

**GUIDE TO
ASSESSING STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES
OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN WISCONSIN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROGRAMS**

Part of the job of a domestic violence children and youth advocate is to assess the strengths and difficulties of children and teens entering their programs. In some mental health or human service settings, assessment is a process that uses a standardized assessment tool or questionnaire to arrive at a specific score, diagnosis or case plan. In most Wisconsin domestic violence programs, assessment is a much more informal process. It is designed to get to know each child, teen and family and determine how the program might help. Consequently, these sample questions are intended to guide a conversation and be a starting point for establishing a supportive relationship with a child, teen or mother. They should not be used as a questionnaire, but as a guide to building rapport with mothers and youth and getting to know them better. The questions cover seven areas important to the well-being of children and youth:

- Physical health
- Developmental growth
- Behavior
- Emotional health
- Home life
- School
- Friendships and social relations

These questions do not specifically assess for the impact of domestic violence, although it will be important to talk about the youth's exposure to domestic abuse in order to understand him or her. They are also not intended to be developmentally appropriate, and should be modified or skipped as is fitting for each child or teen. The guide does not 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. Assessment conversations are only a beginning, and should be supplemented by observation and relationship-building. There are no child development questions for children and youth, as it isn't reasonable to ask them to assess their own developmental progress.

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

Remember:

- Use great care when recording notes from conversations, as case files can be subpoenaed and used in court.
- Children and youth may disclose information that indicates that they are not safe or are in some kind of serious trouble. It is always important to begin by following your agency's guidelines for disclosing your obligation to report child abuse or contact primary caregivers regarding safety concerns.

Children and Youth Assessment Questions for Mothers

Helping Children Thrive: Supporting Woman Abuse Survivors as Mothers, by Linda L. Baker and Alison J. Cunningham, is an excellent resource for supporting battered women as mothers. Pages 18-19 contain a guide to helping mothers identify their needs for their family, and can be used in combination with these questions. The entire document can be downloaded for free at <http://www.lfcc.on.ca/mothers.html>

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)
- Can you tell me anything 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?

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 does he/she have usually 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? If yes, how do you do this?

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 his/her social or friendship skills?

Assessment Questions for Children and Youth

Healing the Invisible Wounds: Children's Exposure to Violence, published by the Safe Start Center, is a good resource for beginning to work with children who have lived with domestic abuse. Pages 7-8 contain information about starting talk with children, followed by guides to age-appropriate conversations. The entire document can be downloaded for free at <http://www.safestartcenter.org/pdf/caregiver.pdf>

General:

- What kind of things do you like to do?
- What are some things that you are good at?
- What do other people like about you?
- Do you know why your family is staying here? (For shelter programs)
- Can you tell me anything about your family's culture or traditions that will help us understand you better?

Physical Health

- Are you usually pretty healthy?
- Do you have any problems with your health that worry you?
- Would you like to find help for any health problems?

Emotional Well-Being

- When do you feel happy?
- Do you ever feel sad, worried or angry? What makes you feel sad, worried or angry?
- When you are feeling unhappy, is there anything or anyone who can help you feel better?
- Is there anyone you can talk to about your feelings?
- Are you ever concerned that you feel sad, worried or angry too much of the time?

Home Life

- What do you like about being part of your family?
- Who do you get along with in your family? Is there anyone in your family who is hard to get along with?
- What's hard about living in your family?
- Do you ever feel sad or worried about trouble in your family?
- Is there anyone you can talk to about trouble in your family?
- When there are problems in your family, what helps with the problems or makes you feel better?

School

- What do you like best about school?
- What school subjects are you good at?
- What school subjects are hardest for you?
- Are there parts of school you don't like?
- Are there adults at your school who you can talk to when you are having a problem?

- Do you feel like you need more help in order to do better in school?

Friends and Social Relationships

- What do you like to do with your friends?
- What makes you a good friend?
- What do you like best about your friends?
- What do your friends like about you?
- Is it ever hard to get along with other people?
- When you have trouble getting along with other people, what do you do?