



# Preparing for Initial Conversations with Child Protective Services (CPS)

A guide for survivors of domestic violence navigating early interactions with Child Protective Services



**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



# Purpose of this Guide

This tool was developed as part of the Navigating Child Welfare Toolkit, a series of survivor-centered resources designed to help survivors of domestic violence understand and navigate child welfare systems with safety and confidence.

Preparing for Initial Conversations with Child Protective Services (CPS) focuses specifically on what to expect in the early stages of contact with CPS. It offers practical guidance to help you prepare for interviews, understand the purpose of these conversations, and communicate clearly about your family's strengths and needs.

Through examples, checklists, and reminders, this tool aims to help you approach CPS interactions with clarity and calm, while prioritizing your safety and your children's well-being. You'll also find information on gathering documents, identifying support people, and connecting with advocates or trusted community members, so you don't have to navigate this process alone.

Remember, you are not alone. Advocates, legal resources, and community members are available to support you along the way. This guide can be a first step.



# What this Tool is Not

This resource is not legal advice and cannot guarantee any specific outcome in your case. It is intended to help you feel more prepared and confident when interacting with CPS. Keep in mind that CPS systems vary widely, not only from state to state, but sometimes from county to county or even city to city. How CPS operates, who manages it, and how policies are applied may differ depending on location.

For guidance specific to your situation, consider speaking with an attorney or a community-based domestic violence advocate who can provide confidential, personalized support.

# How to Prepare for a Conversation with CPS: Step-by-Step Guide

If CPS contacts you for an interview, the next step is to prepare for that conversation. This contact may come by phone, mail, or an unannounced visit to your home — sometimes a worker may even leave a business card at your door without calling ahead.

Preparing doesn't mean you need to have all the answers or be perfect. The goal is to protect your family while staying grounded and ready. Preparation includes thinking through what you want to say, identifying trusted people who can support you, and understanding your rights before the interview begins.

## STEP #1 What to do When You Are Notified of an Interview

When you are first notified, consider doing the following to understand the situation and plan for the interview:

- **Name:** Get the CPS worker's full name, title, phone number, and email address.
- **Questions:** Ask questions such as: "What are the allegations?" or "What am I being accused of?" or "What will this interview cover?" These questions can help you understand the nature of the investigation and how to prepare.
- **Support System:** Find out who can be present during the interview.
- **Trusted Persons:** Request a trusted support person. You have the right to ask for someone to be present during the interview — such as an advocate, attorney, family member, faith leader, or friend who understands your situation.
- **Advocate:** If you do not currently have an advocate, contact your local domestic violence program as soon as possible. They can offer emotional support, help you prepare for the interview, and, in some cases, join you or provide guidance before and after the conversation, depending on their capacity and local policies.
- **Learn:** Learn about your rights before speaking with CPS. Whenever possible, consult with an advocate or attorney beforehand to help you prepare, understand what to expect, and ensure your voice is heard. Some advocacy organizations offer CPS "know your rights" materials specific to certain states, which you may be able to find online or by asking others.

## STEP #2 Gather Information & Documents Before a CPS Interview

It is important to gather information and documents about both the domestic violence you experienced and the steps you took to protect yourself and your children, as well as the ways you have parented, supported, and met your children's needs. The goal is to help CPS understand that—even if the domestic violence created a risk of harm or negatively affected your children—you made efforts to keep them safe.

### **Information**

As part of your preparation, make sure to gather the following details and records:

- Children's full names and birthdates
- A safe phone number and mailing address for follow-up contact
- Relevant safety concerns about the abusive partner (if it is safe to disclose)
- Specific concerns affecting you or your children
- Specific ways you tried to protect your children
- Supports you accessed for yourself and your children

**Note:** You can write down notes to make sure you cover everything you want to share with the CPS worker.

### **Documentation**

In addition, gather any documents that can help demonstrate your efforts to protect your children and the impact of the abuse. These may include:

- Restraining or protection orders
- Custody agreements or court orders
- Police reports documenting domestic violence incidents
- Hospital or medical records
- Children's school records
- Letters of support from family, friends, or professionals

### **STEP #3 Create a Safe and Calm Environment for the Interview**

A CPS interview can feel overwhelming, especially when you're already carrying the emotional weight of surviving domestic violence. It's completely valid to feel anxious, nervous, uncertain, or even afraid. You deserve to feel safe while sharing your story. One of the most important steps you can take is to create a space, both physically and emotionally, that feels as safe and calm as possible before the interview.

#### **Choose a Location**

If you are given the option, choose a location where you feel safe. This could include:

- A trusted community center
- A domestic violence agency building or shelter
- A room at a supportive agency
- A quiet room at a library

**Your home.** If you choose this option, be aware that allowing a CPS

worker into your home gives them the opportunity to observe and document your living environment. Take time to prepare your space and consider what areas they may see or ask to visit. You have the right to ask questions about what they need to see and why.

**Note:** If having the interview in your home makes you feel anxious or exposed, you can ask if it can take place somewhere else. You are not required to hold the interview in your home, though CPS may sometimes request to meet there to see the children's living environment. If you do decide to have the interview at home, remember that the worker may observe and document what they see. Try to ensure that your home appears orderly and clean, with sufficient food visible in the kitchen.

### **Prepare Your Environment**

Ensure children are not present unless specifically requested by CPS.

- If CPS requests that your children be present, ask a trusted caregiver your children are comfortable with to care for them in another room. This will allow you to speak freely, stay focused, and feel more at ease during the interview.

Use grounding techniques:

- Light a candle
- Say a prayer or affirmation
- Practice deep breathing
- Have a support person present
- Hold an object that feels soothing (a stone, prayer beads, etc.)

**Remember:** You are doing great! You are doing the best you can to protect and care for you and your children!



## STEP #4 Consider Who Should Be Present

You are not alone, and you do not have to do this on your own. It's important to think about who you want to have present during the interview. Having supportive people with you can help you feel grounded and remind both you and CPS that you are not navigating this process alone—and that your voice matters.

If possible, let the CPS worker know ahead of time who will be present during the interview. This demonstrates transparency, helps the worker prepare for the visit, and shows that you have strong connections and community support. Any of the following people may offer the support you need, though there may be limits on how many can attend the interview:

**Before Inviting Anyone to the Interview, Ask Yourself:**

- Do I feel emotionally safe with this person present?
- Will they support me without judgment?
- Can I speak freely with them in the room?

**Remember:** This is your story and your truth to tell. The people you invite into that space should help you feel seen, grounded, and empowered.

**STEP #5 Handling the CPS Interview Process – Establishing Rapport, Anticipating Common Questions, and How to Respond**

Navigating a CPS interview can feel overwhelming but knowing what to expect and how to respond can help you stay grounded and better advocate for yourself and your children.

During the investigation, **the CPS worker's main goals are to:**

- Verify the allegations of child physical or emotional abuse or neglect.
- Determine whether your children are currently safe and what supports or services may help keep your family stable.

**Establishing Rapport**

The relationship—or rapport—you build with the CPS worker can often influence how your situation is understood. While it's natural to feel guarded, fearful, or mistrustful, especially if you've experienced domestic violence or systems that haven't supported you, it can help to approach the conversation with calm and clarity whenever possible.

You do not have to share everything or agree with everything said, but finding small ways to communicate respectfully and clearly can make a difference. The CPS worker is more likely to recognize your strengths and your care for your children when you express your perspective thoughtfully and stay focused on your children’s safety and well-being.

**Here are a few ways to help establish rapport:**

- Take a moment to breathe before answering difficult questions.
- Use neutral and calm language when describing what happened or what you need.
- Acknowledge the worker’s role (“I understand you need to ask these questions”) while affirming your own goals (“I just want to make sure my children are safe and supported”).
- If you feel triggered or overwhelmed, it’s okay to pause or ask for a short break.

**Remember:** Feeling nervous or cautious does not mean you’re doing something wrong—these are normal reactions to stressful situations, especially when power dynamics mirror past experiences of control or fear.

Establishing rapport is about helping your story be heard clearly, not about agreeing with everything or trusting everyone involved. You can remain respectful while still setting boundaries and asserting your truth. Remember, your voice and your safety matter most.

**Anticipating Common Questions**

CPS may ask questions about the alleged abuse or neglect, such as:

- “What happened?”
- “How was your child (or children) affected?”
- “What actions did you take to protect your child(ren) from harm?”
- “Are you and your children safe now? If not, what steps could be taken and what supports could be put in place to keep you and your children safe?”

These questions are part of the process the worker uses to understand what is happening and to determine what help or support may be needed.

### **Before the Interview: What to Know**

#### **Navigating Allegations with Care**

Generally, CPS workers are looking for parents to take accountability for what happened to their children. Some may be skeptical of parents who deny the allegations outright. This does not mean you should agree to the allegations just to appear cooperative, but be aware that coming across as overly defensive can decrease rapport with the caseworker. Instead, focus on clearly communicating how important your child’s safety is to you and the steps you take to ensure their well-being.

#### **Holistic Assessment**

Many child welfare systems have shifted away from an incident-driven approach—one that focuses solely on the specific abuse or neglect allegations—and toward a more holistic assessment of the family’s overall context. As a result, CPS may ask questions about your family’s needs, strengths, and dynamics that may not seem directly related to

the reported incident. This broader perspective is used to evaluate family functioning and determine what support or services may be helpful.

This may include questions such as:

- “How do you discipline your children?”
- “How do you manage stress and emotions?”
- “How do you spend time together as a family?”
- “Do you have any mental health or substance use history?”
- “Do you ever have difficulty meeting your family’s financial needs (e.g., paying bills, housing, childcare)?”
- “Who or what is a source of support for you?”
- “What are your children’s strengths?”
- “Do your children have any special needs, and how are those needs being supported?”
- “Is there a firearm in the home? Are you a legal owner? Is it stored safely?”

### **Handling Intrusive or Inappropriate Questions**

CPS workers often conduct a holistic assessment to understand a family’s situation and determine what supports may be needed. While this can help identify resources, it’s also important to know that information shared during an interview may be added to your case record and could lead to additional requirements or allegations.

Because of this, focus your responses on questions directly related to the specific allegations of abuse or neglect. You are not required to discuss every detail of your personal history or circumstances if it is unrelated to the concerns CPS is investigating.

If a question feels intrusive or confusing, it's okay to pause before responding. You can ask the worker to clarify why they are asking or how the question relates to the current investigation. If you need more time to think or prefer to consult with an advocate or attorney first, you can say so.

You may be asked questions that feel personal, invasive, or emotionally difficult to answer. These questions might explore your relationships, mental health, or home environment. For example:

- “Are you currently in a relationship? Does this person spend time with your children?”
- “Do you and your partner ever argue or fight in front of your children?”
- “Have you ever received mental health care or treatment?”

While these questions can feel uncomfortable, they are sometimes part of a broader assessment meant to understand family dynamics and safety. Still, it's okay to pause, ask for clarification, or share only what feels necessary to answer the question truthfully and safely. You have the right to take a breath, to ask how a question connects to the investigation, and to maintain your boundaries while responding.

These questions can be extremely upsetting and may feel violating. Many survivors report feeling further harmed or dismissed in their interactions with CPS. In many situations, you can ask to have an advocate present for support during your conversation(s) with CPS. Below are some suggestions on how you might respond to certain scenarios that may come up.



***Before the interview begins:***

“Can you explain my rights before we get started?”



***When you need more time:***

“Can we schedule this for another time so I can have someone with me?”



***When a question feels irrelevant/ invasive/ inappropriate:***

“I don’t feel comfortable answering this question. How is this related to the allegations?”



***When you want someone present:***

“I’d like my advocate/lawyer present before answering that.”



***When centering your child’s safety:***

“My child’s well-being is my top priority, and here are the steps I take to keep them safe.”



## **Centering Your Story, Needs, and Safety: Practical Strategies**

### **Show Your Concern for Your Child(ren)'s Safety**

- Communicate that your child's safety and well-being is your top priority.
- Be specific about what safety means to you.
- Share concrete steps you take:
  - Creating and following safety plans
  - Seeking support services
  - Maintaining healthy routines
  - Removing your children from harmful situations

Showing that you are actively engaged in ensuring their safety helps reinforce your commitment as a parent and can influence how CPS views your involvement and intentions.

### **Explain What Your Children Mean to You**

- Share things you love about them and meaningful moments.
- Highlight your family's strengths:
  - Close parent-child bond
  - Stability in routines
  - Support systems
  - Favorite family memories

This helps CPS understand you as a whole person and recognize the positive aspects of your parenting.

## **Communicate Your Family's Needs Thoughtfully**

- Be specific about what support, if any, would be helpful.
- Be honest, but cautious about oversharing.
- Consistently communicate and demonstrate your ability to care for your children, even while sharing about any challenges you may be facing.

**Remember:** anything you identify as a “need” could be included in your case plan or required by the court.

## **Be Clear About Safety Concerns**

If CPS suggests changes you feel may increase danger (for example, abruptly leaving a partner), calmly explain:

- The safety concerns you have and why
- What you are currently doing to stay safe such as:
  - Maintaining a safety plan
  - Using community or family supports
  - Court actions
- What additional support would help keep you and your children safer

If CPS expresses concern about safety, try to understand the exact nature of those concerns. You can suggest steps you are willing to take that you believe would increase safety for you and your children.

If CPS recommends a response that feels impractical or unsafe, explain why, and emphasize your willingness to work together to find another solution.

## Overall Tips for Responding

- **Do not deny the allegations outright:** Focus instead on child safety and the steps you've taken to protect your children and ensure their well-being.
- **Avoid making excuses or becoming overly defensive:** It's normal to feel upset or stressed, but staying calm helps maintain clarity and control during the conversation.
- **Avoid oversharing personal challenges that are not relevant to the allegations:** If you feel yourself starting to explain too much, pause, take a breath, and return to the specific question being asked.
- **If you are unsure why a question is being asked, you can say:** "How is this question relevant to the allegations?" Asking for clarification helps keep the conversation focused and clear.
- **If the CPS worker is rude or asks inappropriate questions:** Take a moment to collect yourself before responding. Yelling, arguing, swearing, or insulting the worker can reflect poorly on you in their assessment.
- **You can request that a third party be involved or ask to speak with the worker's supervisor:** If you are concerned about being labeled "uncooperative." This helps ensure the interaction is documented clearly and fairly.
- **Proceed with caution:** Anything you say can be used in the CPS investigation. Consider your responses carefully. Take your time, think before you answer, and try to stay calm.

## STEP #6 *After the Interview*

After the initial contact or interview with CPS, you may feel uncertain about what comes next. The process can vary depending on your situation, the allegations involved, the laws and procedures in your state, and how CPS evaluates your responses. The following are some basic things you can expect and steps you can take after the interview.

### **After the Interview is Over, You Can**

- Make sure you have the CPS worker's contact information.
- Confirm that the CPS worker has your correct contact information for follow-up.

### **Possible Next Steps CPS May Take**

After the Initial Interview, CPS May:

- **Take no further action** and conclude the investigation.
  - At the conclusion, CPS may or may not make findings of abuse or neglect against you and/or the person who perpetrated domestic violence.
- **Determine that your children are in “imminent risk of harm.”**
  - If so, they may remove your children and schedule a court hearing, typically within 48–72 hours.
- **Recommend steps to increase your children's safety.**
- **Offer services** to help keep your family together.

### **Follow-Up During the Investigation**

The CPS worker may need to contact you again while they complete their investigation. States vary in timelines. Most complete investigations within 15–60 days. You can ask:

- “When will I be informed about a decision in my case?”
- “Who will inform me, and how will I be notified?”
- “Are there formal documents or reports I can access? If so, how?”

### **Receiving the Outcome**

Once the investigation is complete, you should receive written notice stating:

- Whether allegations of abuse or neglect were verified.
- What happens next (including court requirements, if any).
- Whether you have the right to appeal.

If you **do not** receive this within the timeframe given:

- Follow up with the CPS worker or their supervisor.

### **If you Have Questions or Concerns, You Have the Right to:**

- Request clarification,
- Contact the caseworker’s supervisor or manager,
- File a formal complaint if concerns are not addressed. (See our tool: [How to File a Complaint](#) or check out our [Map](#) to learn about the specific procedures for your State).

### **Additional Resources:**

[Navigating Child Welfare Toolkit:](#)

<https://centertoadvancepeace.org/resources/navigating-child-welfare>



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## Contact



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