

Navigating Child Welfare Toolkit

Tool 7: What Is a Safety Plan?

NATIONAL CENTER TO ADVANCE PEACE
for Children, Youth, and Families

The National Center to Advance Peace for Children, Youth, and Families (NCAP) is a coalition led by Caminar Latino and includes Ujima: National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community, the Alaska Native Women's Resource Center, the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, and Futures Without Violence

A·K·N·W·R·C ALASKA NATIVE WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTER

FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE

Caminar Latino

NATIONAL INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTER

Ujima
The National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community



Purpose of this Guide

This tool explains what a safety plan is in the child welfare system, when Child Protective Services (CPS) might use one, and what your rights are if you're asked to sign one. It can be confusing because the term "safety plan" is used in both child welfare and domestic violence settings, but they mean very different things.

If you are a survivor of domestic violence, it's especially important to understand how these plans work, how they differ from other types of safety planning, and how to advocate for your and your children's safety.

What Is a Safety Plan in the context of CPS?

When CPS is concerned about a child's safety in the home, they may ask a parent or caregiver to agree to a safety plan. This is a written agreement listing the steps CPS believes are necessary to keep your child safe and prevent them from being removed from your home. Signing a safety plan means you're agreeing to follow all its terms.

A safety plan should include the following information:

- Identify specific situations or behaviors that threaten the safety of children in the home.
- Specify required services and actions that must be taken to keep children safe, and name who is responsible for each action.
- Specify the timeframe that the safety plan is in effect.
- Identify who will monitor the plan to ensure it is followed.

A CPS safety plan might include things like:

- Not allowing a specific person in your home or to have contact with your children.
- Having someone temporarily move into your home (such as a relative) to monitor and ensure safety of the children.
- Attending parenting, substance use, or domestic violence classes.
- Supervised contact with your children.
- Temporarily living in a different place.

These plans are usually developed before a formal court case starts, often while CPS is still carrying out their investigation. Even though they may seem informal, not following a CPS safety plan can lead to serious consequences, including your child being removed from your home.

CPS Safety Plans vs. Domestic Violence Safety Plans

A CPS safety plan is created by the child welfare agency and is usually meant to prevent your children from being removed. It's focused on CPS concerns and outlines what you ***must do*** for your children to remain in your care. These plans are often created quickly, and they can feel more like requirements (or a list of demands), for example, where you can live, who you can have contact with, or what services you must complete, rather than something you helped shape. It is also important to understand that these plans are focused on the safety of your child(ren), and not necessarily on ***your*** safety.

In contrast, a domestic violence safety plan is something you create, usually with the help of an advocate, to stay safe from someone who uses violence. It may include steps like where to go in an emergency, who to call for help, or how to protect your children during a dangerous situation.

If you already have a domestic violence safety plan, and the CPS plan is not aligned with it or makes things less safe, speak up. Try to be as specific and detailed as you can about why the actions CPS is requiring for you and your children are not safe. You can ask CPS to revise the plan and offer your own suggestions about what to include in it. You also have the right to request support to help you follow the plan in a way that also keeps you and your children safe. A domestic violence advocate or legal aid organization can help you talk through your options.

Common CPS Safety Plan Concerns for Survivors of Domestic Violence

One-Size-Fits-All Approach

Safety plans are often “boilerplate” or generic, meaning they’re not written with your specific situation in mind. While they are supposed to be individualized to address the specific child safety concerns identified by CPS, this does not always happen. This can be especially harmful in domestic violence cases, where safety needs to be addressed carefully and in a way that protects survivors as well as children.

Feeling Like a List of Demands [1]

For many survivors, CPS safety plans don’t feel supportive. Instead, they can feel like a list of demands – things you must do to avoid losing your children, even when those things are hard to do or don’t make sense for your situation.

Focus on Child Rather Than Family Safety

Plans developed by CPS are narrowly focused on concerns about the safety of children without considering the safety needs of parents or other adults in the home. In the context of domestic violence, this can mean that the safety of the survivor-parent is ignored. The survivor-parent may be asked to do things that increase danger to themself or other family members because CPS is only focused on protecting the children in the home.

---

[1] This concept of the safety plan feeling like a list of demands was shared by survivor advocate Selena Hernandez, a phrasing we include with her permission and gratitude.

Not Actually Safe

Sometimes, safety plans focus more on general parenting than on protection from someone who uses violence. This means the plan might not actually help keep you or your children safer and might even make things worse if it increases the risk of retaliation by the person who uses violence.

Your Rights and Options

Read the plan carefully before you sign it. Ask questions if there is anything you do not understand. You have a right to understand what you are agreeing to and have your questions and concerns addressed before you sign anything. Ideally, you never want to sign a safety plan if you have concerns about anything that is in it, especially if you feel you are being asked to do things that may make you less safe or that you will be unable to do. Often, however, parents have little or no choice about signing a CPS safety plan. You may be told that if you do not agree to the safety plan, your children will be removed.

Even if you feel pressured to sign a CPS safety plan, you still have rights. These plans can feel confusing, rushed, or unfair, especially if you're already dealing with stress, fear, or unsafe situations. Here are some examples of what you can do:

- You can speak up about what makes you and your children feel safe, or unsafe. For example, if CPS wants someone to supervise your visits who has made you feel unsafe in the past, you can say that. It's important to raise these concerns early. If you don't, CPS may assume you agree. Speaking up won't always change the plan, but it helps document your safety needs and may make a difference later, especially if the case goes to court.

- You can ask for changes to the plan to make it more realistic for you. Sometimes plans are created quickly, without considering your full situation. For example, CPS might ask you to move to a new place, but you may not have money for a hotel or another home. You can explain why a part of the plan doesn't work for you and offer safer or more practical alternatives. For example, you could offer to stay with a friend or for your children to stay with a relative. CPS might not accept every change, but asking for adjustments is your right, and it's better to speak up than to agree to something you cannot safely or realistically follow.
- You can ask for support to complete the plan, like help with childcare, housing, or counseling. CPS may not always offer or approve the help you need, but you can still ask. You can also look for help from:

    - A domestic violence organization;
    - A legal aid or parent defense attorney (note: some pro bono family law firms in your area may be able to help at no charge);
    - A local shelter or community service agency.

These supports may help you meet the plan's requirements in a safer or more manageable way.





- You have the right to say no to parts of the plan that could make things more dangerous. For example, if the plan asks you to file a restraining order, but you know that will escalate the violence or put you in danger, it's okay to say no and explain why. Be prepared that saying no may lead CPS to take further action, including going to court, but your safety matters, and you have the right to tell your side. If you're worried about how CPS will respond, try to talk with a domestic violence advocate or lawyer before refusing, so they can help you plan next steps.
- You can explain your concerns and ask for alternatives. For example, if CPS asks you to move out immediately, but you have no safe place to go, you can say: "I want to keep my children safe, but I don't have another place right now. Can we come up with a plan that keeps us safe where we are, or can you help me find a place?" This shows your willingness to work with CPS while also protecting your safety.

You should receive a written copy of the safety plan. Request a copy if you did not receive one and keep this for your records. It is also a good idea to document all your interactions with CPS and your efforts to follow the safety plan. This documentation will be helpful if your case ends up going to court.

Final Thoughts

Safety planning should never make things more dangerous for you or your children or leave you feeling trapped or alone. Remember:

- A **CPS safety plan** is created by Child Protective Services. It usually lists rules they expect you to follow to keep your children in your care. These plans often come before a court case and can feel more like a list of demands than support. Not following the plan could lead to more invasive CPS involvement, including possible removal of your children from your care.
- A **domestic violence safety plan** is created by you, often with help from an advocate. It's built around your needs and focuses on how to stay safe from someone who is causing harm. These plans are flexible and change as your situation changes.

Ask for Support

If you don't feel comfortable speaking up on your own, ask a trusted domestic violence advocate, lawyer, or community support person to help you communicate with CPS. You can also ask for things like:

- Interpretation or translation;
- A written version of the plan you can review with someone else before signing

For more support, check out our other tools in the Navigating Child Welfare Toolkit.

NATIONAL CENTER TO ADVANCE PEACE
for Children, Youth, and Families

Contact

@caminarlatino

www.centertoadvancepeace.org

info@centertoadvancepeace.org

The production of this publication was supported by Grant 90EV0531 from the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Its contents are solely the responsibility of Caminar Latino and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.