How Safe are Children and Families?
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Law, Regulations, & Agency Policy
- Ethical practice and agency policy
Thinking
- Analyzing information
Reflection
- Self-Awareness

In 2011, there were 21,368 victims in 18,740 domestic violence incidents reported to statewide law enforcement agencies and many victims were young children.

Imagine receiving a call from a mother enrolled in your home visiting program. The mother is crying and scared saying that she feels unsafe in her current living situation. She has mentioned domestic violence. She and her 16-month old child have very few resources and you are wondering how you can best respond.

Domestic violence may trigger many reactions and responses in home visitors. Some questions that we may ask ourselves are, “How can I help this mother?” and “What resources can I provide to this family?” and finally, “Why doesn’t the mother just leave?”

A good place to begin is with the mother and baby’s immediate basic need for safety and shelter. One of the long-term outcomes as identified in the New Mexico Home Visiting program is “Children and families are safe.” Determining if and how families are safe can be done in several ways, one of which is using the Women Abuse Screening Tool (WAST) to try to identify a potential dangerous situation. Yet, even with such tools situations may occur without prior warning. If a WAST score indicated an increased risk and if a safety plan was discussed, the safety plan will have identifiable resources the mother can use to determine her next steps for safety.

Information from a safety plan can be a valuable resource for a mother who is experiencing a crisis. Other resources may be community shelters, local family services agencies, places of worship and local law enforcement. The New Mexico Coalition Against Domestic Violence has many helpful resources for both home visitors and families.
Once we’ve had a discussion and resources have been identified, we may ask ourselves, “Why doesn’t she just leave?” This is a common question that is asked when we learn that a mother is being abused, but the answers are often complicated. Ending a relationship is never easy. It’s even harder when a mother has been isolated from family and friends, psychologically beaten down, financially controlled, and physically threatened which can all occur in domestic violence situations. And despite an abusive relationship, it is familiar. Stepping outside of that relationship into the unknown can be terrifying.

Sometimes, home visitors may encounter negative or difficult emotions from the work we do with families with young children. Our own pain and suffering may be triggered and experiences that we bring to the home visiting relationship can get in the way of working effectively with families unless there is a safe space and opportunity to explore our thoughts, feelings, reactions and emotions.

This processing can occur through regular reflective supervision and it is essential that home visitors have opportunities to become aware of and to attend to their own feelings. This example of parallel process can help improve the quality of services we are providing to the community.

Talking Points for Supervisors:

- What types of feelings come up for the home visitors you supervise around discussions of domestic violence?
- What is your agency’s policy for responding to domestic violence situations?
- What should a home visitor do if domestic violence occurs during a home visit?
- How often is emergency contact and safety plan information updated?
- What are some local resources that families can access to help them be safe?
- Does the mother have access to important papers such as driver’s license, birth certificates, credit cards and other assets?

References/Additional Resources