

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 Alleged Offender

Purpose - Provide standard guidance for promising practices when interviewing the alleged offender 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 Alleged Offender - Before this interview begins, the assessor should be clear on what this person's role and relationship is in this family. If it's a birth parent, does he or she live there? Does he or she serve an active parenting role, or only an occasional visit? Is he or she involved in making decisions about the child's life? If he or she is not the parent, what is his or her role with this family and the alleged victim? How much access is granted? Does he or she discipline the child? Does he or she contribute to the finances of the family?

Also, before beginning the interview, anticipate what you will encounter – anger, denial, demand for information (such as reporter's name), etc. Decide what your responses will be ahead of time, not on-the-spot. In addition, decide just how much information you will provide. You want to get a full understanding of the issue, but you do not want to put any of the children or the non-offending parent into further danger.

Your objectives in this first interview with the alleged offender should include:

- Getting his or her assessment of the family dynamics. How does this person see the family's functioning level?
- Getting his or her version of the incident.
- Determining whether this person can work with DCFS to control the safety issues, or will he or she be a hindrance?
- Assess for other variables that impact the safety of the child – domestic violence, mental health issues, drug or alcohol abuse, temper outbursts, depression.

Some pointers:

- Aggression doesn't work. If you want to gain information, you need to work to avoid setting up a hostile interaction.
- If they are loud and demanding, speak quietly so they have to quiet down to hear you. If they continue to rant, wait for them to take a breath, then calmly jump into the conversation with your next question.
- Keep focused on getting information at this point, rather than proving "he did it." You will get to that point when you put all the information together. Right now, you need to know as much as possible.
- Observe body language and facial expressions as 80-85% of our communication is non-verbal. Listen to the words, but observe the person.
- Observe your own body language – try not to show anger, fear, disgust.

- Keep information about the report general, otherwise the conversation will quickly deteriorate into defiance and denial.

Questions About the Interviewee -

1. Ask how he or she thinks the child is doing – in school, with friends, helping around the house, being polite, etc. This is a step toward determining what level of bonding or attachment exists – does this person care about the child?
2. Ask about the easiest and most difficult thing about parenting.
3. Ask about finances as a potential stress inducing issue.
4. If it is a two-adult home, ask about whether the adults agree on how to raise the kids. Focus on areas of disagreement and how they are worked out.
5. Ask about friends – who are they, how often they get together, what activities they do. Is there a best friend that this person can talk to about anything?

Questions About the Child -

1. Ask about his or her relationship with the child. Is the child easy to get along with? Is he a smart aleck, does he try to get along with this parent?
2. What chores is the child responsible for? Does she do them regularly and well?
3. Does the child have tantrums? Does he seem depressed? What makes him happy?
4. How does the child do in school?
5. Describe the child's closest friends.
6. Does the child have any medical issues?
7. Does this person think the child feels safe and secure at home? Does he or she believe the child is happy to see this person when this person comes home? Why or why not?

Questions About the Family -

1. Who makes the decisions in the house?
2. How do the parents show affection for the kids? How do the kids show affection? How do the parents show affection for each other?
3. When a child doesn't follow directives or complete chores on time, what happens?
4. If two-adult home, explore the relationship – what would he or she want to change?
5. Ask about extended family members on both sides? Are they helpful, or do they cause problems for the family?
6. Ask him or her to describe relationships with the neighbors. Do they interact? How?

Questions About the Maltreatment Incident -

1. Ask with which issues DCFS can help.
2. Ask directly about what happened that resulted in Susie's black eye.
3. Ask "what do you think we can do to make sure the children are safe and happy."
4. Ask pointedly about stresses he or she is experiencing – job issues, substance use, relationship, death of a loved one, etc.
5. If you have formed an opinion about the maltreatment, tell this person what that is. Don't push it, but simply acknowledge, for example, that "Johnny got that black eye from you hitting him, not from falling off a bike" – then focus on "where we can go from here."

Attitude Toward DCFS Involvement -

1. Assess whether he or she has had previous involvement with a state agency, particularly a child welfare/protection agency. If so, how did it work out?
2. Assess his or her attitude toward the investigation and the assessor's role. Is this person open enough to be a positive force in controlling the safety issues?

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 Alleged Offender -

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