

Assessing Risk, Enhancing Safety

The Role of Child Support Agencies in Supporting Survivors of Domestic Violence



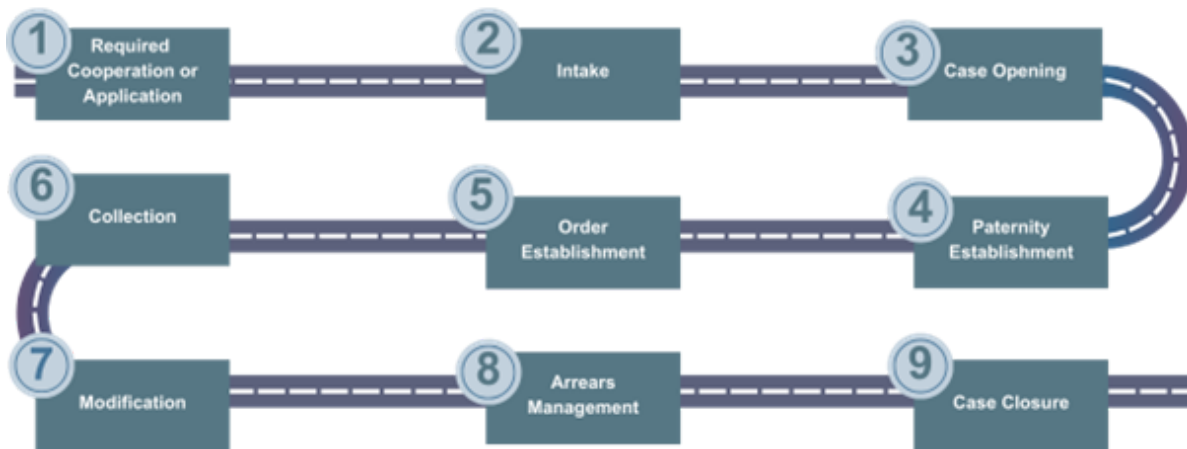
Introduction

The public child support program is a vital source of financial support, especially for low-income single parents and their children. It is a national program that has free or low-cost resources to locate the other parent, conduct genetic testing, enforce orders, and produce payments even when the other parent does not want to cooperate. However, survivors of domestic violence may face heightened risks at each stage of the child support process, including threats or retaliation when initiating a case, coercion or manipulation during legal proceedings, and continued abuse or financial control during enforcement and payment collection. The [SAVES Center](#) created this resource to describe the potential risks throughout the process, as well as strategies the child support agency can take to enhance safety for the survivors they serve.

Recognizing that [nearly 40%](#) of custodial parents in the Title IV-D program have experienced domestic violence, [Office of Child Support Services policy guidance](#) emphasizes the importance of implementing safety measures at every stage of the process. According to this policy guidance, child support agency best practices include:

- Conducting universal screening using procedural questions at any stage of the process
- Accepting survivors' verbal or written disclosure of violence
- Marking cases with family violence indicators (FVIs), where appropriate, to restrict the release of personal information
- Ensuring survivors' location and identity protection
- Permitting the closure of child support cases at any time

The Child Support Process



Child Support Agency Risks to and Potential Safeguards for Survivors

Stage 1: Child Support Cooperation

Survivor Risks	Potential Safeguards
A survivor applying for TANF, Medicaid, or other public benefits may not understand that child support cooperation is required and results in automatic case opening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide plain-language information about child support cooperation at public benefit application
Good cause options, which lift the requirement to cooperate with child support if it presents a safety risk to survivors and/or their children, are largely not offered/explained at the time of benefit application. Good cause approval policies may have requirements for third-party documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide plain-language information about good cause and the process for obtaining it at public benefit application • Eliminate third-party documentation requirements for good cause approval • Accept written or verbal statements from survivors • Improve training for and coordination between public assistance and IV-D agencies
Child support cooperation and/or case opening notices may go to both parties at (or around) the same time. An abuser may pressure a survivor to disenroll in public assistance with child support cooperation requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess and strengthen communication between public benefits and child support agencies regarding shared caseload • Limit contact from child support agency until safety screening is conducted
Even when cooperation and/or case opening notices are sent only to the public benefit recipient or survivor, they may still be intercepted by the abuser	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information about child support cooperation via telephone or email, rather than mail • Provide plain-language information about child support cooperation requirements, good cause, the application process, sanctions, and any additional safety modifications in cooperation notices

Stage 2: Applying for Child Support Services/Intake

Survivor Risks	Potential Safeguards
Child support application questions include personally identifying characteristics about the other party (e.g., physical attributes, financial support provided, relationship information, location, and employer information)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include an explanation of good cause and additional safety modifications available on application instructions • Conduct safety screening at application • Include contact information for local domestic violence (DV) service providers, who may provide advocacy and safety planning, on application instructions
Survivors may be asked for sensitive information, such as histories of violence and safety concerns, in a safety screener	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include information about how DV screening questions will be used on application instructions • Provide information about local DV providers— who may be able to assist with advocacy and safety planning— on application instructions
Lack of transparency about how application information and screening questions about domestic violence will be used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information about how application information and screening questions will be used on application instructions • Reassure clients that information about safety concerns is being asked to reduce risks and/or customize child support actions

Abusers may find evidence of application and screening questions, regardless of whether they are submitted on paper or digitally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote the use of online applications (submitted by portal), rather than mail applications Provide multi-factor identification for online portals
Workers may be required to report DV witnessed by the child(ren) to child welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase awareness and training for mandatory reporting if child support agency is a mandated reporter Work with child welfare agency/unit to see if they're willing to provide training Clarify whether reporting DV witnessed by a child(ren) to child welfare is a requirement or discretionary or does not happen on application instructions

Stage 3: Case Opening

Survivor Risks	Potential Safeguards
Child support case opening notices may go to both the survivor and abuser at (or around) the same time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct safety screening at or before case opening Redact all personally identifying information (for all family members) from case opening notices
If locating the other parent is required, employers, friends or relatives may be contacted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Notify survivor when other parties will be contacted
System-generated notices (to either parent) may have address or other contact information present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Notify survivor when the abuser will be contacted Redact all address/contact information from case opening notices
Service-of-process notices, which formally notify the abuser that a legal action regarding child support has been brought against them, may include the survivor's address or other contact information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Notify survivor when the abuser will be contacted Redact all address/contact information from service-of-process notices
Abuser must comply with information requests (re: employment, income) and appear for legal proceedings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Notify survivor when the abuser will be required to appear for legal proceedings Connect survivors to local DV service providers, who may provide advocacy and safety planning

Stage 4: Paternity Establishment

Survivor Risks	Potential Safeguards
Paternity establishment can involve genetic testing, signing administrative forms, or a contested court hearing. Each process can involve contact with the other parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide plain-language explanation of paternity establishment process, requirements, and options Redact address/contact information on paternity notices
To complete a paternity test, both parents and child(ren) have their cheeks swabbed either in court, at a local lab site, or at a local child support office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct safety screening prior to scheduling paternity tests For tests conducted at a local child support office, schedule each party to have genetic testing completed on a different day and/or location For contracted genetic testing labs/providers, explore current safety procedures and modify contracts to require testing on different days/locations

Stage 5: Order Establishment (Child support, medical support, and/or parenting time)

Survivor Risks	Potential Safeguards
Calculating child support, medical support, and/or parenting time requires contact with and request for personal information from the abuser	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct safety screening prior to establishing support order and provide information about the right to close child support case • If necessary, refer survivor to an agency that can support them in filing a protection order before moving forward with child support establishment • To reduce the risk of joint meetings between the survivor and abuser, establish and include safety procedures for meetings (e.g., virtual options, escort into/from buildings, separate waiting areas, shuttle negotiation, accompanying DV advocate)
Both parents will be required to provide financial and health care coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notify survivor that the abuser will be required to provide financial and health care coverage • Redact address/contact information on paternity notices (including medical support/health insurance notices to abuser’s employer)
Abuser-provided health insurance triggers medical support notice to abuser’s employer. This notice may include survivor’s address for delivery of health insurance ID card. Explanation of benefits notices go to policyholder and give location information of health providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redact address and/or additional contact information on all notices — use child support agency address for health insurance cards • Request a cash medical support order (to be paid by abuser in addition to child support)
Child support office may calculate and order retroactive support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notify and consult with survivor before requesting retroactive support
Legal papers (e.g., court orders, medical support notices) may include address information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactively petition court for address confidentiality if needed
High order amounts may put survivors in danger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include survivor safety as reason to deviate from child support guidelines if needed
Parents may be required to attend in office meetings for order negotiations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish and include safety procedures for meetings (e.g., virtual options, escort into/from buildings, separate waiting areas, shuttle negotiation, DV advocate participation)
Parents may be required to attend court, participate in pre-trial negotiations, and/or participate in hearings and give testimony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish and include safety procedures for hearings (e.g., virtual options, escort into/from buildings, separate waiting areas, shuttle negotiation, DV advocate participation)
Most states and the District of Columbia include the amount of time a child spends in each parent’s home as part of child support guideline calculations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide plain language information on how parenting time helps to shape the child support guideline calculation • Require third party documentation for parenting time credit
Some states and/or courts will order parenting time when establishing a child support order for never married parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide plain language information on how courts determine parenting time and if it will be addressed in the child support hearing • Provide parents with examples of safety-modified parenting time orders • Provide safety-enhanced parenting time services (e.g., parenting plans, monitored visitation, supervised visits, neutral drop-offs) to families through access and visitation grant funding • Use the state’s interest in family safety to recommend safety-modified orders (e.g., supervised visitation, neutral exchange, limited overnights) to the court • Provide time for the survivor to access legal services for parenting time assistance if requested
Child support order establishment may trigger an abuser to seek parenting time or custody	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage survivors to consider establishing a parenting time plan and to learn more through access and visitation programs and/or online resources • Provide parents with examples of safety-modified parenting time orders, such as parenting time plan templates with variations for safety-enhanced schedules and supervised exchange and visitation centers

Stage 6: Collection/ Enforcement Actions

Survivor Impacts/Risks	Potential Mitigation(s)
Abuser employers will be contacted and required to withhold support payments from wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Notify survivor about wage withholding and provide information about when it is likely to begin
Child support agencies may engage in the following enforcement actions when there is a payment delinquency that reaches a legally established level: income tax refund intercept, driver's/professional or recreational license suspension, seizure of bank accounts, property liens/levies, and court actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inform survivor about enforcement actions and which actions may or may not be deferred for safety reasons Notify survivor prior to any enforcement actions Develop processes to suspend enforcement actions when deemed unsafe by survivor Connect survivors to local DV service providers, who may provide advocacy and safety planning
Court-based enforcement actions may require participation in hearings and giving testimony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish and include safety procedures for hearings (e.g., virtual options, escort into/from buildings, separate waiting areas, shuttle negotiation, accompanying DV advocate) Connect survivors to local DV service providers, who may provide advocacy and safety planning

Stage 7: Review and Adjustment — Modifications*

Survivor Impacts/Risks	Potential Mitigation(s)
Although child support agencies must review orders every three years, parents may also request a review of child support order amount when financial or other parenting changes occur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DV screening prior to review and adjustment actions Establish protocols to catch when financial and/or parenting changes occur (e.g., custody for a child changes, a parent loses a job, or a parent goes to jail), and review the order for modification Identify the child support agency as being responsible for the action to modify
Child support review may result in a child support order increase, which may endanger the survivor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consult with survivor prior to finalizing modified amount Include survivor safety as reason to deviate from guidelines if needed
Modifications may require court participation, such as attending and testifying in hearings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish and include safety procedures for hearings (e.g., virtual options, escort into/from buildings, separate waiting areas, shuttle negotiation, accompanying DV advocate)

*Nearly all risks and potential mitigation offered in the “Establishment” section apply in this section as well.

Stage 8: Arrears Management

Survivor Impacts/Risks	Potential Mitigation(s)
Family arrears may be forgiven if the survivor allows it, so abuser may directly pressure survivor to forgive debt. Alternatively, survivor may proactively forgive arrears as a way to reduce risk of engagement and escalation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reference training and resources to understand survivor and/or abuser behaviors that suggest coerced forgiveness of arrears Conduct DV screening prior to arrears forgiveness Ensure survivor knows that, once arrears are forgiven, they cannot be collected Privately consult with survivor before any action is taken Offer to use agency policy as a reason not to forgive arrears Offer a rescission period for a survivor to change their mind about forgiving arrears Specify that any rescission period needs to be included in the arrears forgiveness stipulation and agreed to by both parties
Arrears forgiveness may require participation in court hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish and include safety procedures for hearings (e.g., virtual options, escort into/from buildings, separate waiting areas, shuttle negotiation, accompanying DV advocate)

Stage 9: Case Closure

Survivor Impacts/Risks	Potential Mitigation(s)
An abuser may pressure the survivor to close their case	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct DV screening and privately consult with survivor prior to case closing actions • Offer option to use agency policy as reason for not closing case
A survivor may wish to close their case as a way to reduce engagement and/or escalation with the abuser	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct DV screening and privately consult with survivor prior to case closing actions • Clarify the options that the survivor has, including the option to reopen their case later • Eliminate case re-opening fees if charged by state



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