

FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CASES

GUIDELINES FOR PRACTICE



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PREVENTION FUND AND CHILD WELFARE
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EDITED BY KELLY MITCHELL-CLARK

SECOND EDITION
SEPTEMBER 2003

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IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CASES



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1. THE PURPOSE OF THESE GUIDELINES

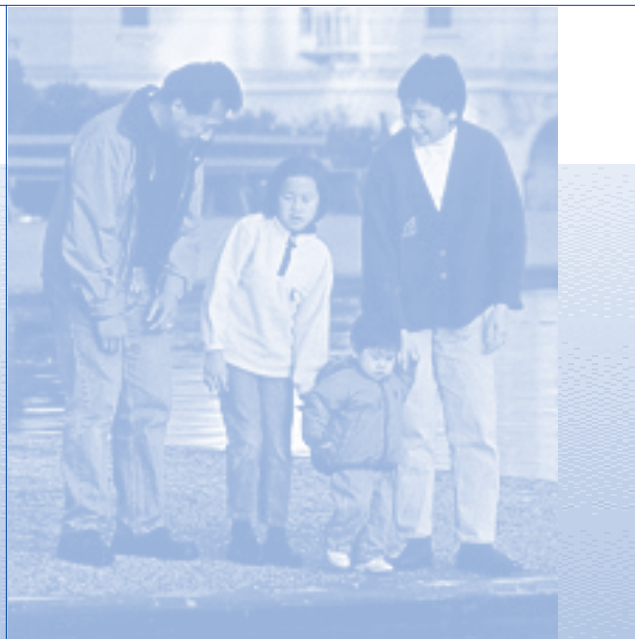
Family Team Conferencing and other similar family conference models involve family and community members in decision making and case planning to provide safety to children and other family members in child maltreatment cases. Since roughly half of all families experiencing child maltreatment also experience domestic violence, a large percentage of families who are possible candidates for Family Team Conference (FTC) will have a history of domestic violence. These guidelines lay out steps to decide whether a family with such a history is a good candidate for a Family Team Conference, and to prepare and conduct a Conference that will result in the best possible child welfare decision and safety for all. Case scenarios offer examples of different circumstances involving domestic violence and describe how an FTC, if planned and structured properly, can safely address case goals.

These guidelines are primarily intended to provide additional information to trained Family Team Conference facilitators that will help them address domestic violence issues in the context of Family Team Conferences. In addition, the guidelines offer background information and tips for other Family Team Conference participants, including domestic violence advocates, community-based service providers, child welfare agency workers, and extended family members. It is also our hope that readers who are new to Family Team Conferencing will gain insight into this innovative approach that engages families and community members in child welfare decision making.

The dynamics of domestic violence are complex. These guidelines cannot address all the potential domestic violence issues that may arise in the Family Team Conference context. They do not take the place of good training in domestic violence screening, assessment, and intervention, and should be read in conjunction with the *Handbook for Family Team Conferencing and Domestic Violence: A National Curriculum for Children's Protective Services*. These guidelines are intended to supplement other sources of information such as training, and to help facilitators and participants integrate what they already know about domestic violence, Family Team Conferences, and good child welfare practice, generally. Sources of additional information on domestic violence and Family Team Conferences, and related topics, are listed in the resources section of these guidelines.

Domestic violence cuts across all races, economic groups, genders, religions, sexual orientations and cultures. Both women and men may be domestic violence perpetrators or victims. However, for the purposes of these guidelines, we will refer to the abuser as male, and the adult survivor as female. This is the family configuration in the vast majority of domestic violence cases in which child welfare agencies are involved.

The practice suggestions in this document draw heavily on the experiences of the Community Partnerships for Protecting Children (CPPC) sites in Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Jacksonville, Florida; St.



“Studies indicate that Family Team Conferences can reduce rates of child abuse and domestic violence.”

THE PURPOSE OF THESE GUIDELINES

Louis, Missouri; and Louisville, Kentucky. The Cedar Rapids site has developed the following guiding principle for their collaborative work to address the overlap in families of domestic violence and child maltreatment, which we also embrace as the key foundation to these guidelines:

“It is crucial for child protective services staff and domestic violence service providers to have frequent and ongoing consultation with each other that is grounded in mutual trust and respects each other’s knowledge, intentions, and counsel. These working relationships are ongoing, always evolving, and ask a high level of openness, honesty, maturity, and capacity to operate outside of our comfort zones. They contribute significantly to the furtherance of improved safety and quality of life for all.”

2. WHAT IS A FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE?

The *Handbook for Family Team Conferencing* describes an FTC as “a gathering of family members, friends, community specialists and other interested people who join together to strengthen a family and provide a protection and care plan for the children.” The FTC brings together people whom the families trust and who can respond to the issues the families face. Participants may include one or more of the parents and extended family members, family friends and support people, and the children themselves, if appropriate. Community participants in cases involving domestic violence may include advocates for domestic violence survivors, batterer intervention program staff, and other service providers who can address the family’s particular needs. Community members may also include representatives from local institutions such as faith-based groups, schools, health care, mental health services, 12-step programs, and other community resources. If the family has an open case with child protective services, the social worker assigned to the case will attend the meeting.

FTC participants come together under the direction of a facilitator to help the family develop a plan to ensure the safety and well-being of the children. A facilitator can be a case-carrying social worker from child protective services, a staff person from a community-based organization or public institution (such as a school, probation department, or battered women’s shelter), or someone whose primary, full-time responsibility is facilitating FTCs for the child welfare agency. Facilitators need to be able to play a neutral role in directing the meeting process, and offer the family a fresh opportunity to resolve their concerns. The best facilitator may be the team member whom the family trusts the most.

Meetings are held at locations that are convenient to the family. Team members help identify the family members’ strengths, resources, and needs; they also contribute their own skills as supports to the family and hold other members of the FTC accountable for their commitments to the plan. The process relies heavily on using the family’s strengths, which are listed and posted during the meeting for all the participants to see. The family’s needs are also identified, as are the underlying conditions that services for the family must address. Because the service providers are there at the FTC, they come to understand their roles in helping the family. The plan developed in the meeting makes clear what each person in the meeting agrees to do to promote the safety and well-being of all family members. FTCs should happen throughout the life of a case to ensure progress or to make improvements to the plan.

FTCs can also be used in contexts other than child welfare. Community-based service providers can use this model to do safety and service planning with their clients. For example, in several of the Community Partnerships for Protecting Children sites, battered women’s shelters are beginning to use FTCs to develop service plans for shelter residents.

3. FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CASES

In cases involving domestic violence, Family Team Conferences can take on a variety of forms and serve a range of safety and service planning goals. Following are four of many possible case scenarios for Family Team Conferences in the context of domestic violence. The venue and composition of the team varies in each scenario and reflects the desired goals of the meeting and thorough attention to safety for the participants.

CASE SCENARIO

1 Shana is a 17-year-old mother of two children: Chris who is two and Cara who is nine months old. Shana has been involved with Child Protective Services most of her life. She spent her childhood moving in and out of foster care, and currently lives in a foster home. Her children are also in foster care. Shana will soon be 18 and will have to leave foster care and get her own apartment and job. Her 22-year-old boyfriend, who is the father of both children, is currently in jail for domestic violence and is expected to get out soon. Shana’s mother is furious with her for “letting a man beat her,” but she also feels guilty because she knows that Shana had to live with her mother’s abusive boyfriend during the early part of her childhood. Shana feels alone and without much support. A Family Team Conference is organized for her at the child welfare agency. Based on discussions with Shana and an assessment of the violence, it is decided that Shana’s boyfriend will not attend. Shana’s mother and foster parents will participate in the meeting, as will community-based service providers. The goal of the Family Team Conference is to plan ways to address Shana’s needs for housing, safety, employment, and emotional support, and to create stability for her so that she can safely reunify with her children.

CASE SCENARIO

2 For assaulting his wife Kim, Jeffrey was issued a court restraining order requiring that he move out of the apartment he shared with Kim and their only child, four-year-old Kristen. Jeffrey is 25 years old. He is currently living with his mother and younger siblings a few towns away from his wife and daughter. Jeffrey’s mother has taken responsibility for keeping Jeffrey in compliance with the restraining order and thinks his behavior toward Kim is reckless and unacceptable. Jeffrey sees Kristen at visits supervised by his mother. Kim and Jeffrey do not speak to each other at all. Kim has no intention of getting back together with Jeffrey, but for the sake of their daughter, she wants Jeffrey to stop being violent. Child Protective Services wants to close their case with the family. A Family Team Conference is organized for Jeffrey at the child welfare agency. Kim will not attend. Jeffrey’s mother will participate in the meeting, as will a staff member of the local batterer intervention program. The goal of the meeting is to supplement and strengthen his informal support (his family) with more formal sanctions, such as a batterer intervention program that includes information about the harms of child exposure to domestic violence. A separate FTC is organized for Kim to ensure that she has a safety plan and support system in place. Jeffrey will not attend.

FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CASES

CASE SCENARIO

3 Jeanie and Calvin have been married for 10 years and have six children. Calvin has been in and out of substance abuse treatment programs and is currently living in a residential treatment halfway house. He has been sober for one year. Jeanie supports his sobriety because she believes if he is sober, he will not be abusive or scary. He hit her once three years ago, and while drinking he has also broken things in the house and acted “crazy.” While he was getting substance abuse treatment in the halfway house, it was recommended that Calvin also attend a group for men who batter. Calvin has been participating faithfully in that program and Jeanie has been able to follow his progress by maintaining her own contact with the program. Calvin is supposed to come home in three months. A Family Team Conference will take place at the batterer intervention program site. Both Jeanie and Calvin will participate in the meeting. Representatives from the batterer intervention program, the halfway house, and the drug treatment program will also attend. The goal of the Conference is to create a transition plan for Calvin and support for the family to ensure safety for Jeanie and the children once Calvin comes home.

CASE SCENARIO

4 Pam has been living in a shelter for battered women for a little over two months. The shelter is 60 miles away from where she was living with her abuser. Since she has been at the shelter, Pam has learned her way around town by public transportation and knows where to go food shopping, but she knows little else about the community. Because Pam has been in the shelter during the summer months, soon she will need to navigate a new school system for her children, ages eight and 10, and find other services for them, such as healthcare and recreation. The only friends she has she has made at the shelter. Pam has not seen her family or old friends since she moved. A Family Team Conference for Pam will take place at the battered women’s shelter. Shelter staff, other local community-based service providers, and several of Pam’s family members and friends will participate. The goals of the FTC are: 1) to provide Pam with continued support, including how to keep in touch with old friends without compromising her safety and how to make new friends, and 2) to help Pam find housing and tap into resources for herself and her children in her new community.

Although there are risks to conducting FTCs when the family has a history of domestic violence, it is important to remember that in child welfare cases, the child protective services agency has to decide how best to ensure the child’s safety and well-being. New information from an FTC is likely to result in a better-informed, more family-friendly decision and service plan. FTCs can serve as starting points for building a network of support for the adult and child victims, as in case scenario #1, or for clarifying the agency’s expectations of the offending parent, as in case scenario # 2. Family members’ involvement in the development of their own service plan will likely increase the willingness of the family to follow through with the plan.

4. BENEFITS OF A FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE

There are many benefits to the Family Team Conference approach, including: 1) increasing the number of solutions to safety issues; 2) matching appropriate services to needs; 3) better informing the child welfare agency about the family's strengths; 4) fostering coordination of services and supports; 5) eliminating duplication of services; 6) creating a system of support that will sustain the family over time; and 7) holding community agencies accountable for providing the services they have promised. Studies indicate that FTCs can also reduce rates of child abuse and domestic violence.¹ In cases involving domestic violence, an FTC may decrease the likelihood that the children are removed from the non-offending parent, and increase the chances of children who have already been removed being safely reunified.

FTCs can empower families to recognize their strengths, make decisions about the safety and well-being of the children, and rally services and informal community supports to address their needs. An adult victim who may not talk about domestic violence in the first FTC, may, after several safe FTCs, begin to discuss how domestic violence affects her and her children and get help from the team of participants to plan how she and her children can be safe in the future. Over time, FTCs can build a new team of support for the mother and the family. They can also enhance existing support networks, particularly during critical times, such as when, as shown in case scenario #4, a woman is leaving the shelter.

FTCs also engage community representatives directly in the child welfare decision-making process, draw on their resources, and allow for greater agency-community collaboration. These meetings are an opportunity for service providers working in different organizational settings with unique histories and cultures to come together, share their expertise, and reach agreements with the family about how to keep the family safe. For example, in cases involving substance abuse, such as in case scenario #3, staff from substance abuse treatment programs can contribute information about treatment options and can debunk myths about substance abusers and the recovery process. If they have already worked with members of the family, they can provide information about the family member's progress and how their program can further support the family. Similarly, advocates for domestic violence survivors participating in FTCs can support the mother and her children and influence the child welfare agency decision. Participation also gives advocates the opportunity to correct misconceptions that may come up in the meeting regarding domestic violence dynamics or the decisions or motives of the adult survivor. (Regardless of what expertise participants in FTCs may have, it is the responsibility of the child welfare agency to ensure that agency staff participating in

¹ Marsh P., and Crow, G. (1998). Family Group Conferencing in Child Welfare. Oxford: Blackwell Science. Pennell, J. and Burford, G. (2000). Family group decision making and family violence. In G. Burford and J. Hudson (eds.), Family Group Conferences: New Directions in Community-Centered Child and Family Practice (pp. 171-185). Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter. See also Shore, N., Wirth, J., Cahn, K., Yancey, B., and Gunderson, K. (2002). Longer term and immediate outcomes of family conference in Washington state. EFORUM. International Institute for Restorative Practices. Available at www.restorativepractices.org.

BENEFITS OF A FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE

FTCs have received adequate training on substance abuse, domestic violence, and other key issues affecting families. And it is the job of the meeting facilitator to educate and prepare participants for the meeting. See Section 8 on preparing for the FTC.)

Family team Conferences can also be used to engage abusers in changing their behaviors and in getting appropriate services. As in case scenario #2, fathers who have been violent often continue to have ongoing contact with their children. They may, in some cases, also continue to co-parent with the mother. Some domestic violence survivors will make the decision to maintain an ongoing relationship with the offending parent. Through the FTC, men who have been violent can link up with batterer intervention programs and other services that can support them in ending their violence, improve their relationships with their children, and address other needs such as employment or substance abuse treatment. The FTC must be structured to address safety issues and to best accomplish the goals of the meeting. As the case scenarios show, this may mean separate FTCs for the survivor and the abuser. The facilitator may also want to include in the meeting someone who has worked with abusers, for example staff from a batterers intervention program. Section 7 of these guidelines lays out key points to consider in determining whether it is safe for batterers to participate and under what circumstances.

It is critical that participants in the meeting understand that the intended outcome of FTCs is always to increase safety and decrease risk for the mother and the children. Through the meeting preparation process, the mother will identify what she would like the specific goals of the FTC to be with regard to the safety and well-being of her and her children. Strong relationships between child welfare staff and community-based service providers are vital to ensuring that FTCs go well, and that all family members have access to the services and supports they need to stay safe.

	BENEFITS OF THE FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE APPROACH INCLUDE: - Increasing the number of solutions to safety issues - Matching appropriate services to needs - Better informing the child welfare agency about the family's strengths - Fostering coordination of services and supports - Eliminating duplication of services - Creating a system of support that will sustain the family over time - Holding community agencies accountable for providing the services they have promised

5. CHALLENGES TO FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CASES

Families experiencing domestic violence can present special challenges to the FTC process. The primary concern in these cases is safety. FTC facilitators need strategies to determine whether it is safe for the abuser to participate in the FTC., and must work with the mother and child welfare agency staff to make that determination. Child welfare and domestic violence workers have identified specific concerns for the safety of the mother and children when the abuser does participate. Potential risks of participation by the abuser include:

- The survivor may feel limited in what she can safely say
- The survivor may give up trying to get what she wants and needs
- The survivor may agree to plans that she knows will put her or her children in danger
- The abuser may try to manipulate the proceedings
- The abuser may retaliate after the FTC

Before the facilitator can plan to conduct an FTC with the family, the child welfare agency must conduct a thorough risk and safety assessment for the family, which includes specific questions regarding domestic violence. Although these guidelines will touch on safety assessment, they are not meant to replace comprehensive safety assessment training, which we recommend all FTC facilitators have. Recommended policies and practices for effective assessment by child welfare workers in cases involving domestic violence can be found in *Domestic Violence: A National Curriculum for Children's Protective Services* (see reference list). A critical part of this assessment process is working with the adult survivor to determine what she believes will help ensure her and her children's safety and well-being. If the child welfare agency staff does not have the capacity to conduct a complete assessment of families experiencing domestic violence, it should turn to community partners for assistance and expertise. The information resulting from this assessment will be vital for the facilitator to use in planning a safe and productive FTC.

FTCs in domestic violence cases create other challenges as well. Child welfare workers and advocates for domestic violence survivors represent organizations with different philosophies and approaches, and may not agree on the goals of the FTC or on the best strategies for ensuring safety. Advocates for domestic violence survivors, accustomed to thinking about the adult survivor and her children, are expected in FTCs to participate in a conversation that may include the abuser as well. These advocates may be concerned that the seriousness and potential lethality of domestic violence are not being adequately considered. They may fear that the child welfare system will treat the mother unfairly, or that she may reveal something in the FTC that will lead to sanctions against the mother or removal of her child. Although it is true that more information will come out in the FTC than in traditional case planning, it is also true that the mother will have more opportunities in the FTC to present her point of view, and to have her point of view actively supported by team members. Similarly, many child welfare workers are not accustomed to having advocates for domestic violence

CHALLENGES TO FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CASES

survivors at the decision-making table with them, and may view advocates as biased and unhelpful. Child welfare workers may not initially understand that these advocates can both support the mother and work to ensure the safety and well-being of the children. Extended family members participating in the FTC may not understand the dynamics of domestic violence and the implications for the safety of the adult survivor and the children. They may come into an FTC with their own agendas that differ from that of the adult survivor.

Clarification, before the meeting, of the roles of FTC participants can address some of these challenges. Preparation for the FTC should include conversations with all participants to understand expectations and concerns better and to prepare each participant to support the goals of the meeting. Advocates for domestic violence survivors, batterer intervention program staff, and other community partners who participate regularly in FTCs should be trained in Family Team Conferencing, so that they thoroughly understand the meeting process and participant roles.

Even when good assessment and preparation are done for an FTC, surprises can happen. Participants must be prepared to deal with the unexpected. Sometimes domestic violence will not be identified before an FTC, yet will come up as an issue during the meeting. Or despite thorough conversations with family members in preparation for the meeting, tensions may escalate in the meeting to the point where the facilitator must take steps to de-escalate the tension or even discontinue the meeting. In the years that FTCs have been conducted for these cases, practices have improved and increased knowledge and expertise have emerged. Yet, many unanswered questions remain. While this manual does not address every possible issue that may arise in FTCs for cases involving domestic violence, it does provide guideposts where it can, and also acknowledges areas where best practices have not yet been determined.

6. ASSESSING FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

A thorough assessment of each family should include routine screening questions about domestic violence. The agency should begin this screening process by asking whoever reported the family to child welfare whether they are aware of domestic violence in the family. Once domestic violence is identified as an issue for a family, the child welfare agency, in partnership with community service providers as needed, should continue the assessment process to determine the nature, extent, severity, frequency, potential lethality, and impact on family members of the violence. This process includes speaking directly with family members about the violence and, as confidentiality permits, conferring with community-based service providers who know and have served the family.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SCREENING AT INTAKE

In a routine screening for domestic violence, it is important to make it clear that the same questions are asked for every child abuse or neglect report. Questions should be asked in a calm and matter-of-fact manner, using follow-up questions to further clarify vague or confusing answers. Below are some sample questions that the child welfare agency intake worker should pose to the agency or individual who initially referred the family to Child Protective Services:

- Has anyone else in the family (in addition to the child) been hurt or assaulted? If so, describe the assault. Who is the victim? Who is the perpetrator?
- Has anyone in the family made threats to hurt or kill another family member or him- or herself? If so, describe what happened. Who is the intended victim? Who is the perpetrator?
- Do you know if weapons have been used to threaten or harm a family member? If so, what kind of weapons? Are the weapons still present?
- Have the police ever been called to the house to stop assaults against adults or children? Have arrests ever been made?
- Has anyone threatened to run off with the children?
- Has any family member stalked another family member? Has anyone taken a family member hostage?

ASSESSING THE VIOLENCE

A full assessment of the domestic violence should be done as soon as the screening process identifies the presence of violence. This assessment must be completed before the FTC takes place. Here is where strong partnerships with domestic violence services providers are crucial, especially if the child welfare agency does not have its own in-house expertise in safety assessment for domestic violence cases. Domestic violence service providers have expertise in assessing the lethality of the violence and in addressing safety issues. By working together to assess risk, child welfare workers, FTC facilitators, and domestic violence service providers can better ensure a safe and productive meeting.

ASSESSING FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The following are some sample questions that can be directed to the survivor to assess the nature of the violence in the home. These questions are not comprehensive and are not a substitute for a thorough domestic violence assessment:

- How does your family resolve conflict? How do you and your partner communicate when either of you is upset?
- What happens when you and your partner disagree and your partner wants to get his/her way?
- Have you ever been injured in an argument? Has your partner ever used physical force against you or destroyed property during an argument? Have you ever felt threatened or intimidated by your partner? If so, how?
- If your partner has used physical force against a person or property, describe what happened. Tell me about the worst or most violent episode. What was the most recent episode? Are you afraid of being harmed?
- Have the children ever been hurt in any of these episodes? Have the children been present? Are the children afraid of your partner?
- How frequently do the violent episodes occur? Have there been any changes in the frequency or severity of the abuse in the past month or year? Have the police or any other agency been involved?

Similar questions can be asked of extended family and community members who may have information about the family’s situation. The abuser can also be interviewed (always separately from the survivor) using the above questions as well as the following ones:

- Have you ever used physical force against your partner? If so, talk about the worst episode. Describe the most recent episode.
- Is your partner afraid of you?
- Are your children afraid of you?

Through follow-up conversations, the facilitator can determine whether the adult survivor wants an FTC. Once a decision has been made to conduct an FTC, the facilitator continues to assess conditions, consulting with the mother and interviewing other family members and potential participants, to determine how best to conduct the meeting and who to include so that the desired goals are reached and participants are safe.

7. DECIDING WHETHER TO CONDUCT A FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE

Discuss with the survivor the main conclusions of the assessment to help determine whether an FTC would be useful to her. If the survivor or the facilitator believes that conducting the FTC may place someone in jeopardy, then together they should review the results of the assessment to determine how they should proceed. In reviewing the assessment to decide whether or how to go forward with the FTC, the following questions should be answered:

- Is the survivor afraid of the abuser?
- Is the abuser threatening to harm the mother, the children, or himself?
- Are the severity and frequency of the violence escalating?
- Have the children been used to threaten the survivor or keep the abuser from inflicting further violence? How?
- Does the abuser or survivor have access to weapons?
- Have weapons been involved in prior assaults?
- Has the criminal justice system been involved? If so, are there pending charges or is there a probation or parole officer assigned to the case?
- If the abuser has participated in some type of education or treatment program, how has he responded to that intervention?
- What has been the extent of the survivor’s injuries? Have there been injuries requiring hospitalizations?
- Is the abuser or survivor chemically dependent?
- Is there a history of mental illness?

Answering “yes” to one or more of these questions does not necessarily eliminate the use of a Family Team Conference. However, pre-meeting planning must take these issues into account. The facilitator and family should ask themselves: “How could a Family Team Conference make the situation better?” and “In what ways could a Family Team Conference make the situation worse, or more dangerous?” Ultimately, if the survivor does not want an FTC, then the agency should not conduct one. Agency staff can use other strategies for reaching the best possible decision regarding the safety of the children and other family members.

DETERMINING WHETHER THE ABUSER SHOULD PARTICIPATE

If the domestic violence survivor wants an FTC to happen and the abuser is still involved with the family, the facilitator must find out if the survivor believes the abuser can be safely present at the meeting. If the survivor makes it clear to the facilitator that she does not want the abuser to participate, then the meeting must take place without him. A separate meeting may be planned for him.

DECIDING WHETHER TO CONDUCT A FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE

The survivor may want the abuser to participate in the meeting. Some women see involving the abuser in an FTC as a safe way to negotiate agreements with him regarding visitation with the children and other issues of importance to the family. They may also see the meeting as a way of bringing community pressure to bear on him to stop his violence. With the abuser participating in the meeting, the facilitator may want a co-facilitator who is experienced in working with batterers. This co-facilitator can engage the abuser in a way that holds him accountable, yet also supports him through the meeting process. A co-facilitator can watch for signs that the conflict is escalating and assist the other facilitator in deciding how best to proceed under those circumstances. If there is no facilitator accustomed to working with abusive individuals, it may not be appropriate or safe to hold a meeting that includes the abuser.

This process of deciding how to go forward with the FTC should include an assessment of the risks of emotional and physical harm to the adult survivor and children by the abuser if he participates in the meeting. Factors to consider include: 1) his access to the victim, 2) the patterns of abuse, 3) his state of mind, 4) the suicidality of the survivor, children, or abuser, 5) the presence of other stressors or risk factors, and 6) past failures of the system to respond appropriately. Much of this information should already be available through the agency’s domestic violence assessment. The facilitator should use the information available from the assessment to work with the adult survivor to decide whether her abuser can safely attend the meeting and whether his attendance would be in the best interest of the woman and the children. The facilitator can share with the survivor information the agency has gathered regarding the abuser’s domestic violence history. In some instances, the initial assessment may not have been thorough or may be outdated. In this case, the facilitator will need to work closely with the survivor to assess the current circumstances. Below are some questions for the adult survivor and the facilitator to explore together before the meeting to determine whether or not the abuser should attend the FTC:

- Is there a restraining order?
- Do they live together?
- Is domestic violence a topic that been addressed publicly with him, the police, a judge, the child welfare worker, other family members? How did he react?
- What are her goals for having him there, or not?
- What is the facilitator’s goal for having him there, or not?
- What is the biggest fear if he does participate?
- What is the hope if he is there?
- Is he involved in any services? For how long?
- Are there any current stresses in his life that might make him more violent?

DECIDING WHETHER TO CONDUCT A
FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE

Based on conversations with the survivor and others, facilitators can tell the survivor their view on the potential risk of violence in the meeting, and explain why they have this view. Then the facilitator and survivor can talk together about whether the possible benefits of having the abuser there outweigh the risks. In some cases, the domestic violence survivor may want an FTC and may want the abuser present, but the facilitator may believe it is too dangerous to proceed in this manner. In this instance, the facilitator should explain to the woman why the facilitator believes it would be unsafe to conduct the conference with the abuser present, and explore with her alternative ways to conduct the FTC. It is also important for the facilitator to clarify meeting goals with the adult survivor to be sure that her expectations are reasonable for the meeting, given the domestic violence context.

In practice, FTCs conducted with the abuser present are for domestic violence cases involving low to moderate levels of risk, and are at the request of the adult survivor to accomplish her goals for the meeting. The bottom line is that if either the facilitator or the woman believes it is too dangerous to conduct an FTC with the man present, it should not be done.

If the decision is made that the abuser should not attend the meeting, the facilitator and adult survivor should review the implications of that decision. The survivor may be concerned that by choosing to exclude the abuser from the meeting, she will be viewed by the child welfare agency as uncooperative. The facilitator should work closely with other child welfare staff to ensure that this important safety decision by the survivor does not negatively impact the family's case. The facilitator and survivor should also explore how the abuser might react to being excluded from the meeting. For example, will he try to railroad or undermine any decisions that are made in the FTC? Will the goals of the meeting be accomplished without his input? The facilitator and adult survivor may also want to explore a variety of options available for the abuser to participate in an FTC without actually being present:

- Two separate FTCs may be conducted, one with the adult survivor and the children, if appropriate, and another with the abuser.
- A service provider who has worked with the abuser may attend the Conference as his representative with his permission.
- The abuser may write a letter, responding to the questions being asked in the conference, to be read by his representative.
- He may videotape his response to the questions being asked in the conference, and inform the participants of his desires and wishes.

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Having an FTC with the survivor and children, and then another one with the abuser, may increase access to services for all of the family members, while still ensuring safety and accountability. For example, through the assessment process, it may become clear that the abuser is also struggling with substance abuse and unemployment. In an FTC with the abuser, the team of participants can develop a service plan for him that both supports the safety and well-being of the adult survivor and children, and provides him with substance abuse treatment and job training. If the abuser is the biological father of the children, he is legally entitled to a case plan from the child protective agency. The facilitator can explain to him that the mother will be developing a plan, and describe how he can also use the FTC process to develop his own plan.

“FTCs engage community representatives directly in the child welfare decision-making process, draw on their resources, and allow for greater agency-community collaboration.”

8. PREPARING FOR THE FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE

Much of the preparation for the FTC is about building trust with the adult survivor, as well as with the other participants. To build trust with the adult survivor, the facilitator must listen to her and let her tell her story. If domestic violence is suspected but the woman has not disclosed it, the facilitator may want to talk about why families keep secrets, and that it is normal to want to hide difficult topics like domestic violence. The facilitator may want to acknowledge the potential risks to the woman and children if she discloses the violence. At the same time, the worker can encourage her to talk about barriers to her children's safety and discuss what she needs to keep her children safe. If the survivor does not disclose the violence in these first discussions, it may still come up in later conversations or in subsequent FTCs. It is important for the facilitator and child welfare agency workers to understand that denial of the violence is a common safety strategy that domestic violence survivors use, and it does not mean that the survivor is ignoring her children's safety and well-being. A decision by the survivor to withhold discussing the violence in the FTC should not be viewed by the facilitator or child welfare worker as obstructionist or uncooperative, but rather as a way of trying to maintain her own and her children's safety.

Even if the initial screening does not reveal domestic violence, the facilitator preparing the FTC should ask the mother again (when the man is not present) about the presence of domestic violence. In some cases, this will encourage disclosure that was not possible at the beginning of the case when the child welfare worker and mother had not yet developed a sense of trust.

In addition to planning with the adult survivor, preparation for the conference should include interviewing the abuser, if this will increase the safety of the meeting and help accomplish meeting goals. It may not be wise to interview the abuser in all cases. If he is not attending the meeting, is not the father, and the relationship between the mother and the abuser has ended, there is no reason to risk stirring up the situation through interviews with the abuser. The facilitator should also interview any other critical members of the team. These interviews provide the meeting facilitator with information about the other participants and can also serve as an opportunity for the facilitator to discuss meeting expectations and roles. Separate, thorough, and careful interviews with the survivor and abuser, as well as with other possible meeting participants, prior to the FTC tend to reduce the likelihood of unexpected disclosures in the FTC, and increase the facilitator's capacity to manage unexpected disclosures should they occur.

PREPARING FOR THE FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE

PREPARATION WITH THE SURVIVOR

Safety planning with the mother should be standard when preparing for FTCs with families experiencing domestic violence. This means that the facilitator must be sufficiently trained to help the survivor assess her level of danger and strategize on how best to protect herself and her children throughout the process. For example, if the abuser will be present at the FTC, it is important to work out with the survivor how the discussion of the domestic violence should take place (if at all). In those circumstances, the facilitator and mother will want to answer the following questions:

- Are there any specific topics to avoid?
- Does the woman have safety concerns about anyone else who may also be attending the meeting, such as her child or the child welfare worker?
- Does she want to discuss the domestic violence in the FTC?
- How safe does she feel discussing the domestic violence with the abuser present?
- If the children will be present, does she want to discuss the violence?
- What does she want to do if the children or other parties bring it up?
- What has she already discussed with the children regarding the violence?
- How have the children been impacted by the violence?
- What will the impact be on the children if their father's violence is discussed in the conference without him present? With him present?
- How will the abuser react if his violence towards her is brought up? By her? By others?
- What has happened in the past when his violence has been discussed?
- Are there other community or family members that he will want at the meeting? How does the woman feel about that?
- Does she want someone who is an expert in domestic violence, such as a domestic violence victim advocate, or a batterer treatment counselor who is working with the abuser, present at the conference? If so, how might the abuser react?
- Does she feel that she can safely speak out about her wishes and concerns if they are different from those of the abuser?
- How will the facilitator know if the mother begins to feel afraid during the conference? Can they plan to signal each other if the mother does begin to feel afraid?
- Of all the people she wants to invite to the conference, with whom has she discussed the domestic violence? What have their reactions been?
- What does she think the reaction of people at the conference will be to disclosure of the violence? Will they support her need to be safe and his need to be non-violent?
- What does she fear could go wrong in the FTC? What would be the consequences?
- To avoid surprises, what else does the facilitator need to know about her and her family? If, for example, an aunt is invited, what might she tell the group that would be a surprise?

PREPARATION WITH THE ABUSER

Listening to the abuser and understanding his perspective is vital to assessing safety and risk. Questions can probe the extent to which he has taken responsibility for his actions and can help the facilitator better understand his sense of entitlement. If he will participate in the FTC with the survivor, this interview gives the facilitator a chance to discuss with the abuser how he can be a constructive participant. Ideally, the person conducting this interview should have expertise in working with perpetrators of domestic violence, understand domestic violence dynamics, and know how to communicate effectively with abusers. If the facilitator does not have these skills, the agency may want to partner with a local batterers' intervention program to have one of their staff members conduct this interview. Effective engagement with the abuser will require empathy for his situation, openness to hearing his underlying fears, and a willingness to respond to his legitimate need for services. The following questions can be used in the interview to determine how the abuser might react in the meeting, and how to conduct a safe meeting with him present:

- Are there any specific topics to avoid?
- Would it be helpful if a batterer intervention program staff person attended the meeting?
- If the woman wants to discuss the domestic violence, how will he manage that discussion?
- Are there other community or family members that he wants at the meeting? How does he think the woman will react to that? Will these other people support her need to be safe and his need to be non-violent?
- Have any of the people attending the meeting seen him escalate situations when disagreements arose in the past? Will this be a fear or concern of other meeting participants? How can that concern be addressed?
- How can he let the facilitator know that he needs a break during the meeting because of topics being discussed?
- If it has been agreed that domestic violence will not be discussed, how will he respond if another party brings it up?
- What has happened in the past when the violence has been discussed?
- What has he discussed with the children regarding his violence?
- How have the children been affected by the violence?
- What might the impact be on the children if the violence is discussed in their presence in the meeting?
- How can he convey to the woman that she can safely speak out about her wishes and concerns if they are different from his?
- What does he fear could go wrong in the FTC? What might the consequences of this be?
- To avoid surprises, what else does the facilitator need to know about him and his family?

If the abuser is not participating in the FTC with the adult survivor, an interview can help the agency determine whether a separate FTC for him would be useful to help hold him accountable for

his behavior and to plan services that may improve his future interactions with his children and the mother.

PREPARATION WITH OTHER FTC PARTICIPANTS

Preparation for the FTC includes determining who else should participate in the meeting. If both the abuser and the survivor will be present in the meeting, the facilitator may want to speak with them about inviting both an advocate for domestic violence survivors and a provider of batterer intervention services. These service providers have unique expertise that can help ensure safety and provide support to the FTC process. They may be able to suggest solutions to problems the families are facing and offer their assistance as part of the service plan or follow-up to the meeting.

It is important to remember that these participants may be new to the FTC process and may have preconceived notions of how child welfare typically does business. To participate effectively in the meeting, they must understand how the FTC process works, see its value for the families, and believe that safety concerns are being adequately addressed. Domestic violence service providers must also have the opportunity to speak with the

THE BATTERER INTERVENTION PROGRAM STAFF'S ROLE:

- ▶ Work with the facilitator to prepare the abuser for the meeting, if he is going to attend
- ▶ If the family is known to the staff person, provide information about the situation and the abuser's progress in any intervention programs he is attending
- ▶ Provide facilitation support as needed, and especially if the conflict escalates
- ▶ Model respectful listening of the survivor's needs and goals
- ▶ Offer follow-up services for the abuser

THE ADVOCATE'S ROLE:

- ▶ Support the goals of the FTC
- ▶ Support the survivor
- ▶ If the family is known to the advocate, provide information about the situation
- ▶ Debunk misinformation that might come up in the meeting regarding domestic violence
- ▶ If the abuser attends the meeting, work with the facilitator and survivor to watch for warning signs of escalating conflict in the FTC
- ▶ Provide follow-up support to the survivor and her children

facilitator about their role in the meeting, especially given that they are not accustomed to working with the family together. It is not always appropriate to have these service providers at the FTC. Not all survivors want an advocate present, and some advocates may disapprove of the process to such an extent that their participation would not be useful. In some circumstances it may make sense to have an advocate in the meeting, but not have her identify herself as an

advocate. Participants must be assessed individually to determine their ability to support the specific goals of the FTC.

The assessment process may reveal other risk factors in the family, such as mental illness or substance abuse. If this is the case, the agency may want to talk to the family about inviting a mental health professional or substance abuse treatment provider to conduct further assessments and participate in the meeting. If the family already has a relationship with certain service providers, the facilitator may want to get permission from the family to interview these providers before the meeting and invite them to attend. These interviews provide an opportunity to learn more about the family, but also to give the service providers information about domestic violence dynamics, so that they can be better prepared for whatever happens in the FTC. Any community-based service providers who will be attending meetings on a regular basis should participate in an FTC training.

The facilitator should also meet with extended family members who want to participate in the FTC to determine their motives for participating and the role they can play in crafting solutions to whatever issues the family is facing. An agreement with each participant regarding his or her role can be a way to gain consensus on the nature of the problems to be discussed in the FTC and on ground

rules for participation. If a family member wants to bring up domestic violence, but the survivor does not believe it is safe, the facilitator can acknowledge the family member's concerns but coach that family member not to bring up domestic violence in the meeting.

There are a number of concerns the facilitator will want to consider in determining whether the children should participate in the FTC. The facilitator will need to assess whether: 1) the children are developmentally capable of participating; 2) the children will benefit from the FTC; 3) the meeting will cause further trauma to the children; and 4) the children can

help achieve the desired outcomes for the meeting. The facilitator will also need to consider how the children's presence may inhibit honest conversation by the adults, and how the children will feel about discussing the violence in front of the abuser, if he is there. One option may be for the children to participate in only part of the meeting.

Some parents may want to talk only about certain aspects of domestic violence during the FTC. For

9. FACILITATING THE FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE

example, if the school principal or child's teacher is present, the mother may feel reluctant to explore the impact that witnessing the violence against her has had on her children. It may also be that the survivor does not want the issue of domestic violence to come up at all in the meeting. The facilitator should respect the survivor's desire to withhold information about domestic violence. If the abuser is at the meeting, the survivor will know better than anyone whether it is safe to bring up domestic violence in his presence. The facilitator must prepare participants for the possibility that the issue may arise anyway. For example, a child participating in the FTC may raise it, or a child welfare worker may insist that the issue be discussed as part of planning for the safety of the child.

FTCs are emotional events. The facilitator and other meeting participants must be aware that during such stressful situations family members may resort to coping mechanisms that have worked for them in the past; this is especially true for families who have experienced domestic violence. For some family members, this may mean minimizing or denying the existence of domestic violence. For others, it may mean trying to exercise control over the meeting by sabotaging the process or escalating conflict. A thorough assessment, in the preparation phase, of the range of possible emotional responses to the meeting will help the facilitator contend with participants' behaviors.

IF THE CONFLICT ESCALATES IN THE FTC

The FTC can be stopped if the facilitator or survivor thinks the batterer is getting angry and escalating the conflict. The survivor and facilitator can agree ahead of time on a signal that they exchange if they believe the conflict is escalating to the point of danger. However, a meeting should not automatically be stopped because there is anger in the room. An FTC can be used to help family members begin to learn how to deal with anger appropriately. With sufficient planning, the facilitator can use the FTC process to model the management of difficult emotions by de-escalating a conflict. In this situation, it is helpful to the facilitator to have other experts in the room- participants who are familiar with domestic violence dynamics, who can identify shifts in behavior, and who can help the facilitator maintain control of the situation.

When conflict escalates in a meeting, the facilitator must immediately assess what is happening in the room. Sometimes, empathizing with the fear or pain the key players are expressing can be enough to reduce the conflict in the room. Without discounting the harms past violence has caused, the facilitator can encourage participants to focus on solutions for the future. It is important for the facilitator to show empathy for both the survivor and the abuser, and not to confront the abuser directly. The facilitator can acknowledge the feelings they have expressed and remind them that the meeting participants are there to provide them support and resources.

It may be necessary to call a break in the meeting if an abuser becomes angry and continues to escalate the conflict. During the break, an assessment can be done to determine whether the FTC should end or reconvene. The facilitator, with support from other team members as needed, should meet with the survivor, abuser, and any other key players separately. For these reasons, it is recommended that someone with expertise in working with abusers be a regular consultant in planning FTCs and in serving as a meeting co-facilitator, when possible. The facilitator and co-facilitator can plan ahead how they will work with the individual family members during a break in the meeting, should the conflict escalate. In speaking with the survivor during the break, the facilitator can ask her: 1) what she thinks should happen, and 2) whether she feels safe.

In most cases, reconvening an FTC that has been halted to re-assess safety or to de-escalate tension should occur only when all of the following exist:

- During the break, the survivor says she wants to continue with the FTC and that she feels safe doing so;
- The facilitator (along with the co-facilitator or other domestic violence experts) believes that reconvening will not jeopardize anyone’s safety;
- It appears that the abuser is constructively managing his anger;
- The facilitator and survivor believe continuation of the meeting will be productive; and
- The safety of the survivor will not be compromised.

If the FTC cannot continue, the facilitator should end the meeting with some solution-based strategies in place, and with a plan for checking on the safety of the adult survivor and children post-meeting. The facilitator can remind the key participants to use the constructive stress reduction skills they already have, and can connect them with supports right away. It may be that there are meeting participants who can provide follow-up support for the adult survivor and the children, and for the batterer, if he is willing. One of the team members should plan to do a follow-up visit with the adult survivor. The facilitator should work with the survivor and other team members (but not the abuser) to develop a short-term safety plan that can be put in place immediately to address safety issues for the mother and children.

WHEN THE ISSUE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COMES UP UNEXPECTEDLY

To effectively respond to situations in which domestic violence comes up unexpectedly during an FTC, the facilitator should always have in place a strategy that allows a co-facilitator or resource person, who is also trained in domestic violence dynamics, to check in with the survivor privately, during and after the conference, about her safety. Similarly, someone who is experienced in working with domestic violence perpetrators can pay attention to the abuser’s behavior during the FTC, when

the domestic violence is unexpectedly disclosed, and can assess his attitudes and behavior during and after the meeting.

When domestic violence does come up unexpectedly in an FTC, the facilitator may decide not to address it right away. The facilitator can acknowledge the issue, but defer the discussion of domestic violence to a later time. This will allow time to prepare the participants and address safety issues before the discussion takes place. The facilitator may also choose to pause the meeting to do a check-in with the parents and other team members separately, and then reconvene if it seems safe and productive to do so.

“In cases involving domestic violence, an FTC may decrease the likelihood that the children are removed from the non-offending parent, and increase the chances of children who have already been removed being safely reunified.”

10. FOLLOW-UP AFTER THE FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE

No matter how careful and thorough an assessment of danger posed by domestic violence is, it is impossible to know for certain if and when violence will escalate again. This is particularly true at times when the abuser perceives that his control over the victim has been challenged by an intervention, such as an FTC. For this reason, it is crucial that follow-up be done with the domestic violence survivor after the FTC to assess any impact the meeting may have had on her or her children's safety. The timing of the follow-up will depend on the level of risk as assessed by the facilitator and the survivor. It is also important for someone who has expertise in working with abusers to check in with the abuser to see how he is faring after the meeting.

Before each FTC, the worker and mother should craft together a strategy for how the worker can get feedback after the conference about the survivor's safety. When possible, the child welfare worker should ask the woman if a home visit can be made after the conference to make sure she and the children are safe. However, this should be done only in situations in which the mother's and worker's safety will not be compromised. If the abuser was present at the FTC, and his violence was discussed, the worker should always call the survivor within 24 hours, and ask such questions as:

- Did you discuss the FTC with him?
- Have you been afraid of him since the FTC?
- Has he been or threatened to be violent since?
- What was the impact of the disclosure on you, on him, and on the children?
- If there have been negative repercussions from the disclosure of domestic violence in the FTC, how can the agency support you in increasing your and your children's safety?

Follow-up should also include an assessment of the FTC process and its effectiveness in addressing the issues the family is facing. The worker can meet with the mother to talk to her about whether she thinks the FTC has improved her and her children's circumstances or made her situation more difficult. The following questions can be used as a basis for this discussion:

- What was most helpful about the FTC?
- What worried you the most, or made you the most uncomfortable?
- What has happened since the meeting to improve your situation? To worsen it?
- Was the plan that was developed at the meeting put into place?
- Would you recommend this type of planning process to other families? Why or why not?

FOLLOW-UP AFTER THE FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE

Similarly, the child welfare worker should have a face-to-face follow-up meeting with the abuser, particularly if he was present at the meeting. Questions to ask the abuser include:

- Did you discuss the FTC with your partner?
- Have there been any episodes of violence or threats of violence since the meeting?
- What was the impact on you of the disclosure of domestic violence? The impact on her? On the children?
- What aspects of the meeting worried you the most or made you feel the most uncomfortable?
- What has happened since the meeting to improve your situation? To worsen it?
- Was the plan that was developed put in place?
- Would you recommend this type of planning process to other families? Why or why not?

As part of follow-up, the worker designated by the team to ensure the plan's implementation should check regularly with the family and the support team to see how team members are doing in supporting the family. Is the family receiving the supports agreed to in the meeting? Are these supports making a difference? The worker may decide to plan for follow-up FTCs to resolve any outstanding issues, address any gaps in support for the family, or respond to new circumstances when they arise. One of the advantages of the FTC is that it provides a forum for bringing a team of people together to support a family that is struggling. With regular follow-up, that team can continue to provide support as the parents work to ensure the safety and well-being of their children.

The worker may also want to speak with the other participants to get their perspective on the meeting. A discussion of what worked and did not work can inform future FTCs with that family and can shape strategies for FTCs in other domestic violence cases, as well.

11. CONCLUSION

Family Team Conferences can be useful tools for families facing both child abuse and domestic violence by engaging families in the decision-making process and fostering the formalization of community and social supports. The presence of domestic violence necessitates that thorough assessment and preparation processes be implemented. Partnerships among child welfare workers, trained FTC facilitators, and domestic violence service providers help ensure that FTCs include strong expertise in addressing domestic violence issues. Once the security of all family members is assured, the facilitator, child welfare worker, participating family, and community partners can embark upon a process that is likely to result in a safer, healthier, and stronger family. Given that the child welfare agency has to reach a decision regarding the safety of the child, FTCs provide a valuable opportunity to have additional voices and expertise at that decision-making table, and to use a strength-based approach to helping family members keep their children safe.

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RESOURCES

American Humane Association. National Center on Family Group Decision Making. 63 Inverness Drive East, Englewood, Colorado, 80112-5117. Phone: (303) 792-9900. Fax: (303) 792-5333.

Center for the Study of Social Policy. 1575 Eye Street, NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC, 20005. Phone: (202) 371-1565. Fax: (202) 371-1472. Website: www.cssp.org

Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group. 2033 East Second Street, Montgomery Alabama, 36106. Phone: (334) 264-8300. Fax: (334) 264-8310. Website: www.childwelfaregroup.org.

Family Conference Institute. 625 Wool Creek Drive, Suite D, San Jose, California, 95112. Phone: (408) 299-1525. Fax: (408) 299-1550.

Family Violence Prevention Fund. 383 Rhode Island Street, Suite 304, San Francisco, California, 94103. Phone: (415) 252-8900. Fax: (415)-252-8991. Website: www.endabuse.org.

North Carolina Family Group Conferencing Project. North Carolina State University. Social Work Program. C.B. 7639, Raleigh, North Carolina, 27695-7639. Phone: (919) 515-2492. Fax: (919) 515-4403.

The Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare. 700 Broadway, Suite 301, New York, New York, 10003. Phone: (212) 979-2369. Fax: (212) 995-8756.

The Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Child Protection and Custody. The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. P.O. Box 8970, Reno, Nevada, 89507. Phone: (800) 527-3223. Fax: (775) 784-6160.



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