

Arkansas Division of Children & Family Services Practice Guide Series

How We Do the Work is as Important as the Work We Do

How We Do the Work of Gathering Information to Assess Health & Safety Risk Factors: Preparation

Purpose - Provide standard guidance for promising practices when preparing to gather information to assess immediate danger to children.

Related Policy - Policy II-D

Related Practice Model Principles -

- Safely keep children with their families.
- Enhance well-being in all of our practice with families.
- Safety for children is achieved through positive protective relationships with caring family and community members.

How We Do the Work of Preparing to Gather Information to Assess Health & Safety -

- 1. Have a plan & be prepared!** Don't think you can figure out what to do when you get there. This is occasionally successful, but more often it leads to an incomplete gathering of facts and poor decisions. Consider the following:
 - What's the first thing you're going to say?
 - How will you bring up the allegation?
 - Who will you ask to interview first? What is your alternate plan?
 - Who all do you need to interview?
 - How will you deal with the parent's attitude about being reported?
- 2. Know as much as possible before you go!**
 - Carefully read all the intake information. Know the children's names and ages. This lets the parent know you are aware of the number of kids and plan to see them all. It also makes the children feel more comfortable with you. (Sometimes the intake doesn't contain the names, but it often provides at least basic information – genders, approximate ages, races, etc.).
 - If there is time, become familiar with prior child maltreatment reports.
 - Are there major pieces of family information missing at the time of intake that you want to be sure to address? (e.g. siblings, other adult in home, sick child's specific ailment)
- 3. Think about the order in which you want to interview subjects.** Although it varies, what is generally considered best practice is listed below. This method provides you with the best opportunity to let each interview build upon the previous one – that is, you can use the information from the preceding interview to help with the next one.

If the alleged victim is at home:

 - a. First, after a brief introduction, interview the alleged victim.
 - b. Next, interview the siblings.
 - c. Then, interview the parent who was not identified as an alleged offender (if there is one).
 - d. Then, interview the alleged offender.

If the alleged victim is not at home:

- a. First, interview the alleged victim, wherever he or she is located.
- b. Then, proceed in the order listed above.

4. **Try to make each interviewee feel that you value his or her opinion.** This may mean spending a little more time with each one than is actually necessary. Ensure that each interview is private, and that you do not violate their confidentiality in subsequent interviews with other subjects. If you lose that level of trust, you cannot get it back. The interviewees are your primary sources of information.

Initial Introduction - Your initial approach with the parents will likely set the tone for your entire involvement with the family. Remember the old saying “you only get one chance to make a first impression” – don’t get started on the wrong track. You must make it clear that you are involving them in the information-gathering process because they serve a critical role in their family. Be sincere, respectful, attentive, specific, and objective. Let them know you are coming in with an open mind about the incident.

- **Be direct about why you are there.** Tell them a report was filed and DCFS is required by law to investigate. You can provide an overview of the report without getting into specifics at this time. It is okay to ask them why they believe someone reported them.
- **Provide your identification and be clear about your role.**
- **Remind them this is “just an allegation” at this point,** that anyone can call the hotline, and that all reports must be investigated.
- **Park on the street so you can’t be blocked in and think about your “escape route”** should the situation become dangerous.
- **Let them vent.** Think about how you would act if you thought you were being accused of child abuse or some other serious action. However, be sure to note their specific attitudes/responses (e.g. defensive, clarity in their statements, in touch with reality, denial of ever doing anything wrong, how emotional, etc.) You will have to deal with emotions before you deal with facts.
- **Give them your contact information** (e.g. phone number, business card).
- **Tell them what the next steps are** – how you plan to proceed with the investigation.
- **Keep it general at this point,** although you will get very specific about the details of the current incident during the individual interviews. Too much focus on the allegation will cause them to start defending themselves, rather than working cooperatively with you. At this point it is better to talk about the family in general – members, how they do in school, do they get along with each other, etc.
- **Begin to think about whether there are immediate dangers to yourself and/or the children.** This could include other threatening individuals in the home, weapons, bizarre behaviors, assaults on the child, etc. If these occur to the extent that you cannot proceed with a standard assessment, you must take immediate protective action – leave, get the police involved, etc.
- **If there is an immediate danger to the child, you must start safety planning.** This often includes getting the parent involved in the planning. For example, “Your child needs medical care now; how can we get that done?” Or, “Your child cannot remain in the home with your boyfriend who allegedly molested him; what options do we have?”
- **Proceed with the interviews** if an immediate danger seems possible, but you need more information to make an accurate determination.
- **Answer questions about their rights.** If they ask if they have to let you in, tell them the alternatives.
- **Try to verify the demographics noted on the intake form** – children’s names (including nicknames if that’s what they are usually called), ages, races.
- **Get the parents’ assistance in arranging the interviews.** Ask them where would be the best spot for privacy. Also, let them know you want to interview them after you interview the children. Let them know you will review the situation with them at the end of your assessment, but don’t promise them you will tell them what the child says. Consider having a parent introduce you to the child.

Time Frames -

- Begin investigations of severe maltreatment ***within 24 hours***.
- Begin all other investigations ***within 72 hours***.
- Complete all interviews ***within 30 days*** of receipt of the child maltreatment report.

Documenting – After each interview, remember to document with whom you spoke and perhaps how you coordinated and scheduled the meeting. If you spoke with your supervisor about the approach to take with each interviewee, document that as well. You may include this information in your narrative. For example: *Worker contacted the reporter prior to visiting with the alleged victim to prepare for the interview. Also spoke with the supervisor about the approach and which prompt questions would be best for interviewing the alleged victim and alleged offender.*

Outcomes of Quality Preparation to Gather Information to Assess Health & Safety Risk Factors:

- Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.
- Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.