## Batterers Treatment Programs

When you are seeking to support a harm doer's change process, batterers' intervention programs may be one option. You can contact your local domestic violence program to find out whether there are any programs for harm doers. Some batterers' intervention programs are licensed in order to meet requirements that courts set in family law, criminal proceedings, and other types of legal cases.

## Conclusion

This Handbook is meant as a supportive resource for CW professionals to provide trauma-informed guidance for issues you may encounter and to carry out responsive CW practices when working with a family who has experienced domestic violence. As a CW professional, your goal of child safety can be achieved in tandem with supporting a survivor parent's empowerment – this Handbook intends to support both those aspirations. For holistic support of families who have experienced domestic violence, utilize community resources available locally, including a domestic violence program.

In addition to acting as a resource for CW professionals, this Handbook represents an opportunity for increased understanding and collaboration, and ultimately partnership, between CW professionals and domestic violence advocates.



Wisconsin Department of  
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