tcfv
TEXAS COUNCIL ON FAMILY VIOLENCE

ADVOCACY *in* ACTION:

Children's Advocacy



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With the passage of SB 1841 (88R), Chapter 51 of the Texas Human Resources Code now requires that family violence centers provide specific advocacy services, including advocacy focused on the needs of children who are victims and the children of victims. Further, Sec. 51.012 of the Human Resources Code states that the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) and the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) shall coordinate the provision of violence prevention services for children. This is a broad mandate which requires action both at the family violence program level as well as within these two state agencies. We offer this tipsheet to support advocates starting their role in supporting the needs of children, and their protective parent, in a family violence center.

A strong relationship between a child and a safe survivor parent can build resilience and support healing, whereas a parent using domestic violence disrupts a child's sense of safety, stability, and wellbeing. As a family violence advocate, you can play a critical role in supporting survivor parents in their efforts to rebuild relationships with their children, as well as providing healing spaces and services for children and youth who have a parent that has caused harm by using domestic violence and coercive control. Coercive control is a form of domestic violence through which controlling behavior is designed to make a person dependent by isolating them from support, exploiting them, depriving them of independence, and regulating their activities.[1]

For survivors of family violence, children are at the heart of many of their choices when it comes to how they pursue and define safety. As parents, survivors are not always faced with a bad choice and a good choice; instead, due to the environment of violence and control created by the person using violence, they are often faced with choices that are not safe or viable options.

This tip sheet will provide essential considerations when serving children and youth who have experienced this specific type of trauma, with a focus on strengthening the bond between the children and survivor parents, and giving children and youth tools to heal and to build healthy relationships of their own. It will also offer support for advocating for survivor parents involved in the child welfare system.



As a family violence advocate, you can play a critical role in supporting survivor parents in their efforts to rebuild relationships with their children...

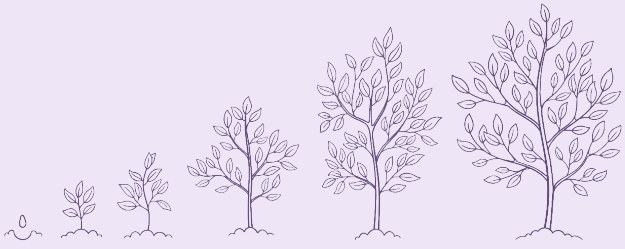
[1] *What is coercive control?*, WOMEN'S AID, https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic abuse/coercive-control/ (last visited Nov. 10, 2022).

Trauma and Resilience

Impact of Domestic Violence on Child Wellbeing

Domestic violence can have a significant impact on a child's sense of stability, safety, and security; however, it is critical that as advocates and as a society as a whole, we recognize that this impact is caused by the person choosing to use violence and control, not by the adult survivor of the violence.

In addition to increased generalized anxiety, anxiety about the safety of one parent, sleeplessness or nightmares, difficulty concentrating in school or on tasks, turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms, long-term physical health impacts, and emotional challenges as an adult, children of a parent who uses domestic violence can also learn destructive models of love and relationships.[2]



You can learn more here about the impacts on children: Effects | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

As with every factor in domestic violence, the impact and experience vary from family to family, and even from child to child within the same family.

Child Abuse and Domestic Violence

Domestic violence constitutes the single greatest precursor of child maltreatment fatalities.[3]



By age 17, **a third** of America's children will have been exposed to a parent using violence against a partner.[4]



56.8% of children who have seen that violence being used will also have been abused themselves at some point in their life.[5]



Between **30% and 60%** of people who use domestic violence also abuse children in their household.[6]

There is a strong link between people who abuse their partners and people who abuse their children.

[2] https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/intimate-partner-violence/effects
Effects | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
[3] U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect. 1995. A Nation's Shame: Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States. Washington, D.C. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
[4] Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., Ormrod, R., & Hamby, S.L. (2009). Violence, abuse, and crime exposure in a national sample of children and youth. Pediatrics, 124 (5), 1411- 1423. Retrieved 9/4/14 from http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/-content/full/124/5/1411
[5] Hamby, S., Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., & Ormrod, R. (2010).
[6] Edelson, J.L. (1999). "The Overlap Between Child Maltreatment and Woman Battering." Violence Against Women. 5:134-154.

Being an adult victim of domestic violence, however, does NOT equate to being abusive or neglectful of your children, nor does it mean the child has experienced abuse and neglect automatically.

This is a critical nuance to understand when serving children of survivor parents. Domestic violence that physically harms a child or puts the child at substantial risk of immediate harm would constitute an allegation of child abuse or neglect - against the person using violence.

Abuse and neglect are defined in Section 261.001, Family Code, and awareness of these definitions will serve advocates well. **DFPS itself summarizes signs of abuse and neglect here:** DFPS - Recognize the Signs of Child Abuse.

Resilience

Resilience is a blend of *"genetic predispositions and personal, familial, environmental risk and protective factors"*.[7] For some children, a high level of resilience is innate and built into who they are. For all children, resilience can be planted, grown, and supported by a number of factors. Protective factors promote resiliency and include:



Individual Strengths
(e.g., conflict resolution skills, temperament, and the ability to make sense of difficult experiences);



Family Strengths
(e.g., strong child-caregiver relationships, a physically and mentally healthy caregiver, and a stable living environment);



Community Strengths
(e.g., a positive school climate and feeling connected to their school, role models, safe places to play in their neighborhoods, and mentors who create safe, nurturing environments).



Additional supportive adults in a child's life.

In all factors, research is clear that children need consistent and loving adults to help create and build that resilience.[8]

[7] Rutter, 1999, as cited in Lieberman et al., 2011
[8] Bancroft L, Silverman J. The Batterer as Parent. 2002. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California

Role of the Children's Advocate



A children's advocate can help to provide youth- and child-friendly spaces to help kids heal from trauma, and provide connection to bolster their relationship with their protective parent, learn about healthy relationships, and to just be children in a world that hasn't often let them.

Did you know? The Health and Human Services Commission Rules outline a number of required services and support to children in shelter and nonresidential services. These include everything from developmentally appropriate activities to support for education. You can find those rules below to orient yourself to the required services related to your position.

- Shelter Center Rules: Rule 356.713-356.718.
- Nonresidential Center Rules: Rule 356.2110-356.2112.

For those who work in a shelter, it is also important to be aware of your role in the prevention of violence – navigation of safety concerns and lack of other available options can be primary reasons a survivor, especially a survivor with children, may stay with an abusive partner. Being in shelter provides safety, security, and opportunities to heal for the children and their survivor parent. As a children's advocate, you can help make that shelter stay as comfortable as possible for the survivor and their children. While these ideas may be more specific to shelter, they can be great tips for nonresidential and outreach centers as well. Here are some ideas to accomplish this goal:

Create child-friendly physical spaces.



Consider using bright colors, comfortable soft cushions where parents can get cozy with their littles, reading nooks with age-appropriate books, fairy lights, soft or foam flooring, cozy and protective touches like throw pillows, child-sized table and chairs, cozy throw rugs, etc. Try to avoid furniture with sharp corners, breakables, and empty hard floors. Secure heavy furniture items like shelving to the wall to reduce tipping risk.

Create teen-friendly physical spaces.



Consider LED string lights, age-appropriate books and magazines, comfortable space to socialize, flexible and movable furniture, board game area, plants, vanity/mirror setup, interchangeable wall art, etc.

HHSC also has facility requirements to make sure shelters have adequate safe play spaces, both indoors and out, as well as toys and other components. Check out those requirement by visiting rule 356. 501. Nonresidential centers also need adequate safe play spaces. That rule can be found at 356.1901.

Work with your program to develop a respite care system for parents. Respite care is defined as short term relief for a parent/ caregiver to rest/attend to a personal matter without another pressing childcare need. This can allow for a survivor parent to attend meetings, appointments, interviews, and hearings without having to worry about the care of her children during that time. Whether you have childcare on site to do this, or need to navigate using this option via local resources, this resource is critical to survivor and child healing. Sometimes this can be as easy as partnering with a local YMCA to have sliding scale memberships where survivors can have respite while using the facilities. In other places, it is a full onsite program.

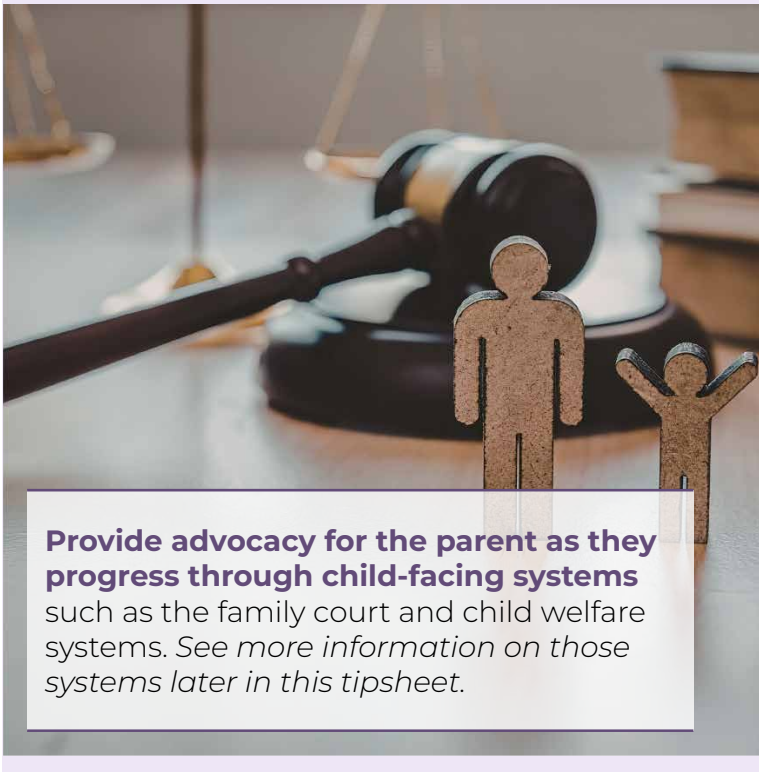
Facilitate bringing in trauma-informed training on working with children exposed to violence for staff at your program. The foundation of trauma-informed care is shifting the perspective from 'Why are you acting this way?' to 'What happened to you?". It's critical that any staff interacting with the children of survivors are aware of how trauma may present in children and youth, and can employ trauma-informed interaction when working with them.

Connect youth to healthy relationship education in shelter and non-residential settings where their survivor parent is receiving services. Education about healthy relationships is a key factor in preventing today's youth from experiencing intimate partner violence now or in the future.[9] As noted above, having a parent who uses violence against their partner can be harmful as children develop a sense of self and what healthy relationships should look like. Building prevention programming that centers this in your work can bring support to both the child and the protective parent.

Support connection of children, youth, and parents to individual domestic violence-informed counseling to process their experiences and their complex feelings related to each of their family members. Individual counseling for children and teens was ranked as the #1 need for minor survivors and children of survivors in the 2025 Needs Assessment.

Support the relationship between the children and their survivor parent. Children's emotional recovery from exposure to domestic violence depends on the quality of their relationship with the non-battering parent **more than any other single factor**.[10]

- **Create structured opportunities for survivor parents and their children** to create together, play together, make music together, and laugh together. This helps shift the constant focus from the disruptions in their lives and relationships and helps rebuild the bond that is so important for healing.



- **Provide advocacy for the parent as they progress through child-facing systems** such as the family court and child welfare systems. *See more information on those systems later in this tipsheet.*

- **Support the Five Interrelated Protective Factors**, shown on the next page.

[9] Preventing Intimate Partner Violence | Intimate Partner Violence Prevention | CDC
[10] Bancroft L, Silverman J. The Batterer as Parent. 2002. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California

The Five Key Protective Factors **For Adult & Children Survivors**

- **Social and Emotional Abilities**
- **Resilience and a Growth Mindset**
- **Safer and More Stable Conditions**
- **Nurturing Parent-Child Interactions**
- **Social Connections**

According to Futures Without Violence:[11]

Five protective factors (Overview of Protective Factors) can help to reduce the effects of domestic violence on adult and child survivors, support their personal growth and development, and build a family and community environment that promotes their well-being. The five protective factors for survivors of domestic violence are:

- **Social and emotional abilities**
- **Resilience and a growth mindset**
- **Safer and more stable conditions**
- **Nurturing parent-child interactions**
- **Social connections**

Each of these links goes into detail about what the protective factor is, how you can build and support it, and questions you can ask the survivor parent and their children to help identify a foundation for building these protective factors.

Supporting Older Youth

As children grow into adolescence, the bond they have with their survivor parent is still incredibly important, but there are other areas of their life and challenges in their relationships that you can provide support for as well. See the following resources for older youth and adolescents:



- **TCFV's Youth & Adult Allies Toolkit**
- **Love is Respect (available in English and Spanish)**
- **Health, Healing, and Healthy Relationships (English and Spanish)**
- **Creative Activities for Youth - Action for Equality**
- **McKinney - Vento: Educating Homeless Youth | Texas Law Help**

TCFV's Podcast, **Down the Rabbit Hole**, has several episodes focused on youth advocacy, survivorship, and engagement. Reach out to **Prevention@TCFV.org** for even more resources on engaging and empowering youth or check out **TCFV's Prevention Launchpad**.

[11] https://futureswithoutviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Overview-of-Protective-Factors-for-Adult-and-Child-Survivors-of-DV-TIP-SHEET-2025.pdf

Parenting Support

Here are several resources available to provide support to parents at any stage of their children's lives:

- How to Talk to Children About Witnessing Violence
- Connected Parents, Connected Kids (English)
- Mindfulness Activities for Kids and Parents
- Supporting Your Child During Dating Abuse | Love is Respect
- Empowering Parents: How to Deal with Bullies - Manage Bullying Kids
- Need a Screen Reset? How to Reduce Screen Time Without Daily Battles

Child-Facing Systems Advocacy

Many survivor parents will be involved at one time or another with the child welfare system, the family court system, or both. As a children's advocate, it will be helpful to have knowledge of both systems to help advocate for more positive outcomes for the children and their survivor parent. This information can support all families you support, those in shelter and those seeking nonresidential services.

Child Custody Professionals and Domestic Violence

When survivors with children are involved in the family court system, they may at any time be involved in child custody mediation or in family court with a variety of professionals assigned to the case on behalf of the children, or assigned directly to the children.

There are some protections in place for survivors in some family court proceedings, as well as some requirements that certain professionals receive some minimum of family violence training. If you are familiar with these requirements, you can share them with a survivor to give her more information to aid in better outcomes in the family court proceedings.



Professional	Role	Domestic Violence Requirements
Judge 	Makes final decisions and orders on a case, based on recommendations and/or evidence from all parties.	1 hour of family violence dynamics training is required in their first term, and again once every 4 years. Subchapter B §22.110, Government Code
Amicus Attorney 	Appointed to assist the court on custody cases to represent the child's best interest.	Some portion of 4 hours of family violence dynamics training is required prior to appointment. Sec. 107.0245 (2)(A), Family Code
Child Custody Mediator 	An attorney or non-attorney who helps the parties come to an agreement outside of court, prior to trial, which gets accepted by the judge.	4 hours of family violence dynamics training is required. There is also a family violence exception to mediation, meaning that a survivor may be able to avoid mediation altogether. Sec. 154.052, Civil Practice and Remedies Code
Parenting Time Coordinator 	Appointed by the court to perform specific duties related to settling disputes in a custody case and implementing parenting plans.	Must receive 8 hours of training on the dynamics of family violence. A party may at any time file an objection to the appointment of a parenting time coordinator based on family violence. Sec. 153.610 (b)(1), Family Code
Parenting Time Facilitator 	Similar to the role of a coordinator, but with the additional duty of monitoring compliance with court orders.	Must receive 8 hours of training on the dynamics of family violence. A party may at any time file an objection to the appointment of a parenting time coordinator based on family violence. Sec. 153.6101 (b)(2)(A), Family Code
Child Custody Evaluator 	A qualified professional appointed to a contested custody case to make specific recommendations as requested by the court related to conservatorship of the children.	8 hours of family violence dynamics training. Section 107.104 (e), Family Code

Child Welfare Agencies and Domestic Violence

Understanding DFPS as an Organization

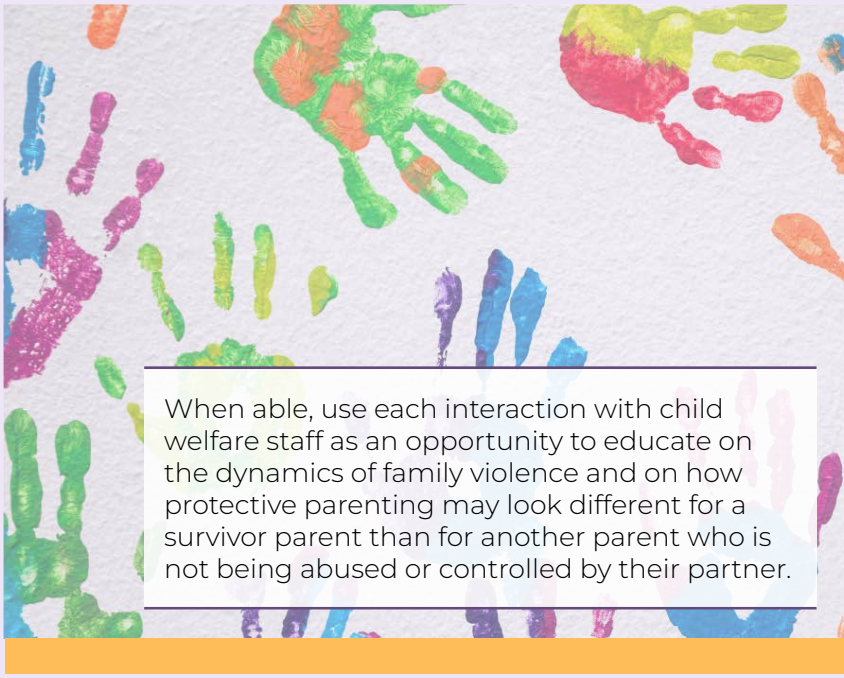
DFPS is in the midst of privatization – meaning that post-investigation services are increasingly being handled by private agencies contracted by DFPS. You can learn more about privatization, or Community Based Care, here: Community-Based Care - Frequently Asked Questions. It is important to note that Child Protective Investigations (CPI) will remain a direct responsibility of the State of Texas and will not be contracted out to private entities.

Ongoing case management in Family Based Safety Services (FBSS) and Conservatorship (CVS), however, is being handled by private entities, otherwise known as Single Source Continuum Contractors (SSCCs), throughout more and more of the state. Throughout this document, we will often refer to this system as the child welfare system, in order to encompass the public and private combination of agencies in this Community Based Care model.

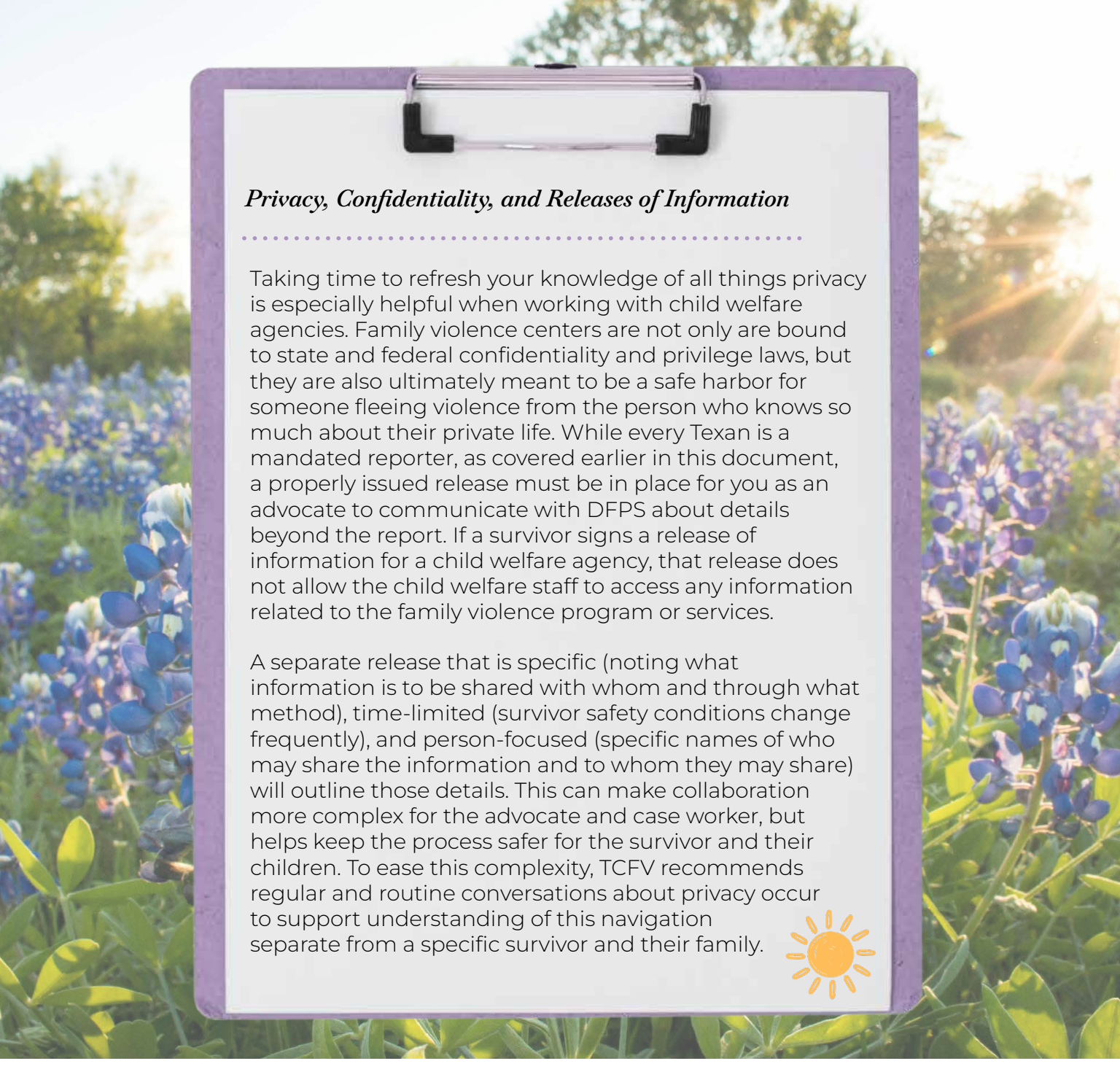
Building a Relationship with DFPS to Support Survivors

TCFV attempts to maintain an updated list of the best contacts at DFPS and SSCCs, often called Liaisons, to reach out to for domestic violence-related issues, as well as those best suited to build relationships with family violence programs in their respective areas. That said, if you have had a positive experience with one or more caseworkers, build and keep a relationship with that person/s and consider going through them to organize cross-training events. Working relationships between family violence centers and child welfare agencies are best laid out in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between DFPS and FV Centers, which was established in 2012 and receives periodic updates.

Building and maintaining relationships with your local child welfare agencies outside of case-related emergencies helps ensure that when an emergency does arise, all professionals involved have a foundational understanding of each other's responsibilities and limitations when it comes to serving and supporting survivors and their children.



When able, use each interaction with child welfare staff as an opportunity to educate on the dynamics of family violence and on how protective parenting may look different for a survivor parent than for another parent who is not being abused or controlled by their partner.



Privacy, Confidentiality, and Releases of Information

Taking time to refresh your knowledge of all things privacy is especially helpful when working with child welfare agencies. Family violence centers are not only are bound to state and federal confidentiality and privilege laws, but they are also ultimately meant to be a safe harbor for someone fleeing violence from the person who knows so much about their private life. While every Texan is a mandated reporter, as covered earlier in this document, a properly issued release must be in place for you as an advocate to communicate with DFPS about details beyond the report. If a survivor signs a release of information for a child welfare agency, that release does not allow the child welfare staff to access any information related to the family violence program or services.

A separate release that is specific (noting what information is to be shared with whom and through what method), time-limited (survivor safety conditions change frequently), and person-focused (specific names of who may share the information and to whom they may share) will outline those details. This can make collaboration more complex for the advocate and case worker, but helps keep the process safer for the survivor and their children. To ease this complexity, TCFV recommends regular and routine conversations about privacy occur to support understanding of this navigation separate from a specific survivor and their family.

Shelter is a confidential and private space for all survivors within it. Child welfare staff are required to see children in their current living environment. To balance these priorities, programs can consider having available a picture or video of the living space with no other staff, clients, or belongings in the frame, along with a copy of what is and is not permitted to be at shelter (firearms, substances, etc.) to distribute to investigators at a non-residential location. This can go a long way to satisfy the requirements of child welfare staff to be familiar with the living environment of the children. For meetings between survivor parents and child welfare investigators or case workers, consider having available a non-residential meeting space, with child-friendly toys and a comforting environment.

When an investigator or case worker calls in search of the survivor, know they too are doing their job. To honor privacy laws, and to honor their complex role investigating child abuse or neglect, consider thanking them for their work and communicating your duty to honor these laws. Meet in advance, when there are no case emergencies, so they understand your protocols for discussing a release of information with a survivor, and why seeking information from a family violence refuge should be a last resort. This is imperative to all survivors so that they can seek urgent lifesaving services and not feel their intimate details will be shared.

Supporting Vs. Reporting

A component of working with DFPS that often creates questions about safety, for both a parent and child, is mandatory reporting. In Texas, every adult is mandated to report suspected child abuse or neglect to Statewide Intake. Certain professionals are required to report within 24 hours (Sec. 261.101, Family Code: Persons Required to Report; Time to Report).

Where an advocate can support both the child and protective parent is both in how they report and working to continue to build a trusting relationship with the parent through the process.

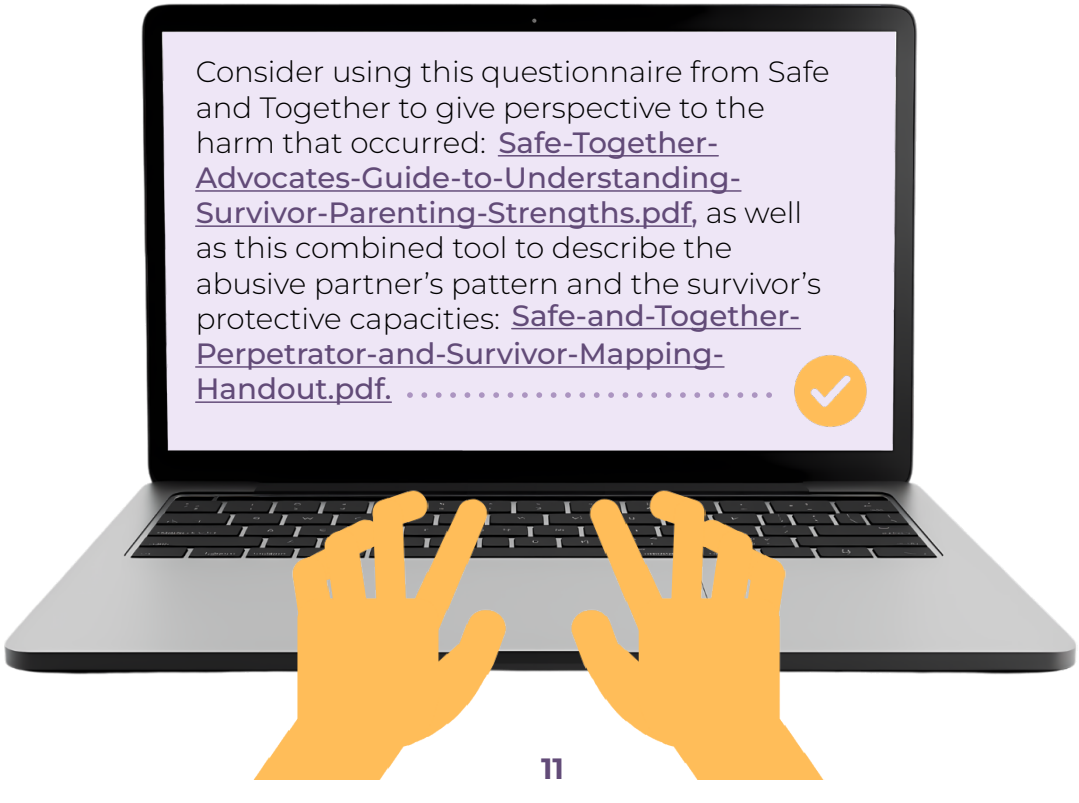


See the Promising Futures website for a helpful perspective on the nuanced considerations when reporting the existence of family violence as abuse or neglect of children: MANDATORY REPORTING - Promising Futures.

There are likely two different types of scenarios that you as an advocate face with regard to reporting child abuse: reporting when the partner who used violence was also abusive to the child, and when you have current concerns about the protective parent. In either scenario, consider the following:

Staff status as mandated reporters should be shared during intake, and this can be reiterated when addressing the concern.

- If the call is related to domestic violence that has occurred in the past, take time to sit with the survivor and give voice to the protective steps they took even while their partner was so dangerous that they (the abusive partner) endangered the children. This intake call is the beginning of the foundation of the child welfare case, so it is critical that the survivor's parenting strengths and protective steps are part of that record.



If the conversation does not rise to abuse or neglect reporting threshold but is a parenting concern:



- Know that the survivor may be unaware of the impact of the concern on their children. Try a nonjudgmental, supportive conversation with them describing why you have the concern that you do. Options include:
  - Offer a solution to the concern if it is current. This could include alternative methods of discipline, safer feeding or sleeping options, or alternative supervision options. Childcare is scarce in and out of shelter – consider what a survivor was faced with when they made the choice they did.
  - When a survivor has left home with her children, her relationship with them is likely strained and her belief in her worth as a parent is likely diminished as a result of the abuse and lack of control she has experienced. Bringing your concerns to her could validate her worst thoughts of herself, so it can be helpful to talk through her parenting strengths and give voice to any protective steps she has taken.

If the concerns exist to the point where you believe abuse or neglect is now occurring per the legal definitions and DFPS descriptions, then inform the survivor that you must make the call. **Invite them to be present with you or to speak with Statewide Intake themselves unless you believe doing so puts the child at risk.**

If you have made a call to Statewide Intake to report child abuse or neglect, and an investigator calls back to discuss the allegation, you are only authorized to discuss the specific incident or circumstance about which you reported. Outside of the report a signed release of information from the survivor. **See privacy information later in this tipsheet*

Working with Child Welfare-Involved Survivors and Their Children

TCFV also has a Know Your Rights document for survivors involved in the child welfare system. It is helpful to have staff at the Family Violence Center who are familiar with DFPS practices and procedures, as well as with the rights of parents going through DFPS investigations and/or case management services.

There is a delicate balance between the voluntary service model of family violence programs, and the high stakes of interacting with the authority of child welfare agencies. Advocates should support survivors' autonomy in decision making whenever possible, and this includes conversations about child welfare interaction. This means providing survivors with full information about what could happen when sharing information with child welfare, and what could happen when withholding information from child welfare.

Since 2024 all Texas family violence centers are required by state law to adhere to a trauma-informed, voluntary service model specific to each survivors individual needs. Educating others such as child welfare staff about the model can be helpful.

To support your continued use of this model, TCFV has a host of resources. You can access more about this model and how to weave it into YOUR role as a child advocate here.

Some items to consider:

- A survivor's relative safety can change from day to day. What is safe to share with child welfare today may no longer be safe tomorrow.
- What is shared with any child protective services staff becomes part of the case file, which is often shared and reviewed by all parties.
- Advocates may accompany survivors to any child welfare meetings or hearings, with rare exceptions.
- If a survivor is appointed an attorney following legal intervention by child welfare agencies, it is not guaranteed that the attorney is familiar with the dynamics of control and abuse.

DFPS Resources Related to Domestic Violence Response

- **DFPS - Domestic Violence:** Answers for parents about DPFS Investigations of Persons Using Violence. This document was updated with the multidisciplinary Texas Family Violence Interagency Collaborative (TFVIC), of which TCFV is a member.
- **Disposition Guidelines for Domestic Violence Resource Guide:** TFVIC, with the help of DV advocates across Texas, also recently updated this resource, reflecting a significant shift in philosophy and language at DFPS regarding survivors and people who use violence. Dispositions refer to how investigations are classified: Reason to Believe, Unable to Determine, or Ruled Out. Not every child welfare investigator or caseworker is aware of this updated resource, so familiarity with this as an advocate is a very useful thing to share with an investigator or caseworker.
- **Domestic Violence Resource Guide March 2026:** TFVIC updated this resource guide in 2026, also with the help of DV advocates, and the update reflects shifts in approach similar to the disposition guidelines. There are many different topical resource guides available to DFPS/SSCC staff, so bringing awareness of this specific guide to caseworkers can aid in better outcomes for survivors involved with child welfare.

Contact: For any inquiries on this tip sheet, reach out to: **policy@tcfv.org**

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TEXAS COUNCIL ON FAMILY VIOLENCE

INDIVIDUALLY WE POWER CHANGE.
TOGETHER WE POWER A MOVEMENT.

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