

Children & Youth Advocate Manual

Section 9: Facilitating Conversations With Protective Caregivers



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Introduction & Importance

Advocates can play an important role in beginning to repair the harm done by abusers to relationships between protective caregivers and their children. It is imperative that you build rapport with both protective caregiver and their children before diving into deeper issues or programming. Family members may be concerned about having these conversations, and this is where advocates can help. Many advocates are concerned that they may not have the skills to facilitate these discussions, or that talking about abuse will open feelings and problems that advocates, and families are not prepared to handle. It is important for advocates to understand they may be the last person a protective caregiver wants to speak with, while acknowledging that the protective caregiver may be feeling pulled in many different directions while in crisis. Here are some goals and strategies that advocates can consider before starting these conversations.

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Suggestions for Facilitating Conversations

Advocate Readiness for Difficult Conversations

Advocates may worry about crossing the therapy line or may fear taking on a family's conflict, sadness and pain. This can be particularly true when children are involved. It is important for advocates to be aware of their own fears and to acknowledge the boundaries of the work. *We want the families to take the lead on their path to healing from the trauma they experienced.* Remember that most protective caregivers access services to protect their children. It can be harmful to force families into these conversations before they are ready.

Advocates can be especially concerned about exposing children to these conversations. Facilitating these conversations is not damaging to children. Allowing the families to tell their stories and talk openly about their experiences can be validating for families. Research on resilience in children exposed to domestic abuse confirms that children benefit from a nurturing relationship with their protective caregiver and from support for the expression of feelings.

Domestic abuse staff should become comfortable being present with protective caregivers, children, and the families. Consulting with other staff and supporting one another is critical. Trauma-informed practice, active listening, and family safety planning are important tools for these conversations. (Refer to [New Advocate Manual: Trauma Informed Practices](#). You will need a login to access the information and scroll down to MEMBER-ONLY Resources)

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With Protective Caregivers



Goals for Protective Caregiver-Child Conversations

Here are some suggested goals that are appropriate when facilitating conversations between protective caregivers and children.

1. Protective caregivers feel supported to reclaim their parenting, able to identify their strengths as caregiver, and able to talk with their children about the domestic abuse they were exposed to.
 - a. This is the most important, and sometimes the most difficult, part of strengthening caregiver-child relationships. Protective caregivers should take the time they need to begin to come to terms with the impact of domestic abuse on their parenting and their families. Advocates should support protective caregivers so that protective caregivers are better able to support their children.
2. Children able to express their feelings and perspective AND have those feelings and perspectives validated.
 - a. Protective caregivers listen compassionately to their children and acknowledge what they have experienced and how they feel.
 - b. Protective caregivers listen and respond with empathy and in a developmentally sensitive manner.
 - c. Children are NOT placed in a listening role for their protective caregivers. That's the advocate's job. We support the protective caregiver so they can support their children.
 - d. The child can tell their story and tell their story without being corrected. If family members disagree, it may be helpful to say, "I'm hearing that you both saw that experience a little differently and that is ok. It is good to know that you have different perspectives on that."
3. Children and protective caregivers do not feel blamed for their experiences.
 - a. Advocates can help family members discuss their experiences without condemning others. Domestic abuse is not the fault of the protective caregivers or the children.
 - b. Distinguish between the abuser and their behavior, especially if the abuser is the child's caregiver.
4. A safety plan is created with the whole family that everyone understands and agrees too.
 - a. The safety plan highlights the strengths and connectedness of family members.
 - b. The safety planning process places protective caregivers in the role of caring, competent parents.
 - c. It offers opportunities for protective caregivers to learn about what their children have seen and know about the abuse.
 - d. Safety planning together as a family provides a strength-based opportunity to talk together, plan for their safety, and discuss abuse as they are ready and able. It also offers caregivers a chance to demonstrate their protective capacities.

Non-Violent Communication

Here is a document how to craft [non-violent communication](#) between people that includes a worksheet people can fill out beforehand. This activity can be practiced in groups or in their home settings.

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Always Start Conversations with Protective Caregivers

It's important to begin by talking one-on-one with protective caregivers. Do not force these conversations. It is important to have conversations with the protective caregiver ahead of time to help them understand the impacts of trauma on their children. This understanding should take place before protective caregivers have conversations around the impact of trauma on their family.

***TIP:** It may be helpful to talk in general terms of how trauma affects children versus talking about the family's trauma directly if a protective caregiver is not at a place to talk about the impacts of abuse on their children.*

Many protective caregivers believe that their children have been shielded from the abuse and do not want to consider that this thinking might not be true. Often, these conversations will be the first time a protective caregiver has allowed herself to think about the impact of domestic abuse exposure on their children. Start slowly, begin with the protective caregiver's concerns. If a protective caregiver becomes very reluctant or defensive, then it may be too soon for these conversations.

Some protective caregivers in crisis are not open to talking about or receiving help for their relationships with their children. They can be overwhelmed by survival concerns and may feel too vulnerable or defensive about their batterer-dominated parenting, especially if this is not the original intent for them seeking services. Once they have trust for staff and have moved beyond the crisis, they are often ready to focus on improving their relationships with their children. When a protective caregiver is willing, introduce the idea of talking with their children about the abuse at home. Acknowledge that parenting in public can be difficult and assure the protective caregiver that you are not judging them as a caregiver. These questions can present opportunities to initiate conversations with mothers about talking to their children. Some example questions include:

- What concerns are you having about your child's behaviors?
 - What do you think is causing those concerns?
- What are some practices you and your child can create to cope with this?
- What conversations has your family had about receiving services?
 - We can set up a time to meet as a family to have these conversations if you would like.

Another method to introduce these conversations is to talk about what is known about the effects of domestic abuse on children. Ask if they have noticed any of the affects you mention, and ease into a discussion of their family. It may help to assist the protective caregiver in identifying what they have done to protect their children. Make a list together; pay attention to decisions that may look like survival parenting, and make sure that they know that you understand the difficult choices they must make.

It may also be useful to help a protective caregiver think of topics that could arise in protective caregiver-child conversations as belonging in one of three categories: OK to talk about, worried to talk about, not OK to talk about. If you are preparing for a conversation with children, protective caregivers can choose to talk about OK topics, one or two worried topics, and agree to stay away from topics that are too difficult.

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Conversations with Protective Caregivers and Children

These conversations should always be opportunities for protective caregivers to feel like good caregivers and for children to feel listened to and cared for by their protective caregivers. Any conversation that creates this opportunity is important, even if domestic abuse is never mentioned. The protective caregiver and advocate(s) should go over questions that may be asked, potential responses from their children, and when the protective caregiver would want the advocate to intervene. Many advocates agree that acknowledging both what children have seen or heard, and how witnessing abuse affected them, matters to children.

When first meeting with the family, it is more important that everyone is connecting with one another. Some suggested questions for the first family one-on-one are:

- What activities do you do as a family?
- What is a happy moment you have with your family?
- What holidays/celebrations do you like having with your family?
- What do you wish your family did more?

It is very important to remember that ONLY IF NECESSARY, should you start the first meeting with creating family discussion guidelines that everyone understands and can agree to. Examples of when guidelines may be useful to incorporate are when family members are talking over each other or continually speaking for others in the family. If a family member is dominating the conversation, ask others what they think about what has been said. Some suggestions for guidelines:

- One person talks at a time.
- Questions will be answered honestly.
- Take breaks if conversation is getting heated.
- Start and end on time.
- No yelling

Suggestions for Facilitating Family Conversations

Some advocates from around the state have created a family events calendar that is displayed in their agency that everyone can see. Others have created a family events calendar that they print and give to the protective caregivers. To find activities in your community try looking at websites like your city, school district, youth serving agencies, etc.

- Have the family lead the discussion.
- Maintain your role as facilitator of the discussion.
- Show respect and concern for every member of the family.
- Support the adult's role as caregiver.
- Support everyone's right to be heard.
- Respect the family's values.
- Ask about the family rules, traditions, cultural, or religious beliefs or practices.
- Identify strengths in individual family members and in the family.
- Do not judge, blame, or take sides.
- Use active listening skills.
- Expect expressions of anger or other distress, but do not allow threats or abusive behavior.
- Take breaks and have a separate conversation with one or more family members if anger or silence create an impasse.
- The family members should talk to each other rather than to the advocate.
- Look for informal opportunities to support good conversations between protective caregivers and children.
- Use art, music, yoga, and relaxation exercises to bring families together.

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Learning Strengths and Challenges

In most Wisconsin domestic abuse programs, assessments are meant to be an informal process that should be thought of more as learning about the family and building a relationship for supporting them. Advocates should remember to focus on the strengths of the youth and family. It can be easy to get caught up in talking about the negatives and setbacks the family has faced, so redirecting to focus on positives is key when working with the family.

How this Guide and the Children and Youth Assessment Questions may be useful:

- Aid advocates in working with protective caregivers and children to talk about their family's strengths and difficulties when entering programs
- Designed to get to know each child, teen, and family while determining the program might help
- Sample questions are intended to guide a conversation by being a starting point for establishing a supportive relationship with a child, teen, or protective caregiver
- These questions should be used as a guide to building rapport with protective caregivers and youth and getting to know them better
- Questions cover seven areas important to the well-being of children and youth's physical health, developmental growth, behavior, emotional health, home life, school, and school development

What this Guide and Children and Youth Assessment Questions do not do:

- Specifically assess for child abuse or include questions about risky behavior, such as substance use, that may be important to evaluating the well-being of older youth and teens
- Specifically assess for the impact of domestic abuse, although it will be important to talk about the youth's exposure to domestic abuse in order to understand them better
- Questions are not intended to be developmentally appropriate and should be modified or skipped as is fitting for each child, teen, or protective caregiver

Strengths and challenges conversations are only a beginning and should be supplemented by observation and relationship-building. There are no child development questions for children and youth included in this guide, as it isn't reasonable to ask protective caregivers and children to assess their own developmental progress.

Advocates should make sure that youth know what information will be shared with their protective caregivers and explain the youth intake procedure to the protective caregivers in advance. Many programs collect information on youth by facilitating joint conversations with protective caregivers and children. This encourages them to talk together about their experiences and reinforces the importance of the caregiver-child relationship. Programs that do joint intakes should talk with the protective caregiver in advance to learn if there are specific things that they do or do not want to talk about in the presence of their children. Both protective caregivers and children may be uneasy when advocates meet with youth alone. Protective caregivers may be concerned about what information their children will be asked to reveal, and children and teens may worry about their protective caregiver's reaction to what they share with an advocate.

Remember: Use great care when recording notes from conversations, as case files can be subpoenaed and used in court. If a child discloses information that causes concern to report, it is always important to begin by following your agency's guidelines regarding your obligation to report child abuse or contact primary caregivers regarding safety concerns.

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Children and Youth Assessment Questions for Protective Caregivers

The questions below were taken from *Helping Children Thrive: Supporting Woman Abuse Survivors as Mothers*. Pages 46-47 and page 57 of the [Helping Children Exposed to Violence at Home: An Essentials Guide](#) contain a guide to helping protective caregivers identify their needs for their family, and can be used in combination with these questions. Having the [Potential Needs Chart](#) from section Abuse Effects on Protective Caregiver's Parenting may help move along different conversations.

General

- Describe your child.
- What are some of the things you like best about your child?
- What does your child do that makes you proud?
- How would you describe your relationship with your child?
- Does your child know why your family is staying here? (For shelter programs)
- What would you like to tell me about your family's culture or traditions that will help us understand you better?

Physical Health

- Is your child usually healthy?
- Does your child have a history of health problems?
- Does your child have any current health problems that concern you?
- Would you like to find medical help for your child?
- When was your child's last well child visit to a doctor or health clinic?

Child Development

- What does your child do well for someone his/her age?
- Are there ways that your child is behind other children his/her age?
- In general, do you think that your child's development is appropriate for his/her age?
- Do you have any concerns about how your child is growing and developing?
- Would you like more information about or help with your child's growth and development?

Behavior

- How is your child cooperative and well-behaved?
- Are there times when your child's behavior is a problem?
- How would you describe your child's overall behavior?
- What do you do that's effective in helping your child manage his/her behavior?
- Do you ever have difficulty coping with behavior problems in your child?
- Would you like help coping with your child's behavior?

Emotional Health

- When does your child usually feel relaxed and happy?
- Are there times when your child is depressed, withdrawn, anxious or angry?
- In general, how would you describe your child's emotional health?
- Has trouble with your partner or abuse in your home caused problems for your child? If so, how?
- Do your child's moods or emotions ever cause you concern?
- Can you talk to your child about his/her feelings?
- Can you talk to your child about problems in your family?
- Would you like to find help to improve your child's emotional well-being?

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Home Life

- What do you enjoy about living with your child?
- Are there times when living with your child is a challenge?
- Who in your family does your child usually get along with? Who do they usually have conflicts with?
- Do your child's family conflicts ever become too difficult to handle?
- Would you like to find help to better handle your child's behavior at home?
- Is it important to you to give your child a sense of cultural pride or family tradition that makes him or her a stronger person?

School

- What are your child's successes in school?
- Are there parts of school that are difficult for your child?
- Are you concerned about any part of your child's progress at school?
- Who are the teachers and other staff you feel comfortable talking to about your child's progress at school?
- Would you like help with any part of your child's progress at school?

Friends and Social Relationships

- What makes your child good at being a friend?
- Does your child have any problems getting along with friends or other people?
- Is there anything that concerns you about your child's relationships with other people?
- Do you think your child could use help in improving their social or friendship skills?

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Resources

[Before You Talk to Your Children: How Your Feelings Matter](#) This factsheet is to help caregivers explain to how to take time to reflect on your own thoughts, feelings, and reactions to stressful events BEFORE talking to children.

[Helping Children Exposed to Violence at Home: An Essentials Guide \(2017\)](#) This guide is an updated and revised version of the 2004 publication titled “Helping children thrive: Supporting woman abuse survivors as mothers”, the 2007 publication titled “Little eyes, little ears: How violence against a mother shapes children as they grow” and the 2008 publication titled “Helping an Abused Woman: 101 Things to Know, Say, and Do”. The guide addresses: the needs of abused women as mothers, the effects of power and control tactics on mothers, and the potential impact of woman abuse on children of different ages.

[Listening and Talking to Your Child About Domestic Violence](#) This factsheet is to help you understand how children may react to domestic violence, and how you can best help them feel safe and valued and develop personal strength. Within the factsheet are tips for how to talk to your children and what to listen for.

Pretty Good Design has created [Your Kids Aren’t Too Young to Talk About Race: Resource Roundup](#). This resource contains links to podcasts, articles, books, toys, studies, and more to help adults talk about race to youth.

[Talking About Traumatic Events: Helping Children Cope](#) This PDF goes through steps on how to work with youth who have been through traumatic events.

[Wheel of Choice](#) A primary theme of Positive Discipline is to focus on solutions. The wheel of choice provides an excellent way to focus on solutions, especially when youth are involved in creating the Wheel of Choice.

Please notify the LGBTQ & Youth Program Director, [Cody Warner](#), if ANY links are no longer working.
