



# Practice Points

## **GATHER EVIDENCE AND ESTABLISH CHILDREN'S SAFETY WITHOUT COERCION CA/N Investigations and Family Assessments**

The purpose of this Practice Point is to provide a reminder to staff of the importance of looking at every Child Abuse and Neglect (CA/N) Investigation and Family Assessment as an opportunity to evaluate the family's overall situation. Staff should include the nonresidential parent and extended relatives as needed. Staff should apply the Framework for Safety model to identify safety threats to any vulnerable child, assess whether or not the parent/caretaker has the capacity to counter the presenting threat of danger, and enter into voluntary agreements with families as needed. Children's Service Workers should gather as much information as possible to evaluate safety and write effective safety agreements with families. Safety agreements should include child specific planning and individuals specifically identified to perform active monitoring of the agreement.

The parent/caretaker must be given a choice to participate in the safety planning process. There may be times when families refuse to enter into a voluntary safety agreements. If so, they must be made aware of the potential consequences if the Children's Service Worker feels that he or she cannot assure a child's safety. Staff may need to consult with their supervisor and/or make a referral to their law enforcement or juvenile office if a family refuses to enter into a voluntary safety agreement. However, employees of the Children's Division are not authorized by law to remove children from parents/caretakers, and shall not speak for those agencies or individuals with the power to take protective custody of a child.

Staff should document any communication that provides a detailed account of how a parent/caretaker chose not to enter into a voluntary agreement. Staff should also document and utilize all of the information observed or provided by family members, collateral contacts and multidisciplinary team members to best ensure children's safety and well-being. Staff should also make sure that everything documented in the record or CA/N conclusion has sufficient evidence to support the finding of facts for each case.

**Staff must refrain from the use of ultimatums or any other similar practices.** The use of ultimatums is a direct contradiction to strength's-based, family-centered practice, and may be construed as an oppressive act of coercion. Staff may inform families of possible actions, such as a report being filed with the local juvenile court, which may take place should children's safety or well-being continue to be a concern beyond the Division's ability to enter into a voluntary safety agreement with all suitable relatives or kin, including non-resident parents. However, staff may not tell a family that failure to enter into a specific safety plan, especially one that the family is not in agreement with, will result in their child(ren) being removed from their custody.

Staff should consult their supervisory channels as needed when facing situations of unresolved children's safety or well-being.

Program Development Specialist Contact: Scott Montgomery  
[Scott.B.Montgomery@dss.mo.gov](mailto:Scott.B.Montgomery@dss.mo.gov)