

Children & Youth Advocate Manual

Section 9: Facilitating Conversations With Protective Caregivers



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Introduction & Importance

Advocates can play an important role in repairing 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 may be hesitant 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 during their 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)

Non-Violent Communication

Here is a document on 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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Goals for Protective Caregiver-Child Conversations



Goals with Protective Caregivers

Able to identify their strengths as a caregiver.

Feel supported to reclaim their parenting.

Listen and respond with empathy in a developmentally appropriate way.

Acknowledge what their child has experienced and how they feel.

Be ready to talk about their traumas with their child.

Goals with Children

Be able to express their feelings and perspectives.

Communicate their story without being corrected.

Have their feelings and perspectives validated.

NOT be placed in a listening role for their protective caregiver.

Goals for Both Protective Caregiver and Children

Not feel blamed for their experiences.

Know their trauma experience is not their fault.

Discuss their experience without blaming others.

Be able to distinguish the behavior from the person.

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Considerations BEFORE Having a Conversation with Protective Caregivers

Start slowly, begin with the protective caregiver's concerns. If a protective caregiver is 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 about their parenting, especially if this is not the original intent for them seeking services.

Do not force these conversations. It is important to have these 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 about the impact of trauma on their family.

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 themselves to think about the impact of domestic abuse exposure on their children.

Always Start Conversations with Protective Caregivers

It's important to begin by talking one-on-one with protective caregivers once they have trust in the staff and have moved beyond the crisis. Acknowledge that parenting in public can be difficult and assure the protective caregiver that you are not judging them as a caregiver. When a protective caregiver is willing, introduce the idea of talking with their children about the abuse at home.

QUESTIONS TO INITIATE CONVERSATIONS WITH PROTECTIVE CAREGIVERS ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN

What are things you are proud of your child?

What are some practices you and your child have created to cope in the past?

What resources are you interested in exploring?

What conversations has your family had about receiving services?

What concerns are you having about your child's behaviors?

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 effects you mention, and ease into a discussion of their family.

TIP: Assist the protective caregiver in identifying what they have done to protect their children.

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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 create a list of topics that could arise in protective caregiver-child conversations. As you are discussing the topics identify them as 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.

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 and is feeling heard.

FAMILY 1:1 SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

What activities do you
do as a family?

What is a happy moment
you have with your family?

What celebrations do you like
having with your family?

What do you wish your
family did more?

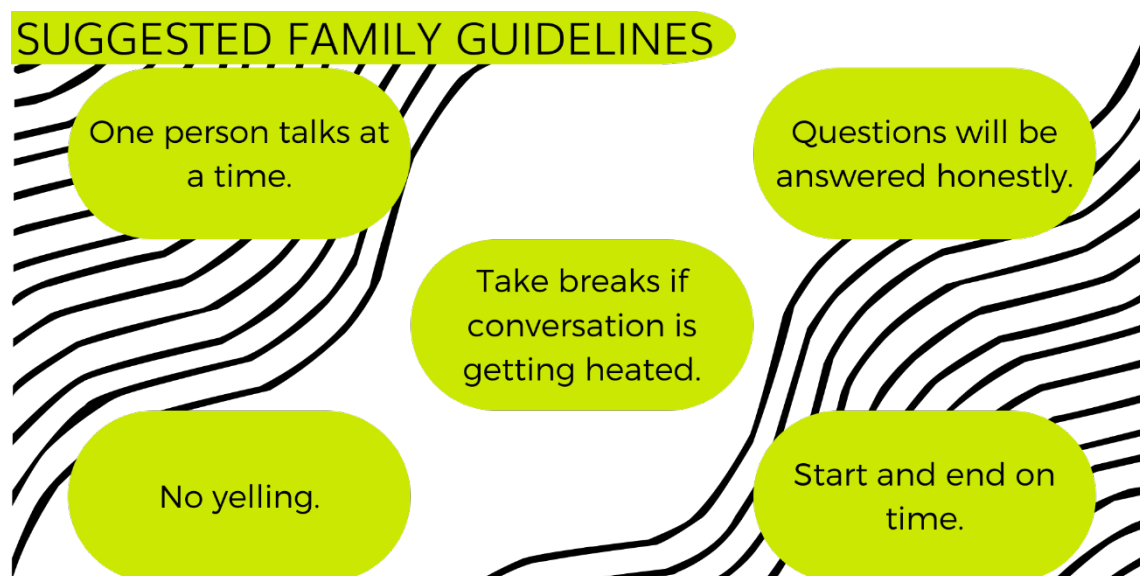
What is something you
appreciate about your family?

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Try starting the first meeting by creating family discussion guidelines that everyone understands and can agree to. That way, everyone knows the expectations of one another before starting harder conversations. Guidelines may be useful to incorporate 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.



Suggestions for Facilitating Family Conversations

INTERACTING WITH THE FAMILY



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BENEFICIAL ADVOCACY SKILLS

Create a family events calendar.

Identify family activities on community websites.

Utilize creative outlets to bring families together.

Lean in with curiosity instead of judgement.

Use active listening.

Provide acknowledgement when informal good conversations occur.

Stay impartial while the family is discussing their experiences.

Maintain your role as a facilitator.

Questions to Connect with Protective Caregivers

The [Questions to Connect with Protective Caregivers](#) link will take you to a document that has been adapted from multiple sources to help advocates identify their familial needs while receiving services. Having the [Potential Needs Chart](#) from section Abuse Effects on Protective Caregiver's Parenting may help move along different conversations.

Learning Strengths and Challenges

Assessments within advocacy are meant to be an informal process that should be thought of more as a learning tool 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.

[Questions to Connect with Protective Caregivers](#) 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 build rapport with protective caregivers and youth to build rapport.
- 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 does 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 the impact of domestic abuse, although it will be important to talk about the youth's exposure to domestic abuse to understand them better.

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- 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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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.

[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.

[Sesame Street](#) has a plethora of resources around talking with children around traumatic experiences. The [Sesame Workshop](#) YouTube account has curated playlists on specific topics as well.

[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.*
