

Child Support Model Practices: Screening for Domestic Violence in Child Support Programs

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Identifying parents who have a safety concern is essential for child support programs to better serve survivors of domestic violence (DV). When child support programs are aware of DV, programs can improve outcomes for survivors and their families. Research indicates that around 40% of parents in the child support system have experienced DV¹; however, many do not disclose safety concerns. Effective screening and assessment² help child support programs to identify safety risks early on, connect survivors with appropriate resources, and increase safety for survivors and staff. The Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) recommends all child support programs conduct trauma-informed, comprehensive DV screening at multiple points in the child support process.³ This brief outlines model practices for screening in child support programs and offers examples from state and tribal child support settings.

KEY LESSONS

1. Child support programs need clear policies requiring DV screening.
 2. Screening for safety should be part of every child support process, with staff trained to safely ask questions and support survivors who disclose safety concerns.
 3. Informational materials that explain the child support process are essential to establish the context for screening.
 4. Survivor voice is central to the development of effective screening protocols and questions.
 5. Trauma-informed, comprehensive DV screening incorporated into child support operations enhances safety for parents and staff.
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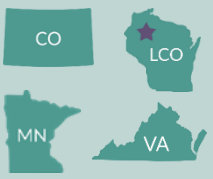




Model Practices in DV Screening

In 2022, OCSE funded the Safe Access for Victims' Economic Security ([SAVES](#)) Center to provide research, training, technical assistance, and policy and collaboration guidance to increase safe access to child support and parenting time for survivors of DV. Additionally, OCSE funded 13 SAVES demonstration sites that include state and tribal child support agencies. This brief provides model practices and key lessons for screening from six of those demonstration sites (Colorado, Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO), Minnesota, New York, Texas, and Virginia).

¹ Davis, L., & Starcher, D. L. (2025). *Building a safer child support program for survivors: Findings from the New York Family Safety Questions Pilot Study*. Center for Policy Research. Retrieved from <https://centerforpolicyresearch.org/publications/building-a-safer-child-support-program-for-survivors-findings-from-the-new-york-family-safety-questions-pilot-study/>.

² Screenings are typically brief and used to quickly identify potential safety concerns, while assessments are more in-depth and used to better understand the nature and extent of those risks to inform appropriate responses.

³ See https://acf.gov/system/files?file=documents/ocse/dv_guidance_and_model_questions.pdf.

Model Practice	Why it Matters	Steps That Can Be Taken	Site Examples ^a
Screen universally and routinely over time	Administer screenings at multiple points over time to capture information not initially disclosed. This is particularly helpful for DV survivors as trauma affects memory and disclosure, trust builds gradually over time, and safety situations can change.	Routinely conduct family screenings at intake, pre-hearing, review hearings, and when modifying orders. Through written and/or verbal reminders, let parents know you can update information about safety concerns at any time.	
Offer ways child support agencies can enhance survivors' safety throughout the process	Pose questions about safety at each step of the child support process to help educate parents and inform the right mix of services, as demonstrated through OCSE's model questions .	Make sure parents understand that the child support process can be changed to help keep their families safe. Describe or illustrate ways in which certain child support procedures may be adjusted.	
Incorporate multiple direct, targeted, and clearly worded questions	Use several specific questions to help identify subtler forms of abuse that broad questions may overlook. The wording in questions should be direct and actionable to support consistent interpretation, more accurate reporting, and meaningful analysis.	Replace vague safety questions with specific prompts, such as, "Has the other parent ever threatened or harmed you physically?" Ask separate questions about physical harm, threats, harassment, stalking, and economic abuse.	
Do not force disclosure	Clearly convey that participation in screenings is voluntary; survivors should never be required to disclose DV experience to access services.	Provide a written notice stating that responding to safety questions is not required for access to child support services.	
Integrate survivor input and expertise into design	Collaboration between child support agencies and DV advocates and/or survivors on the design of screening questions can help to ensure the use of survivor-centered and culturally appropriate language. In turn, this can improve participant comfort and disclosure rates.	Provide a dedicated portal for child support applicants who indicate safety concerns. For example, upon indicating safety concerns in the application process, survivors in Texas child support programs can access tailored support and protections.	

^aSee Appendix A for examples of SAVES Demonstration Site screening tools.

State Spotlights: Putting Safety Screening into Practice

The examples highlighted below detail how three states designed and implemented tools to increase parents' disclosure of safety concerns. New York's Family Safety Questions screening tool serves as an example of screening for DV, while Colorado's Self-Screening tool and Minnesota's Safety Assessment offer approaches that assess survivors' fears or concerns related to the child support process.

New York's Family Safety Questions Pilot

Prior to the SAVES demonstration, the New York Division of Child Support Services (NY DCSS) screened for safety by asking one question on their child support application that yielded a "yes" or "no" response. In partnership with the New York Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (OPDV), under their SAVES demonstration, the NY DCSS sought to re-design their screening process to enhance the safety of the child support process for survivors of DV. The New York SAVES team designed and conducted the New York Family Safety Questions Pilot study. This study tested two screening tools—behavioral (i.e., questions focused primarily on experiences of DV) and operational (i.e., questions focused primarily on child support actions that might pose a risk for survivors)—across 13 local districts over 10 months.

The New York Family Safety Questions Pilot (outlined in greater detail [here](#)) was a comprehensive, collaborative effort to improve the client screening process in order to improve safety for DV survivors participating in New York's child support programs.

To design the pilot study, the New York SAVES team:

- Convened child support district staff to map the child support process and share their perspectives on where safety concerns arise.
- Met with public benefits district staff to document the referral and public assistance application processes to identify where safety concerns arise.
- Engaged DV survivors through Impact Expert Advisory Groups (IEAGs) to learn about their experiences with the child support system and public assistance agencies.
- Met with DV community service providers to gain insight into their experiences assisting DV survivors with the child support process, identify where safety risks occur during the child support process, and generate solutions to those safety concerns.

The New York SAVES team then developed two sets of screening questions, along with a "[Getting Child Support Safely: What You Should Know](#)" resource document. Throughout a 10-month period, both groups of questions were evaluated by giving the screening forms to every client—custodial and noncustodial parents alike—at key interaction points along with the resource document.

Both sets of screening questions—behavioral and operational—yielded a disclosure rate of approximately 40% when parents were asked direct, specific safety questions at any point during their interaction with child support. The New York Family Safety Questions Pilot resulted in a finalized set of universal screening questions now being tested across the state. The lessons that emerged from the New York experience with DV screening are as follows:

- Universal approach: Offer screening to both custodial and noncustodial parents to gain a fuller picture of family safety.
- Survivor input: Gather and incorporate input from DV survivors in the design of screening questions and tools to ensure a survivor-centered approach.

- Informational resource on DV: Provide all parents with a resource such as New York’s “Getting Child Support Safely: What You Should Know” to increase awareness and understanding before each screening is administered.
- Routinely ask direct, specific questions: Ensure screening questions (both behavioral and operational) are clearly worded and specific to differing forms of DV to increase rates of disclosure.

Colorado

Prior to the SAVES demonstration, Colorado’s child support application included one question that asked clients about safety concerns and whether the applicant had a restraining order. Under the SAVES demonstration, Colorado established an advisory council, comprised of survivors and child support and other professionals, that recommended a redesigned intake process. The SAVES Team, in coordination with the SAVES Advisory Council’s Intake Subcommittee, developed a new Self-Screening tool that reflects several model practices for safety screening in child support. It is currently being piloted in five counties across the state.

The self-screening tool is offered to both custodial and noncustodial parents, is voluntary and confidential, with the introduction explicitly stating that responses will not be shared with other parties or the courts. It educates applicants upfront about the range of safety measures available, such as address confidentiality, preferred contact methods, virtual hearings, and potential case closure, helping parents understand that the child support process can be adjusted to keep their families safe.

Clients are then asked to rate their safety concerns on a scale of 0-3, with space for additional notes and contact preferences. Clients who rate their concerns on a scale between 1 and 3 are contacted by a child support worker to determine which safety options and resources may be best for them. Consistent with the model practice of screening universally and routinely over time, the screener is designed to be offered at multiple points in the child support process.

3

- I am very afraid or have big safety concerns related to the other parent.
- I need to discuss safety changes to the child support process or potentially closing my case.

2

- I am afraid or have safety concerns related to the other parent.
- I need to discuss safety changes to the child support process.

1

- I have a little fear or small safety concerns related to the other parent.
- I might want to talk about safety changes to the child support process.

0

- I have no fear or safety concerns related to the other parent.
- I do not need any safety changes to the child support process right now.

Minnesota’s Safety Self-Assessment Pilot

Like most states, Minnesota’s approach to asking about safety concerns in the child support process was by an applicant marking “yes” or “no” to a single question on the child support application, or through other yes/no safety questions that counties might incorporate in their processes. Under the SAVES demonstration, Minnesota developed a pilot project for new paternity establishment cases designed to reframe the child support process for survivors by prioritizing safety from the start.

Minnesota initially drafted an expanded yes/no-based safety screening protocol, but survivors on the statewide advisory council unanimously responded to this approach with “we don’t see ourselves in these descriptions.” This led to a redesign, guided by survivors, to create an entirely new tool that moved away from the yes/no format. Guidance from the survivors called for an assessment that “reduces trauma, builds trust, is confidential and provides clear and simple language.”

Both custodial and noncustodial parents use the new tool to identify the types of concerns and fears they may have about receiving child support services.

The assessment is self-directed, giving survivors control over the decision to disclose. Using a 0-3 rating system, the assessment includes descriptions of safety concerns a parent may have for the parent to self-assess. The child support agency then uses the self-assessment rating to identify available measures the worker can apply to their case and resources to offer. Minnesota developed a survivor-informed assessment script to support workers in conversations about safety and trained staff using scenarios.

Minnesota began piloting this assessment in late summer 2025 in the state's two largest counties, Hennepin and Ramsey counties. It is being piloted at case opening for paternity actions, with plans to offer it at subsequent intervals such as a yearly check-in or following case actions that may raise new concerns. Initial feedback from both parents and staff has been very positive and staff report rates of disclosures have increased.



Conclusion and Next Steps

Improvements to screening for safety in the child support process— driven by survivor input, cross-sector collaboration, and leadership buy-in— lead to meaningful improvements in DV screening and enhance both family safety and program effectiveness. By embedding safety screening and assessment throughout the child support process, programs are better equipped to support staff, improve outcomes, and ensure families feel safer and are more likely to pursue child support services. For programs looking to strengthen their approach, success depends on having a clear screening policy, incorporating survivor voice in developing protocols, training staff to ask questions safely and respond to disclosures, and providing families with accessible materials and resources that explain the child support process alongside any screening and assessment tool.

For many states, screening is just the first step. These responses can indicate a need for more individualized staff support and follow-up, where child support staff learn about a family's safety needs and modify how the child support case is managed. Colorado, LCO, Minnesota, and Virginia are examples of SAVES demonstration sites that have developed these more comprehensive assessment procedures, some of which are touched on in this brief. These approaches will be explored more fully in a forthcoming brief focused on specialized staffing arrangements for survivors in child support.

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Appendix A – Site Screening Tools

The following are samples of the screening tools developed and implemented by each site.



Colorado

This safety self-screening is on fear, harm, safety, and abuse you may be experiencing with someone that would require us to provide better safeguards for you and your child(ren) in the child support program. Fear and safety concerns may be about physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, or economic abuse.

Your response will be used to help you choose what you and your child support worker may need to talk about to keep you and your child(ren) safer as you access child support services. You are not required to provide this information to receive child support services.

This confidential screening will not be shared with other parties or the courts. Your worker may ask for more information so that, together, you can determine which safety options and available resources may be best for you.

Examples of possible safety changes to child support processes:

- Requesting address confidentiality
- Using your preferred methods of safe contact
- Choosing virtual hearings or alternate appointment scheduling
- Asking us to tell you about actions we may take on your case before they occur, if we can
- Potential child support case closure

*If you suspect child abuse or neglect and want to report it, please contact 844-CO-4-KIDS (844-264-5437).

Instructions:

Please circle or mark the answer below that best describes how you are currently feeling about your safety accessing child support services.

3

- I am very afraid or have big safety concerns related to the other parent.
- I need to discuss safety changes to the child support process or potentially closing my case.

2

- I am afraid or have safety concerns related to the other parent.
- I need to discuss safety changes to the child support process.

1

- I have a little fear or small safety concerns related to the other parent.
- I might want to talk about safety changes to the child support process.

0

- I have no fear or safety concerns related to the other parent.
- I do not need any safety changes to the child support process right now.

Is there anything else you would like the child support staff to know?

Your child support worker will contact you to discuss your concerns and options in more detail and determine which modifications may best address your needs.

Name:

Date of Birth:

Best time and way to contact you:

Is it safe to leave a voicemail?

We know relationships and situations change over time. You can change the information on your self-screening at any time, and your child support worker may check in with you periodically to see if anything has changed.



Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO)

Your Safety (Optional)

We ask this next set of questions to learn if receiving child support services might make you feel unsafe. If you do not want to answer these questions, you can skip to the next section. You can update your answers to these questions at any time. (And remember: we *never* share this form with the other parent.)

1. What could we do to make you feel safe while receiving child support services?

2. Does anyone connected to your request for child support services ever make you feel unsafe?

Yes No Unsure Prefer to discuss my situation one-on-one

3. Do any of the following services sound like they might make the child's other parent angry enough to make you feel unsafe?

Establishing parentage for the child Setting a child support order Enforcing the order

Prefer to discuss my situation one-on-one

4. If you had to attend a hearing with the other parent, would you prefer to meet in person or by phone?

In person By phone Unsure Prefer to discuss my situation one-on-one

5. If you saw the other parent or parents when exchanging the child for parenting time, would you feel safe?

Yes No Unsure Prefer to discuss my situation one-on-one

6. Have you or the other parent or parents ever filed for a restraining order or protective order against each other?

Yes No Prefer to discuss my situation one-on-one

If you answered "Yes" and if the restraining order was granted, please attach a copy of this order. Tribe, state, or Court that issued the order: _____.

Court Case Number: _____ Expiration Date: _____

7. Some documents might mention whether you are a member of Lac Courte Oreilles. Documents might also say if you live on or off of the reservation. Would you be concerned if the other parent knew that information?

Yes No Unsure Prefer to discuss my situation one-on-one

8. Would you be comfortable with receiving information or services regarding your safety? We have a staff member dedicated to helping people find services and resources.

Yes No Unsure Prefer to discuss my situation one-on-one



Minnesota



0

I have no fear or safety concerns OR I do not want to disclose at this time.

I do not need any safety measures in the child support process, or what may go in a court order.



1

I have fear or safety concerns about protecting my location and/or managing communication and contact with the other parent.

I would like to proceed with safeguards in place during the process.



2

I have fear or safety concerns about what may go in a court order and may also have concerns protecting my location or managing contact.

I would like to proceed and request safety measures for my court order and may need safeguards in place during the process.



3

I have safety concerns with proceeding or participating in the child support process altogether, and/or have concerns identifying the other parent.

I would like to discuss safety measures and review any options for not proceeding.



New York

We ask everyone enrolling in child support services these questions to help us provide safety options to people who need them. You can talk to your child support worker privately about these questions or other safety options throughout this process.

Your answers will not be shared with the other party on your child support case. Information will not be shared with anyone unless a child is being harmed or is in danger. If you are concerned about Child Protective Services involvement, please speak to your worker. More information about safety options and enforcement actions can be found on the [Getting Child Support Safely: What You Should Know](#) flyer.

Please respond to the following:

1. Has the other party ever done any of the following? **Check all that apply.**
 - Threatened to harm you, your children, or your pets, or threatened to harm themselves
 - Emotional abuse (examples: yelling, putting you down, making you think you are crazy)
 - Financial abuse (examples: not giving you access to money or accounts, hiding or changing passwords to stop you from accessing accounts, keeping you from working or getting you fired, taking out debt in your name)
 - Harassment or stalking (examples: repeatedly calling/texting, using social media to intimidate/monitor you, tracking your location, showing up to your job)
 - Sexual abuse (examples: making you do something sexually you did not want to do, using physical force, drugs or alcohol, intimidation, showing a weapon to threaten or pressure you)
 - Physical abuse (examples: hitting, pushing, kicking, “choking” or putting hands on your throat)
2. Do you have safety concerns if the other party knows your address, where you work, or how to contact you? Yes No
3. At times we contact the other party to get information such as income and employment. Do you have safety concerns if we contact the other party? Yes No
4. Do you have safety concerns about appearing in court and sharing information when the other party is in the room? Yes No
5. Are you concerned about safety if/when exchanging children for visitation or during visitation?
 Yes No
6. Do you think the other party will threaten you, retaliate, or use systems against you if you enroll in child support services? Yes No
7. To collect court-ordered child support, we will deduct money directly from the other party’s paycheck. Actions may be taken if they do not pay, for example, suspending driver, professional, and recreational licenses, passport denial, and taking their State and federal tax refunds.

Do you have any safety concerns if actions to collect support are taken against the other party?
 Yes No

You do not have to fill this out. **Check here** **if you do not want to complete this form.**



Texas

If you have concerns regarding family violence, there are some protections available in the child support process. The following questions will provide relevant information to determine the methods necessary for your case. You may wish to visit www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/child-support to find out about the protections available in the child support process.

1. Have you or your child(ren) experienced the following by the other parent?

Physical abuse Yes No

Emotional abuse Yes No

Threats Yes No

Harassment Yes No

Serious harm or Injury Yes No

2. Will opening a child support case pose a family violence risk for you and/or your child(ren) with the other parent?

Yes No

3. Will opening a child support case pose a family violence risk for you and/or your child(ren) with someone other than the parent of your child(ren)?

Yes No

If you selected YES, please provide the name of the other person and describe the relationship between you/your child(ren):

-
4. Do you have a protective order, police report, or other supporting document?

Yes No (If possible, attach a copy of any documentation.)

5. Do you have family violence concerns with the other parent during the exchange of the child(ren) with the other parent?

Yes No

6. In certain circumstances, a court can order that information related to your place of residence or contact information be excluded from the court order. Would requiring you to provide residence or contact information to the other parent or another party cause you or your child(ren) harassment, abuse, serious harm, or injury?

Yes No

If you selected "Yes" to any of the questions above, your case will be routed through the court process, in an effort to take every safety precaution available to you and all parties on the case. You will also be sent a Request for Nondisclosure to fill out and return to our office.

The Request for Nondisclosure form is a signed document identifying the safety risks on a parent's child support case(s) and request to the Child Support Division to minimize contact with the other parent and to request the Court/Tribunal not disclose any identifying information, such as physical address, in any document filed in this proceeding.