**Workplace Health and Safety**

**Family Inclusion Network Townsville**

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As support workers, we must always keep ourselves safe. Some of the families we work with have a parent who may be unsafe (e.g. an abusive parent showing up during a meeting with the other parent). In these instances, we need to ensure the safety of ourselves and the families. Below I have outlined some ideas which we may be able to incorporate.

1. Lanyards with I.D. cards –The idea of the tag is obviously to identify ourselves when attending a parent's house and someone else answers the door, or if it is a parent that we have only spoken to on the phone. Workers can keep the card in their pocket and show it when requested if they prefer.

Example of tag

 

1. Risk Assessment – the most important thing to consider when you are going to a parent's house;
   1. Before meeting the parent and/or family at their own home, talk to the parent and obtain any relevant information about their home and any visitors who may appear unexpectedly. This should be done as soon as possible.
   2. Advise someone of what time your appointment is with the parent, what suburb you are meeting them, or if you are meeting them somewhere else, e.g., shopping centre. If you have any concerns about meeting the parent, meet in a public place and/or take another advocate with you.
   3. Identify any hazards in and around the home or office and, if possible, put in safety measures to reduce the risk of injury or illness. If hazards are unable to be removed or controlled, always offer to meet elsewhere (café, library). An example would be mould.
   4. Identifying if there are dogs is something you should ask before attending a home. If you have a concern with dogs, please ask for them to be restrained.
   5. Ensure the gate is easily accessible; entering and exiting must be safe and easy for you in times of urgency.
   6. Identify any exits – this means ensuring you can leave the house quickly if an altercation happens between parents (again, always remember that an abusive parent may show up at any time), and you need to leave immediately.
   7. Identify any risks in the home – this should never become an issue as parents usually come to us for help, but there may be trip hazards. Remember, you are going into someone else's home, and they are not required to comply with any safety laws. Identify possible trip hazards, such as cords, children's toys, animals, and drug paraphernalia. Drug paraphernalia is included as some parents are still using drugs, and there is always a possibility there will be something around.
   8. Many children are removed from their homes due to domestic violence and drug use. This is an essential factor to keep in mind when working with a parent and/or their family. Abusive ex-partners may show up at any time, and on occasion, the parent we are working with may become frustrated and hostile with the process of trying to have their child/ren returned to their care or gaining contact. They may take their frustrations out on you. It is not personal, but you are the frontline worker. If you feel unsafe at ANY time, and your efforts to diffuse the anger are not successful, make your feelings known and advise that you will be leaving and contact them at another time. E.G. "I feel that this meeting is not going well, so I will be leaving now. I will call you in a few days to arrange a new appointment." If this causes any further aggression, call the Police on 000. You can advise the parent you are doing so, "I am feeling unsafe, I am going to call the Police". Leave as quickly as possible and contact your supervisor to advise of the incident.
   9. Car Parking – When attending a parent's home, ensure your car is parked at an accessible point for leaving. Ask the parent if you can park in their driveway if street parking is unsuitable.

* If you have a late appointment, try and park near a street light and take a small torch with you if it becomes dark while you are there.
* If you have a late appointment, advise your supervisor or, if no other option, you can check in with someone else. Contact them and advise where you will be, how long you expect to be there, and keep them updated. Contact them again when you leave to advise that you are safe.

1. Safety during meetings at the Child Safety Office – as with the parent's home, ensure that you have a safe way to leave and identify if you feel unsafe. Generally, if there is a lot of anger from a parent to a CSO, the CSO will explain that they are not continuing the meeting and leave. This will allow you to try to calm the parent down; however, leave the room if they turn their anger towards you. Please stay in the foyer, ring for a receptionist and ask them to stay with you until the parent leaves.

* If the CSO is making you or the parent feel unsafe or becomes aggressive, advise the CSO that you will be leaving with the parent immediately. Walk the parent out and to their car. Please make sure they are okay and not emotional or feeling vulnerable. If you feel it is required, take them to a café for a coffee to help them calm down. Once you and the parent feel safe, please return them to their car. This behaviour should immediately be reported to your supervisor, the STL and office manager by email.

1. Bullying/Harassment/Discrimination – we all have the right to feel safe in our workplace. This means being safe from any bullying, harassment or discrimination from our co-workers and/or families. If you feel that this is happening, speak to your supervisor in the first instance. Your supervisor will work with you to come up with a plan to stop the problem. If this is happening from a family, the supervisor must be aware of engaging a new support worker.
2. Violence in the parent's home or at the Child Safety office is not common, however as parents are very emotional during this period of their life, there is a chance it can happen. This could be perpetrated by the parent you are supporting, or the other parent, even by another family member.

The type of violence can include;

* Spitting, hitting, kicking
* Throwing items at you or someone else
* Pushing, grabbing
* Verbal – if the abuse is only verbal, use your skills to diffuse the situation. If other violence occurs, refer to point 2g.
* Sexual assault
* Attacks with a weapon, gun, knives, baseball bats etc. Remember, anything can be used as a weapon.

Identify risk factors. As stated already, the parents you will work with are emotionally vulnerable and may do anything to try and get their child back. You should be aware of:

* Any mental health illnesses, such as depression or anxiety, psychosis, or mania
* What may trigger a parent to become aggressive
* How often the parent has become aggressive or gone through a depressive episode outside of their normal range
* If an abusive parent has been released from prison
* If the current DVO has expired
* The intentions of the CSO in relation to contact or reunification
* If Child Safety has reneged on an undertaking
* Any medication the parent may be on or starting. When starting a new medication for any mental illness, there is a period of adapting; the parent may have highs and lows during this time. This can also occur if the parent is stopping their medication.
* Any prior or current illicit drug use or alcohol abuse
* Change of CSO or STL. The parent may feel they are being manipulated or that they must tell their story again. This can be emotionally exhausting for them.
* Any court dates that are coming up.
* Any FGM's or reviews of the case plan that are scheduled.

These factors will play a part in how a parent reacts on any given day. It would help if you had a good understanding of how to manage these situations as they arise. You can do this by:

* Be aware of any upcoming court dates or meetings that may impact the parent's contact with their child.
* Meeting with the parent just before any meetings at the office and asking them what they would like to discuss and what they hope to get out of it. This helps them become calmer.
* Staying with the parent after the meeting, talking to them about the outcome, and ensuring they fully understand what was agreed on.
* Going to court with the parent as moral support. You may be able to go into the courtroom as a "McKenzie’s Friend”.
* Be aware of any mental health illnesses and medication they are using, if they are taking any.
* Being aware of the reason the children were removed or at risk of being removed.
* Being aware of any DVO’s in place
* Supporting the parent and helping them to find a counsellor or psychologist to see about any substance abuse, DV counselling or counselling for their mental health if required.

1. Look after your mental health as much as possible. Risk factors for a decline in your mental health may include:

* Your workload, especially for students or other full-time workers
* Your current challenges including poverty, relationship difficulties, and/or mental health
* The demands from parents who want you to solve the problems they have
* Not understanding your role
* Lack of organisation skills
* Not using the support available
* Poorly managed work relationships, either with your colleagues, supervisor or parent
* Continued exposure to distressing situations (which is a part of your job)
* Emotional attachments to parents.

These factors can be eased by:

* Speaking to your supervisor about your workload. If you have too many parents to work with, consider handing one over to someone who has more time
* Always ensure that you never make promises to a parent that you will not be able to keep. Assure the parent that you will support them as best as possible and remind them that Child Safety still makes all the decisions and you have no control over them.
* Attend the peer support meetings that are held fortnightly. They are for your benefit.
* Speak to your supervisor when you have had a hard meeting with a parent.
* If needed, see a psychologist or a counsellor.
* Make sure you rest and have leisure time for yourself and your family.
* Students on placement should make this a priority as much as possible. Studying and doing a placement with vulnerable people can be emotionally exhausting.

1. Driving is a necessary part of your daily life. You will not often have a parent in the car with you, but there are important things to consider, even if you are by yourself. These precautions will help you have a safe journey each time:

* Always plan ahead. Make sure you know where you are going and how to get there. If you do not have a GPS system in your car, your smartphone should have one. For Android phones, this will be Google Maps, and iPhones use Apple Maps. Please become familiar with this feature as it will save you time. The apps will read out directions for you, so you do not need to touch your phone while driving.
* Do not answer calls or text messages while driving unless you have Bluetooth capabilities for hands-free calls. Not only is it dangerous, but it also is illegal, and if you are caught, you will be fined and gain three demerit points.
* Make sure your car is in good condition. Check your tyres, coolant, and oil regularly. Always make sure you have enough fuel if you need to do many errands with the parent or have a long drive distance.
* Make sure your car is clean. Not only does it look professional if there is an accident, but loose items can also become missiles and cause serious injury.
* Drive to the weather conditions. Reschedule appointments if there is a dangerous weather event (cyclone, gale-force winds, heavy, persistent rain or floods).
* Try not to drive if highly fatigued. This is as dangerous as driving under the influence of substances.
* If you are transporting a parent, be careful they do not become a distraction. If they become aggressive or overly emotional, pull over as soon as it is safe and calm the parent down.
* If you ever need to transport a parent and their child/ren, make sure you have adequate child safety seating. Stay up-to-date with current regulations and never allow a child to sit on another’s lap.
* If you are going to be late, advise the parent, do not rush.
* Check your insurance on your vehicle. Does it cover others in the car or car accidents
* Only offer lifts if you have the means to do so, as FIN cannot reimburse fuel costs.

1. Incident reporting – any acts of violence or aggression from a parent should be reported to your supervisor in the first instance. If there is physical harm to yourself, go straight to a doctor and report it. If an ambulance is required (in the event of severe injuries during a meeting), ensure you contact or ask someone to contact your supervisor as soon as possible. Students on placement are covered under insurance from the university, so it is also vital that the incident is reported to your liaison person as soon as possible. Your supervisor may do this for you. Fill out an incident report as soon as possible.

**Terms/Definitions**

**Parent** – the primary caregiver before child safety involvement

**CSO** – Child Safety Officer. The primary contact at child safety for the case

**STL** – Senior Team Leader. They have several CSO’s in their team. They will not always attend meetings, but they are heavily involved in the case.

**FGM** – Family Group Meeting. This meeting is held to discuss the worries, strengths and weaknesses of the parent. This meeting will also discuss further contact and case plan meetings. Wherever possible, both parents attend these meetings.

**DVO** – Domestic Violence Order. Usually, a five-year order is granted by a magistrate to protect a person from domestic violence. It will name the parent who applied for the order and the children involved.

**McKenzie’s Friend** is a term for a support person to go into a courtroom when legal representation is not available. The support can not speak on the parents’ behalf but can write questions for the parent to ask.

**Mental Health Support**

Lifeline Australia 13 11 14

Beyond Blue 1300 224 636

MensLine 1300 789 978

Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467

Kids Helpline (18-25) 1800 551 800