

## SAFETY PLANNING FOR BATTERED WOMEN: CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING CHILDREN

When planning for the safety of battered women and their families, it is important to consider the involvement of children. The behavior and life circumstances of children can affect their family's safety in many ways. 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. But too many warnings, responsibilities or precautions can frighten children, especially young ones. Their fear can lead to behavior that further destabilizes an already risky situation. Battered mothers should consider how much information each child should know, what they can reasonably expect from each child, and how much children should participate in safety planning given their ages and capabilities. The following elements may be included in a safety plan to promote the safety of the entire family. Mothers can choose among these measures to create a safety plans suitable for their individual family situations.

1. Schools and child care providers should be alerted to the risks domestic violence presents to the family. There should be a plan in place in case someone other than the mother or someone she trusts comes to school.
2. Placement exchange should occur in a safe place, such as inside a busy public building.
3. Children may unintentionally jeopardize family safety by revealing information, such as the safety plan, to the abuser or his allies. Mothers should plan for what they will do if this occurs. Children should know who their mother trusts and what information they should not share.
4. Abusers may manipulate children through threats and false information, and children may respond in ways that further threaten family safety. Battered mothers should be alert to what her children have been told and talk with them about incorrect information.
5. Children should know what to do if there is an argument between adults at home, and how to distinguish between an argument and a real emergency.
6. Children should be taught that using violence is always wrong, even when the violent person is someone they love. They should be reassured that arguments and violence in their home are never their fault.
7. Children should be taught that they should never try to intervene in an adult argument or violent incident.
8. Children can learn their mother's emergency code word or signal, and what to do when they see or hear it, such as get help or leave the house.
9. Children should know safe places they can go in their home if they feel threatened. A safe place has no weapons and offers a way to escape. They should also know an escape route out of the home, where to go once they leave the home, and where to meet family members if they get separated. Mothers should practice leaving the home safely with their children.

10. Children can be taught to become a small target by going to a corner and curling up in a ball, face protected and arms around each side of the head, fingers entwined.
11. Children should know how to call 911, including what information they should report and how long to stay on the phone. They should learn their home address and phone number as soon as they are old enough to remember it accurately.
12. Children can be taught how to use a pay phone, a cell phone and how to make a collect call.
13. Older children may be expected to take responsibility for younger siblings in an emergency. If so, both older and younger children should understand what is expected of them.
14. Abusers may teach children not to trust police. Children should know that they can turn to the police for help.
15. Children should know what to do in case of a fire.
16. Children should know what to do if they find a weapon.
17. Children should learn what to do if they are by themselves and are approached by the abuser or his ally.
18. Children should know what to do if they are kidnapped, such as behavior that could keep them safe and how to get help.
19. When mothers prepare a packed bag in case they leave home, they should include items of importance to children. This could include:
  - Documents such as birth certificates, school ID cards, immunization, school and medical records and documents providing evidence of special needs
  - Baby supplies, such as diapers
  - School clothes
  - Uniform, nametag or other items needed by working teens
  - Items that provide children comfort away from home, such as favorite toys, clothes or blankets. If possible, these items should be selected by the children themselves.
  - Important school supplies, books and homework
  - Contact information for friends, school or sports schedules and other information of importance to children

#### Developmental Considerations:

##### Infants and toddlers:

- Is there a place where the mother can store or borrow baby equipment (stroller, portable crib, car seat) if she has to leave home and is unable to bring these items with her?

##### School age:

- Is there a safe way to receive and turn in homework in case of school absence?
- If the mother and children leave the abuser, the child's entire schedule, including after school child care, clubs, sports and lessons should be reviewed for elements of risk and potential contact with the abuser or his

allies. Adult supervisors of these activities should know what to do if the abuser appears.

Teens:

- Many teens don't want to go to shelter, and occasionally shelters do not allow teenage boys. Where will teens stay if their mother leaves the abuser? What will they do for money if they are not with their mother?
- Teens may have independent contact with the abuser. If so, they should have a plan that minimizes the potential for these contacts to put the teen and family at further risk.