

Safety Planning Best Practices for Supporting Survivors with Navigating Family Law Matters

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What is safety planning?

Safety planning is a collaborative process undertaken by a support worker with a survivor of intimate partner of violence (IPV) to address the impact of trauma, identify risk and protective factors, mitigate harm and empower survivors with skills, tools and resources to manage their risk and increase their safety. An individualized safety plan can include multiple strategies and actions to increase awareness of formal and informal supports and services that can be used in various situations and locations. Safety planning occurs on an ongoing basis to ensure that the strategies identified are applicable and responsive to the specific needs of survivors and their changing circumstances.

Risk identification and safety planning

Family violence and IPV remain the highest in northern, rural and remote regions of British Columbia (BC). According to [Statistics Canada 2023 data](#), rates of family violence and IPV were highest in the northern regions of BC. While community-based support programs and community coordination initiatives increase safety for survivors, these may not always be available in rural, remote, and northern regions. Survivors' risk of violence increases when they face isolation, limited or no access to services, challenging weather conditions restricting travel, limited access to technology, cultural and language barriers, and precarious immigration status.

Safety planning refers to the process of identifying the survivor's risk factors and putting together strategies, tools and resources to increase safety. To do this well, it is important for support workers to identify resources available, build connections and collaborate to provide survivor-centered wraparound supports. Risk identification and safety planning with survivors may also include exploring formal and informal services and supports and multiple strategies to address the challenges in individualized safety planning.

Statistics show that survivors, their children and families face an increase in the likelihood and severity of IPV and its impacts during and after the process of separating from the perpetrator. This risk often lasts for up to two years with an increased likelihood of lethality. The risk of harm is elevated during family and criminal court proceedings, especially when survivors are in the process of accessing orders related to protection, enforcement, guardianship, child and spousal support and parenting arrangements. It is important to [determine relevant risk factors](#) and experiences of survivors, the potential for new risks to arise, and develop safety plan "actions" that will be implemented to address these risk factors to stay safe. Displays of jealousy, sexual

coercion, coercive controlling behaviour, threats of harm or suicide, strangulation, perpetrator mental health and substance use, or threats to use a firearm are key indicators of risk for violence.

Risk identification requires exploring with the survivor what risks are present now and the pattern of abuse experienced in the past and its impact. Using a trauma-informed and survivor-centered approach, engage survivors to build trust, and through ongoing dialogue identify risk factors. It is important to pay attention to survivors' own perceptions of their safety, as they can best speak to their situation and will already know what actions they are taking or could take to mitigate harm to themselves and their family. Use this opportunity to empower the survivor with information about power dynamics and the impacts of IPV. Discuss any risks you see emerging from the information shared by the survivor – behaviours a survivor may not view as control and that need to be identified as risk factors.

Risk identification also includes asking the survivor about the perpetrator's pattern of abuse and violence, mental health, substance use, and any other important factors (e.g., criminal history, being an adult survivor of abuse). Discuss the warning signs that may signal potential harm and work together to identify actions that can be taken as part of the safety planning process.

What is a safety plan?

A safety plan is an individualized plan that identifies a survivor's needs for safety. A safety plan can be a practical list of actions and/or it can outline the steps a survivor will take to keep themselves and/or their children safe in various circumstances, including while navigating family law matters. A safety plan includes strategies, options and referrals to resources that are specific to the survivor's unique needs and circumstances. Survivors are often concerned with balancing their (and their children's) safety while navigating various systems that can increase their risk and vulnerability. Some examples include navigating the criminal justice system when the survivor has been a victim of IPV and/or sexual violence, the child protection system and the threat of child removal, and/or the family justice system when the perpetrator initiates court proceedings and uses this process to further abuse the survivor. The impact of the various components of the family justice system on a survivor can compromise not only their safety but also impact their overall well-being and financial security. Co-developing a safety plan allows the worker to implement a collaborative and coordinated response to address gaps and identify protective measures for survivors and their families. A safety plan can include various resources and protections a survivor needs to comfortably *and safely* navigate various systems.

An effective and adaptive safety plan supports the physical, emotional, and spiritual safety of the survivor and their family. It is important to understand that risk is not a static concept; rather it is constantly evolving and requires ongoing safety planning through regular check-ins with the survivor. While engaging in collaborative safety planning, you may learn that a survivor already has a plan that works for them. You can support survivors by listening to what they are already doing to keep safe and provide options for them to consider incorporating into their existing safety plan. Continue to engage in an ongoing collaborative survivor-centered process of risk identification and safety planning to reduce or eliminate the range of risks that a survivor may face.

Safety planning foundations

A [safety plan](#) will include essential information that has been clearly thought through, is planned beforehand and outlines the survivor's preferred options to implement when ready. The central components that make up a safety plan include a list of emergency contacts and housing options, mental health and well-being resources, financial resources, actions to keep children and/or pets safe, and a plan to access personal property and important documents. The plan may also include tips on how to talk to children about staying safe, and how to manage different forms of communication to minimize the impact of ongoing abuse by the perpetrator. These points are addressed in the initial intake and assessment phase and are used as reference points to refer to and assist with identifying and managing new issues or risks that may emerge.

Safety planning best practices

In addition to acknowledging the safety planning foundations when supporting families and survivors impacted by family violence, support workers will continuously identify risks and adapt safety plans when navigating family justice, criminal justice and/or other legal processes that are happening at the same time.

This work must be grounded in an intersectional, trauma-informed approach that prioritizes cultural safety, and recognizes and supports the needs of diverse survivors, including racialized and Indigenous survivors and their families. Safety planning is a continuous and ongoing process that involves ongoing conversation with a survivor to identify new risks and changing circumstances to update their safety plan accordingly. Your role is to acknowledge the resilience survivors demonstrate, empower them further with

information that is specific to their situation, provide options and relevant services, and facilitate referrals when requested.

The following best practices highlight key points that should be incorporated into service delivery to assist you in supporting survivors. Refer to these best practices to identify risks and safety plan to address survivors' needs throughout their engagement with your services. Safety planning is an ongoing, survivor-driven process that changes in response to survivors' needs as they navigate multiple issues relating to family justice, criminal justice, and other challenges.

1. Engage in intake and risk identification process

Provide the survivor with a safe and confidential space to tell you about how they are being impacted, and the various barriers and challenges they are experiencing as they balance navigating family law matters and other priorities and intersecting systems. Make them feel comfortable and let them know that they are being heard, they are seen and valued. Acknowledge their strength and resilience by telling them you are glad that they reached out for services and support. In addition to sharing information about the services they will receive, take this time to engage with them and:

- Build trust in the intake process.
- Identify existing risks, potential new risks and other safety concerns that the survivor may not have recognized, as they tell you about their situation.
- If there are children involved, provide information and explain what the “best interest of the child” means and the importance of prioritizing the children’s safety.
- Provide information on family law, protection orders and legal remedies available to assist with increasing their safety.
- Ask the survivor about next steps, encourage them to discuss how they want to proceed and to tell you about what challenges they are experiencing.
- Document key points and strategies (in their client file) that the survivor will use to keep safe.

2. Prioritize risk identification and safety planning throughout service delivery

It is important to consider that the initial meeting with the survivor could be the first and last engagement; sometimes survivors seek services while in crisis and may not come back right away. Often, survivors will return, and you will continue to support them, engage in ongoing review of the safety plan and

ask them if the strategies already in place are helping them to stay safe. Through active discussion, you will be able to determine whether there is a need to revise or develop new actions to mitigate further harm and risk of violence.

Safety planning is a process that is flexible, works alongside the changing circumstances of a survivor, and may require updating on a continuous basis.

Consider the following questions when engaging with the survivor to explore whether there are any changes in their situation and in their level of risk:

- Is the current safety plan effective? Does the survivor feel safe and confident with their decision about how to respond during a crisis?
- What are the next steps for their current situation?
- What new risks or warning signs are observed or anticipated?
- What other options could support the survivor with addressing the new risks or issues that come up?

Update the session notes (in their client file) to reflect the changes in the safety plan.

Discuss the impact and effectiveness of protective orders that may be in place, review and provide information about court documents (e.g., parenting arrangements) that have been received, as well as the process for serving documents and how to stay safe – develop a plan that works for survivors when family court documents are served.

Invite the survivor to talk about their experience to address potential new risk factors and safety concerns throughout the process of providing support as there may be new incidents, new disclosures, or escalation of violence. It is especially important to discuss and develop specific safety planning strategies when the survivor is navigating both the family justice system and the criminal justice system at the same. Throughout the safety planning process:

- Identify ways to stay safe in court, and when travelling to and from court.
- Identify the need for accompaniment during court proceedings and who can provide this support.
- Provide information, explain release conditions and breaches, and define key legal terms.
- Keep an eye out for any conflicting court orders between the two court systems.

- Manage communication with the perpetrator to reduce risk and enhance safety.

3. Implement a process of ongoing case management

You should have a case management process in place to ensure that notes from sessions with survivors are up to date, with only necessary information documented to reflect the discussion and action planning. This information will guide you in coordinating supports for the survivor and in addressing barriers that impact their safety when navigating the family justice system. Some questions to consider as best practice in safety planning with a survivor include:

- What actions have been developed to address how to respond to the perpetrator's use of emails, phone calls and text messages to further abuse the survivor? (e.g., not responding right away, following the instructions laid out in the parenting arrangements, considering counselling support, referral to another program for additional support)
- What is the plan for safety when there are parenting time and arrangements, or supervision issues?
- Is there any follow-up needed with regards to advocacy and other services?
- As a support worker, is there a need for supervision support and debriefing, and/or case consultation?

4. Incorporate cultural safety into your work with survivors

Approach your work with survivors from a place of self-awareness and cultural humility; that is, without stereotypes and judgement. Acknowledge your personal commitment to being a lifelong learner, make space and invite survivors to tell you about themselves which contributes to cultural safety. It is important to be aware of your own biases and learn to identify them to keep them in check; by doing so, you can be genuine in your interactions with survivors and work to dismantle power imbalances between you and the survivor. Showing respect for a survivor's culture, identity, needs, and rights, free from judgement and bias, increases the likelihood of them experiencing cultural safety. Key considerations to keep in mind:

- Identify the survivor's need for cultural safety.
- Identify language barriers and the need for interpretation or translation support.
- Acknowledge the impact of cultural expectations and the pressure to maintain certain values and beliefs.

- Provide relevant information and resources to help them make informed decisions.
- Offer to connect Indigenous survivors with an Elder, Knowledge Keeper or extended family member to assist.
- Welcome traditional ceremonies as part of the safety planning process (e.g., smudging).

5. Collaborate and make effective referrals

To provide relevant and effective referrals, it is important to be familiar with programs and services in your area and surrounding communities. Learn about the different types of services and connect with service providers to learn about their roles and responsibilities and any specializations within their work (e.g., a program may provide services in the survivor's primary language, work with Indigenous people, or specialize in supporting children and youth). Build relationships with them to leverage linkages and to coordinate wraparound supports for survivors. This is especially important when you are limited in the support you can provide the survivor, and you will need to work with other programs and services to address a specific gap. Keep in mind the following points when a survivor is telling you about what they need to feel safe and supported. Supports could include:

- Emotional support and counselling
 - Shared parenting, access and continued abuse from the perpetrator can take a toll on the well-being of survivors; providing information about services can support the survivor to connect with a worker for emotional support and counselling.
- Financial support
 - When child support payments are not coming in and the BC Family Maintenance Agency (BCFMA) is not able to enforce court orders for perpetrators to pay, other options may be available (e.g., income assistance).
- Other legal advocacy supports
 - When there are concurrent legal systems involved, the following services may be able to help: Community-Based Victim Services, Family Duty Counsel or Duty Counsel in the courthouse, Family Justice Centres, or the Justice Education Society of BC.
- Housing support
 - A survivor may need support in accessing a transition house or safe home, or eligibility for BC Housing.
- Community coordination teams for high-risk cases
 - Connect with coordination initiatives where systems are coming together to address systemic barriers and enhance survivor safety

and perpetrator accountability – for example, Interagency Case Assessment Teams (ICATs) and Domestic Violence Units (DVUs).

Safety planning is a collaborative process that is survivor-centered and should meet the needs of survivors. If you have significant concerns about a survivor’s safety, bring this to the survivor’s attention. Approach safety planning by asking the survivor what they need and collaborate with relevant services and programs to ensure the survivor’s specific needs will be addressed. Offer options to survivors and facilitate referrals to provide wraparound supports as they navigate family law matters. Finally, document the process and refer back to review and update the safety plan according to the survivor's changing circumstances.

Honouring your work

Your wellness is important while you support survivors in reducing the impact of trauma and safely navigating often-overlapping family court and criminal court processes. Take some time to slow down, reflect on what is happening for you, and prioritize what you need to find balance. In addition to the self-care practices you may already be using, explore EVA BC’s [*Invitation to Wellness: A Workbook for Anti-Violence Workers*](#) to begin your journey to find balance and connection in your work.

Risk identification and safety planning resources

- Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic’s [Intimate Partner Violence Risk Identification & Assessment Framework in Family Court](#) (2020)
- [HELP Toolkit: Identifying and Responding to Family Violence for Family Law Legal Advisers](#)
- [FVFL – Family Violence Family Law: From Awareness to Action](#) to access webinar recordings and resources
- EVA BC’s [Interagency Case Assessment Team Best Practices](#) manual (2024) for information on safety planning, a safety planning template, and information on the BC Summary of Intimate Partner Violence Risk Factors (SIPVR) tool
- EVA BC’s [Resource Centre](#) to find anti-violence publications and tools
- EVA BC’s [Find a Service](#) to connect and collaborate with other relevant services across the province
- EVA BC’s [Records Management Guidelines](#) (2022)
- Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General’s (MPSSG) [Intimate Partner Violence Safety Planning online training](#)

