



## Safety Planning for Family Violence: Guidance for Service Providers

Safety planning is essential when supporting clients at risk of family violence, which is used as an umbrella term for domestic violence and intimate partner violence. This guide will explore the fundamentals of using safety plans with newcomers to help them manage these dangers and stay safe. Switchboard's editable [Family Violence Safety Plan Template](#) accompanies this guide.

### Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence

**Domestic violence (DV)** is a pattern of abusive behaviors within a household, which can include physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, or financial abuse, between two or more individuals who share a domestic or interpersonal relationship, such as spouses, partners, family members, or cohabitants. DV may have legal implications based on the type of relationship and behaviors involved.

While DV covers abuse that occurs within any household relationship, **intimate partner violence (IPV)** refers to abuse or aggression in a romantic relationship, including both current and former



**A safety plan is a personalized guide with practical steps to help clients manage crises, avoid dangerous situations, and navigate difficult emotions. See Switchboard's [Introduction to Safety Planning](#) for more information on safety plans and the safety planning process.**

spouses or partners. IPV can vary in frequency and severity, ranging from isolated incidents to reoccurring

patterns over time. IPV encompasses physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression.

**Safety planning is a critical intervention that empowers clients to protect themselves and their children** while navigating these often-dangerous situations. It is a practical strategy with actionable steps to minimize risks in various circumstances.

## When to Safety Plan?

Safety planning is crucial when clients have disclosed past DV/IPV or are currently experiencing or at risk of crisis. It is beneficial for clients in various situations, including stalking, dating violence, living with an abusive partner, planning to leave, preparing to flee, living apart, and managing child visitations after separation. Early intervention is critical to help clients minimize immediate risks and plan for potential future dangers. Safety planning is a priority in circumstances including the following:

- When violence or the potential for violence has been disclosed.
- When risk escalates. *Consider using a tool to assess risks such as the [Danger Assessment Tool](#).*
- Before significant life changes or the client is ready to take action.

**Remember: The violence and abuse survivors experience is not their fault.**

## Preparing for Safety Planning

When preparing a client for safety planning in a dangerous DV/IPV situation, it is vital to prioritize the client's emotional readiness and level of risk. If the client is not emotionally ready, focus on building trust, validating their experiences, and providing emotional support without pressuring them to take immediate action. Safety planning should be survivor-led, considering their unique circumstances, and should include small, practical steps that increase their safety without escalating risk.

All client-facing staff should be trained in mandatory reporting and how to use trauma-informed, survivor-centered approaches (see *Resources section below*) while maintaining legal and ethical standards.

## Considerations for Staff

Working with clients in DV/IPV situations presents unique and complex challenges for refugee service providers, who may be indirectly affected by the trauma stories or experiences clients share with them. Recognizing secondary trauma and re-traumatization/ triggers is essential to [preventing staff burnout and emotional distress](#). To support staff in serving clients while maintaining their own well-being, organizations should offer training on addressing staff burnout or secondary trauma, access to Employment Assistance Programs, and regular supervision or peer support.

Furthermore, some clients may feel more at ease sharing sensitive information with specific staff members, such as interns, volunteers, or interpreters, with whom they have a closer connection. However, these individuals may not have the necessary training to handle disclosures of DV/IPV. In such cases, they should refer the client to trained staff who are better equipped to provide appropriate support.

## Initiating Safety Planning

### Maintaining Confidentiality

The safety planning process should start by identifying a secure and confidential space and time for discussion. Safety planning must be completed in a private space with no one else present other than the staff member, client, and an interpreter (if needed and if the client consents). Information from the safety plan **must be kept confidential** and can only be shared if the client signs a release of information or if the client is a danger to themselves or others.

### Considering Cultural Differences

When engaging in safety planning, it's important to maintain a client-centered approach, which includes acknowledging each client's cultural background. Culture can influence how individuals:

- Perceive safety, danger, and abuse
- Respond to trauma
- View relationship dynamics and roles
- Navigate community expectations
- Seek out help and resources

Safety planning using a cross-cultural lens will help ensure your strategies align with each client's values, beliefs, and social context.

Approach these conversations with respect and curiosity, acknowledging that clients may not have all the answers. Ask thoughtful, open-ended questions to

help you understand your client's individual beliefs, expectations, and lived experiences. Even if you are familiar with a client's culture or have had past clients from similar backgrounds, avoid making assumptions and treat the client as an individual. Clients are the experts on their own lives.

Be mindful of systemic barriers and historical challenges faced by refugee and newcomer populations that may impact your clients' ability to access support. When appropriate, seek guidance from colleagues or subject matter experts, and remain open to learning effective ways to navigate cultural differences. Remember, respect and collaboration are the foundation of building trust with all clients.

### Using the Safety Plan Template

The accompanying [safety plan template](#) is available to help you and your clients create individualized, practical, and memorable plans based on each client's situation and preferences. The template is more than a checklist; it helps clients reflect on their fears, risks, and coping strategies. It also provides information on resources for crisis support. Most likely, you will not respond to every question. Prioritize the questions that are most supportive of each individual client's safety.

As safety decisions are made, the client can write down the safety plan themselves if they want to and are able. Remind the client to keep the safety plan in a secure place if they keep a hard copy. Clients who prefer to store the information in their phones can use a scanning or note-taking application to either take a picture of their hard-copy plan or write out the plan on their phone. Clients should then lock the file with their phone's passcode or a different code they select.

Consider discussing how important documents, such as marriage or divorce papers, insurance cards, or identification, can be securely copied and stored digitally. Encourage clients to think about methods they are comfortable using, such as taking pictures, using secure email, or saving files in a cloud storage system.

Explore whether clients would like to keep originals or physical copies of critical documents with a trusted friend or family member. If so, include a section in the safety plan to document who has access to these copies and how the client can retrieve them if needed.

Review all safety decisions multiple times to help clients remember their plan. Clearly explain when they should call the caseworker and when to call an

emergency contact. If there is risk of the abuser finding the plan, having a conversation about staying safe rather than creating a written plan is often the best option. The most important component of the safety plan is the conversation you have with the client.

### Introducing the Safety Plan – Sample Script

The following is a sample script you can use to introduce the idea of safety planning to clients at risk:

*"It's important to know that [the perpetrator's] behavior is not your fault. While you're not responsible for their behavior, let's think about ways you can increase safety for you (and your children) and be prepared if there's an emergency. I'll ask you questions to help you think about a plan. You can decide what will work best for you (and your children). I will be here to support your decisions no matter what they are.*

*As always, everything you tell me is confidential. This means I will not tell anyone other than my supervisor (including anyone in your family) what you tell me unless you ask me to or unless it's information I need to share because you're in immediate danger or a child is in danger. The purpose of sharing information with my supervisor is to navigate resources and receive guidance and support. I want you to know these limitations to our confidentiality so I don't break your trust and so you can make decisions about what you want to share with me. Do you have any questions?"*

**"There is no generic formula for a successful survivor safety plan. Every survivor has his or her own unique needs, abilities, and strengths."**

**—Committee of the Inter-Agency Task Force Against Domestic Violence (March 2002)**

### After Safety Planning

Check in frequently with clients after developing a safety plan to assess if the plan continues to be practical or if any adjustments need to be made due to changing circumstances. Making a safety plan is not a one-time event; it should be revisited regularly and adapted based on the client's evolving circumstances.

Due to the [cyclical nature of domestic violence](#), survivors may face varying forms of risk at different

stages. Therefore, it is essential to continuously reassess and update the safety plan to address these changing dynamics and ensure the client's ongoing safety. Establish how frequently you will be checking in, how you will be checking in, and what the plan of action is if you do not hear from the client or they do not engage in the check-in process (e.g., calling the emergency contact, requesting a wellness check).

Safety plans should be rehearsed and practiced, as even seemingly obvious steps can be overlooked during times of fear and crisis. Follow up with clients more frequently after developing a safety plan to help them rehearse it, increase familiarity with resources, and identify any additional support they may need. This may require safe, ethical referrals to other providers, with the client's consent and the appropriate release of information. Be sure to follow all your agency's policies and procedures for documentation and communication about the elevated risk with supervisors.

## Youth Safety Planning

Youth may require safety plans to mitigate risk during DV/IPV situations, such as dating violence, stalking, or witnessing domestic violence at home. Separate safety plans should be created with children, as appropriate for their age and developmental status. If you want to safety plan with a child or youth witnessing domestic violence at home, first consult the non-offending parent/caregiver and obtain consent for their minor child to engage in safety planning with you.

An additional safety plan template for youth is available in the accompanying template. Make sure you follow your state regulations and agency policies/procedures around mandatory reporting for these situations. The following is a list of special considerations when safety planning with youth:

- Ensure the safety plan is tailored to the youth's developmental and cognitive level.
- Assess the youth's understanding of the situation, as it may differ from an adult's.
- Address family dynamics and consider engaging parents or guardians in the safety planning process, ensuring they understand their role in the safety plan. When balancing confidentiality and safety, be clear about what information will be shared with caregivers.
- Determine if and when school involvement would be supportive.
- Be aware of signs of trauma or abuse.

## Conclusion

Safety planning is vital in empowering clients to navigate the complex and often dangerous realities of domestic and intimate partner violence. When you use a client-centered, trauma-informed approach to address each client's unique needs and risks, you help them take actionable steps toward safety and healing. Remember that safety planning is an ongoing process. Prioritize thorough preparation, regular check-ins, and collaboration with your clients to foster an environment of continuing trust and support. Facilitating effective safety planning not only bolsters the immediate safety of your clients and their families but also helps lay a foundation for their long-term resilience and well-being.

## Resources

### Domestic Violence

Switchboard:

- Webinar: [Fundamentals of Gender-Based Violence \(GBV\) for Refugee Service Providers: The What, Why and How of Safety Planning](#) (2020)
- Guide: [Fundamentals of Gender-Based Violence \(GBV\) for Refugee Service Providers: The What, Why and How of Safety Planning](#) (2020)
- Guide: [Trauma-Informed Care: A Primer for Refugee Service Providers](#) (2023)

United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), Guide: [Gender-Based Violence: Informational Guide for Field Teams](#) (2023)

### Safety Planning with Youth

Switchboard:

- Webinar: [Safety Planning with Unaccompanied Refugee Minors](#) (2021)
- Webinar: [Traumatic Stress Among Refugee Children and Youth: Responding to Abuse, Exploitation and Trafficking](#) (2023)
- Guide: [Traumatic Stress Among Refugee Children: Responding to Abuse, Exploitation and Trafficking](#) (2024)
- Webinar: [Foundations of Mandatory Reporting for Refugee Service Providers](#) (2024)
- Guide: [Fundamentals of Mandatory Reporting: A Guide for Refugee Service Providers](#) (2024)

U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), Toolkit: [Safety Planning with Foreign National Children and Youth Survivors of Trafficking](#) (2021)

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