

## **Family Safety Planning**

Advocates for battered women and their children have long recognized the importance of safety planning. In most domestic violence programs, women's advocates assist abused women in developing safety plans, and children and youth advocates do the same for their children. However, separate safety planning presents risks:

- Children's safety plans may contain elements that their mother believes are unwise or will put the family at risk. For example, a child may identify as a trusted adult someone who is an ally of the abuser.
- A mother's safety plan may contain strategies that involve the children. If the children are unaware of these strategies, they may be confused or frightened when their mother needs their cooperation to implement her plan.
- Advocates may teach children how to call 911 in an emergency, but mothers may want to limit police contact for legitimate reasons, such as fear that she will be arrested instead of the abuser.
- Children's behavior may unintentionally jeopardize family safety. Children should know who their mother trusts and how to avoid or cope with risky situations.
- Mothers may be unaware of some of their children's concerns or things they can do to help their children feel safer.

Safety planning can be more effective when children are involved in discussing safety measures that affect them and are appropriate for their age. Including children may help them feel safer and may help their mother demonstrate her ability to protect her family. In addition, joint safety planning creates an opportunity for families to talk together about the violence they've experienced and to improve mutually supportive relationships between mothers and children. The advantages of family safety planning include:

- Children feel safer, knowing that their mother has a plan to help protect the family and that she has other adults who can help her keep the family safe.
- The mother becomes familiar with her children's safety concerns. If the children have developed safety plans, the mother has the opportunity to support their choices and help them revise parts of the plans that may be problematic for her.
- The mother can demonstrate her concern for her children's safety and her competence at protecting them. She may feel that she has strengthened her capacity to support and care for her children.
- Everyone knows what to expect in an emergency. Children know what will happen and what will be expected of them, and the mother knows that it will be easier for her children to cooperate with her safety plan.
- Children, especially older children, learn safe ways to help the family. This can reduce anxiety and improve self worth.
- Creating a safety plan offers an occasion to talk about the abuse that has occurred. For families who are reluctant to discuss this, it presents a structured opportunity to approach this difficult topic by focusing on family strengths.

- It offers an opportunity to remind children that the abuse is not their fault, and that they should not try to get involved in trouble between adults.
- For mothers and children whose relationship has been threatened by the abuse, it offers an opportunity to strengthen their bond.

Family safety planning does not replace safety planning alone with battered women. It should be limited to topics that directly affect the children and are appropriate for their developmental stage. It should only be used when the mother is responsive to the idea. It should not be used in these circumstances:

- When the mother is against it.
- When the mother is very limited in her ability to nurture and protect her children.
- With a child or children who may sabotage their mother's efforts
- With families where all the children are too young to keep a secret or cooperate with their mother's plan. When some of the children are too young to do this, they can be told to follow directions from their mother or an older sibling.
- With high conflict families. If family safety planning is likely to result in a fight, there may be no point to it.

Each battered mother should consider what she can reasonably expect from her children and weigh the advantages and risks of including each child in her safety plan. Strategies which can be included in a battered woman's comprehensive safety plan but left out of a family safety plan are those which:

- Don't require the children's cooperation
- Could be frightening to children
- Could be overwhelming to children, increasing the risk that they will not be able to remember or comply with the plan, or that they will disclose it to others, including the abuser
- Where knowledge of the strategy doesn't contribute to the children's feeling of safety

Joint safety planning does not have to occur at single meeting established for that purpose, and need not always result in a written safety plan. It can be woven into a variety of formal and informal contacts between advocates, mothers and children. Advocates should be alert for moments that lend themselves to promoting conversations between mothers and children. The process of these conversations is always more important than the product. When participating in discussions between mothers and children, advocates should:

- Support the mother's authority and strengths as a parent.
- Limit the conversation to topics that are developmentally appropriate for the child.
- Avoid negative talk about the other parent. Children should be told that the family takes these precautions because the abuser's behavior may be dangerous, not because he is a bad person.
- If appropriate, help the child describe her experiences of living with domestic violence.

- Help the mother hear and understand her child's needs and feelings as the child expresses them.
- Help the mother demonstrate her concern for her child's safety, reassure the child, and explain what she can do to help keep the family safe.
- Create opportunities for the mother to know that she is a good parent and understand how important she is to her child.
- Remind the child that the abuse is not his fault, and that he should not try to get involved in trouble between adults.
- Help both mother and child learn constructive actions they can take for their family.
- Above all, help the mother and child have a good experience of talking to one another.

### Meeting with the Family

1. An advocate checks with the mother first to see if she wants to do a family safety plan with her children.
2. An advocate who knows them meets with the family to create a family safety plan. The mother and children may or may not already have their own individual safety plans. If they do, these plans should be incorporated into the family safety plan so that they are compatible.
3. If there are no prior safety plans, the family should cooperate on developing a single plan for the family. The mother should be in charge of the plan, and the children may make suggestions about what it should contain. The mother will still need to supplement the family safety plan with safety strategies that do not involve the children.
4. If a child resists participating, she may be given the right to pass, but should remain with the family while they work together on their plan.
5. The family safety plan may provide both the mother and children with opportunities to identify safe support people. For the mother, this recognizes that it's reasonable for her to need help, and allows her to reassure her children that there are other adults who can help protect the family when she can't do it alone.
6. Family safety planning time may be used to discuss and teach safety issues such as these:
  - What to do (and not do) during an argument or violent incident.
  - The family code word or emergency signal, and what children should do if they see or hear it.
  - How to call 911, make a collect call, use pay phones and cell phones.
  - Remembering important personal information, such as address and phone number.
  - Safe places to go at home and how to leave home safely.
  - Safe places or adults in the neighborhood.
  - If older children are expected to take care of younger children in an emergency, both should know what is expected of them.
  - Safety away from home, such as at school, child care, custody exchanges or other events or locations.

- What to do if a child is threatened with abduction.
- Technology safety.
- Fire safety
- What to do is a child finds or is threatened with a weapon.
- Important items the children want to take with them if they have to leave home.

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