

Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse Considerations

The caseworker must take into consideration the issue of domestic violence and sexual abuse when planning a meeting. Meetings are scheduled for the care and protection of children and are not primary ways of confronting batterers and child sexual offenders. A combination of group therapy and court intervention are often necessary to effectively stop these types of behaviors. However persons who demonstrate these behaviors are often also parents and should be consulted about their recommendations for the care of their children.

Family members may attend a scheduled meeting unless the caseworker determines that the family member may threaten or place other participants at risk. A family member who is violent, unpredictable or abusive or is an alleged perpetrator of sexual abuse, domestic violence, or severe physical assaults is an example of who may be excluded from a meeting.

While it is best if all parties participate as equals in a meeting, persons under threat of harm, due to domestic violence or other covert forms of abuse cannot equally participate in meetings without protection and support from other family members¹. It is also important that there are family members present who will hold abusers accountable.

It is not recommended that child sexual abuse victims attend meetings if a decision is made to include the offender in the meeting. Even reading a letter from the offender may be a disturbing experience. For further information refer to the issues to be resolved below.

- Ensure that the meeting facilitator and the caseworker have skills and strategies to recognize symptoms of domestic violence in families.
- Assess the level of risk both within the larger family system and for individual participants.
- Clarify the purpose of the meeting and emphasizing the highest priority of child safety.

The caseworker considers the following questions prior to recommending an exception to conducting a required meeting when domestic violence is a consideration.

- Can someone identify the pattern of power and control?
- Is sufficient information available to accurately assess risk?
- Is the family a closed system with possible major secrets?
- Who will hold the batterer accountable? Is legal leverage available?
- Who will support the child victim?
- Who will support the adult victim?
- Are there effective strategies for engaging and empowering the abused persons before and during the meeting?
- How will hidden intimidation be identified and managed?
- Should the batterer attend the meeting and fully participate? Should a separate meeting be held?
- Have strategies been developed for the abused person to prepare potential plans prior to a meeting, rather than have pressure to agree to plans made at a meeting that might compromise safety for the person or for the child?
- Can adequate safety measures be devised given the level of risk in the family?
- What are the potential effects of exclusion of an unrelated (no children in common) partner?
- What are the necessary safety plans and follow-up for after the meeting?

The caseworker excludes the alleged perpetrator when previous history or current assessment indicates a risk of violence by a parent or when contact is prohibited. Family members may be told not to attend the meeting. The caseworker can arrange for input through written information, consultation prior to the meeting, or by phone if appropriate.

¹ Note: Individuals with restraining orders or “No Contact” orders may not be included in Family Meetings if their participation would violate these orders.