

Tips for screening for abuse

Normalize the questions.

“About 1 in 4 women go through domestic abuse at some point in their lives, so I ask all my clients about abuse.”

If you’ve noticed some specific red flags, it’s okay to say so.

“I noticed you get very nervous around your child’s other parent. Sometimes that’s a sign that there you might have concerns about your own or your child’s wellbeing. I’d like to ask you a few more questions about that.”

You may want to start with some general questions about how problems are handled in the family. This doesn’t work for everyone, so find your own style with it.

“When you and your partner are upset with each other, how do you express it?”

“When you have a problem in your family, can you talk about it calmly or does it get escalated? Does it ever get physical?”

Then, be specific. Name some forms of abuse. Try to ask about physical abuse, threats, sexual abuse and emotional abuse (especially around parenting).

“Abuse takes a lot of forms. Has your (ex) partner ever hit, kicked, punched or shoved you?”

“Has your (ex) partner ever threatened to hurt you or your kids, made you afraid with gestures or body language, or thrown or punched things near you?”

“Has your (ex) partner ever pressured you into sexual activity you’re not comfortable with?”

“Has your (ex) partner ever belittled, insulted or humiliated you as a person or as a parent?”

Consider asking about litigation-specific abuse.

“Has your (ex) partner ever threatened to have the courts take your kids or call you an unfit parent?”

There are some specific issues that you can work into screening if you believe that they’re happening:

Animal abuse

Trauma history of the abusive partner

Alcohol or drug use

Mental health symptoms of parent or child

Immigration issues

Behavioral problems in children

Responding to disclosures

You don't have to have all the answers and you don't have to respond perfectly.

It's also okay if you're not sure – even after screening – if the behaviors “count” as abuse. Feel free to call an advocate and talk it over hypothetically, or encourage your client to contact an advocate for a more detailed discussion.

Assume that a survivor is used to being judged and criticized on a regular basis, and has limited access to accurate information. You might be wrong, but wouldn't that be a pleasant surprise?

Recognize that every survivor does their very best to survive and is the expert on their family's own situation.

Some key points to tell survivors:

The abuse is not your fault, and you are not alone.

Free and confidential help is available. There is no one “right” way or “right” time to get help.

If you choose to get extra support, you are showing your child that it's okay to ask for help.

Abuse affects parents and kids in unexpected ways. Some kinds of services can help you and your child heal together.

Return as much control as possible to the survivor. Explain how the disclosure affects your case but let your client make final decisions about using the information.

Avoid power struggles if you can.