

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: Interviewing the Non-Offending Parent

Purpose - Provide standard guidance for promising practices when interviewing the non-offending parent in order 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 Interviewing the Non-Offending Parent – Depending on whether you are dealing with a single-parent home, a two-parent home, or other household situations, all items in this section may not be relevant to every case. The information is presented to provide direction when the child lives in a two-parent home or the child is being abused by an alleged offender who has a relationship with the parent. However, many of the points are applicable to single-parent homes or other household situations. This interview is critical for the following reasons:

- This is the person who you will most often depend upon to keep the child safe. You must gather as much information as possible to ensure that you make an informed decision. **A substantial number of cases of child abuse deaths and critical injuries came about after an assessor made a quick assumption that the non-reported parent would be the protector of the child.** You will be judging not only his or her willingness to protect, but whether he or she is capable of providing what is needed to protect the child.
- Interview the non-offending parent privately, whenever possible.
- This parent is the one with whom DCFS will work closely to complete safety assessments and risk assessments and to design a service plan if a case is opened.
- The assessor will get insight into the alleged offender from an adult viewpoint, which may differ from the information gathered from the child interviews. This interaction will help you decide the best way to manage the interview with the alleged offender.

Major points to remember when conducting an interview with the non-offending parent:

- It is crucial to get this parent to work with you to carry out the best assessment and plan for the family, while keeping the children safe. It is not a good idea to force this person to choose between the child and the alleged offender at this point, as he or she is generally in an agitated state and cannot rationally make a good decision. It is better to get them to work with you to establish a safe living situation for the child.
- Be supportive and understanding of their mixed loyalties.
- Many non-offending parents will be angry with the assessor for being there, and may be in denial about the maltreatment. However, this does not necessarily mean they cannot work with you to protect their child. They may be willing to take whatever steps necessary to keep their child, even if they don't fully believe that maltreatment occurred.

Questions About the Child -

1. In order to get the non-offending parent talking, start with some basic questions that she knows the answers to: How old are your kids? How does she do in school? Does she have a favorite television program?
2. Ask about disabilities.
3. Then ask some pointed questions about the alleged victim – How do you feel about his behavior? How often does he misbehave? Why do you think he {throws food on the floor}?
4. Ask about the child’s friends – who are they, what age, do they sleepover, does he sleepover with any of them.
5. Ask about his health – anything that worries you?
6. What chores does he do?
7. Is he respectful to you and other adults?

Questions About the Family -

1. Who does what chores in the home – laundry, cleaning, cooking, making beds, etc?
2. Who makes the major decisions? What happens when someone doesn’t listen to the parents? (Ask for an example, or provide one.)
3. How do various family members show they care about other family members – this can also be gathered somewhat from observation.
4. Ask about relatives. Are they in the area? Do they visit often? What is their relationship with the kids? With the alleged offender?
5. Ask about the neighbors and the neighborhood. Are there get-togethers? Can you safely walk down the street at night?
6. If he or she is married or in a relationship, ask about it. What would he or she change? What is good about the relationship?
7. Ask who handles the discipline in the family, and how it is administered.

Questions About the Interviewee -

1. Ask about her birth family. Where she grew up, what she did for fun, good and bad memories.
2. What do you like about parenting the alleged victim? What does he do that’s most frustrating for you? How do you handle that? What did you do the last time he misbehaved?
3. Ask about her feelings about herself in relation to the family. Is she happy? What would she change?
4. Ask about his friends. Who are they? What activities do they do together?
5. Does he take part in any outside activities, such as PTA, church groups, clubs, etc?
6. Come back to how she thinks the alleged victim is doing in general. Look for signs of the level of attachment, blame, empathy – are they bonded? Will she protect him?

Questions About the Maltreatment Incident -

1. Ask pointed questions about the maltreatment. Does he believe it occurred as the child said? If so, what does he think led up to it? If not, why not? Why would it be reported differently (if it was)?
2. Does she feel the child is safe at home? Does she think the child is afraid of the alleged offender? Does he feel the alleged offender is a danger to the child? Why or why not?
3. If you have received any information from other interviews that she also maltreated the child or knew about it and allowed it to occur or continue, explore this in a very direct manner. Remember, this may be the person who you are going to entrust with the child’s safety, so you must know all the facts.
4. Get her to work with you to figure out a way to provide protection while you are conducting the full investigation. Can she be trusted to do that?
5. Ask why this person thinks this report was called to the hotline.

Attitude Toward DCFS Involvement -

1. Assess whether he has had previous involvement with a state agency, particularly a child welfare/protection agency. If so, how did it work out?
2. Identify what she wants from the agency and you (even if it's just to have you go away), then talk about how to accomplish that.
3. Will she be open with you, or do her negative feelings about state intervention make it likely that she will not be honest or fully disclose?
4. Is this a person that you feel can be convinced to trust you?

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 - For each safety factor presenting immediate danger, the assessor should include explanation for injury, facts that support or do not support explanation, quotes, worker observations, and other professional assessments as applicable. The assessor should also include documentation and corresponding explanation of risk factors.

Outcomes of Quality Interviews with Non-Offending Parent -

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