

The **PERCS Conversation Guide** is a psychosocial discussion tool for practitioners working with parents.

It supports collaborative, respectful conversations around the impact of family and domestic violence (FDV) on children's mental health and wellbeing.

The guide provides example questions to help you explore five important domains in a child's life. It is designed to help you to recognise parents' strengths and hopes for their family, and opportunities to support and improve children's mental and physical health, resilience and wellbeing.

FDV is an ongoing pattern of behaviour intent on establishing and maintaining power and control over women and children, by creating fear and intimidation. Therefore, there are separate guides for working with mothers living with violence, and with fathers using violence.

There are four broad stages to the guide:

### 1 What is the entry point?



Look for opportunities, or 'entry points' to engage the parent in conversations about their child's mental health and wellbeing in the context of FDV.

Potential entry points include:

- The parent presents with a concern about FDV.
- The parent expresses concern about their child's behaviour or circumstances.
- The practitioner has concerns around the child's wellbeing due to adversities being faced by the family, including FDV.
- The practitioner explores the child's social and emotional wellbeing through open enquiry.

### 2 What are you curious about?



Consider the five PERCS domains:

- P** Parent-child relationships
- E** Emotions and behaviours
- R** Routines
- C** Communication and meaning-making
- S** Support networks

This guide contains example questions to assist practitioners in their conversations. The first set of questions encourage open enquiry, while the second set is designed to help develop a deeper understanding of the impact of FDV on children's daily lives.

### 3 Conversation with the parent



Conduct a collaborative and respectful conversation with the parent to arrive at shared understandings and decisions, using the six principles of parent engagement:

- Child-aware & parent-sensitive
- Curiosity
- Collaboration
- Strengths & hopes
- Context
- Respect

These principles will support the development of a trusting therapeutic relationship.

### 4 Provide support








Provide support to parents to lessen the impacts of FDV on their children:

- Use a strengths-based approach to support a positive parent-child relationship and improved emotional wellbeing for children.
- Provide resources to parents regarding child development and parenting practices.
- Practice integrated care and make warm referrals to other community supports or specialist services.
- Continue to work with the parent around their initial presenting issue.

This guide provides a pathway and example questions for exploring the five domains of a child's life. Each domain can be significantly impacted by FDV, due to the climate of fear that surrounds children, and the negative beliefs and understandings they hold in relation to the violence.

You don't need to ask questions from every domain, every time. Instead, work on those areas that are relevant each session. Trust may take a few sessions to develop, so questions can be revisited if necessary. Also, the language used is a guide only and should be adapted to suit the individual worker/client. Finally, it is crucial to think about what the parent is feeling at the end of these conversations, and to ensure they leave your sessions with a sense of hope.

<b>P</b>	 <h3>Parent-child relationship</h3> <p>A safe, secure, responsive and nurturing relationship between a child and their parent/caregiver is key to building resilience.</p>	<b>Practitioner's role</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify what parents want for their relationship with their children.</li><li>• With mothers: Explore the effects of the violence on the mother-child relationship, and how they've responded to protect this relationship, despite the violence.</li><li>• With fathers: Identify how their violence gets in the way of this relationship.</li></ul>	<b>ASK Example question</b> <p>What is important to you as a parent?</p>
<b>E</b>	 <h3>Emotions and behaviours</h3> <p>Children need to feel loved, safe and confident their emotions will be listened to and responded to in a nurturing way.</p>	<b>Practitioner's role</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• With mothers: Explore what they've noticed about how their children's emotions and behaviours have been affected by the violence, and how they've responded to this, despite the violence.</li><li>• With fathers: Examine how they interpret their children's emotions and behaviours, and whether they're able to respond to these safely.</li></ul>	<b>ASK Example question</b> <p>Could you tell me a bit about (child's name)?</p>
<b>R</b>	 <h3>Routines</h3> <p>Routines and rituals provide children with a stable base, especially in times of stress.</p>	<b>Practitioner's role</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• With mothers: Identify the routines that are important to them and their children, and how these have been affected by the violence.</li><li>• With fathers: Ask what they notice about the effects of their violence on their children's routines, and what they can do to help reconnect them to these routines.</li></ul>	<b>ASK Example question</b> <p>What does a regular week with (child's name) look like?</p>
<b>C</b>	 <h3>Communication and meaning-making</h3> <p>Respectful and effective communication can help children to express emotions and make meaning from experiences of adversity. This helps develop their resilience.</p>	<b>Practitioner's role</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• With mothers: Explore how their children have made sense of the violence, and how they might have supported the children not to blame themselves.</li><li>• With fathers: Identify their responsibility for the violence and that this responsibility should never be directed towards their children.</li></ul>	<b>ASK Example question</b> <p>What opportunities do you get to spend time talking with your child?</p>
<b>S</b>	 <h3>Support networks</h3> <p>Safe and supportive networks outside the family can be key to a child's social and emotional wellbeing.</p>	<b>Practitioner's role</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• With mothers: Explore what support networks exist for their children, despite the violence, and how these networks might support the children's wellbeing.</li><li>• With fathers: Discuss how important they think support networks are for their children, and how their use of violence might impact these.</li></ul>	<b>ASK Example question</b> <p>Who does (child's name) enjoy spending time with, outside of immediate family?</p>

The use of the PERCS Conversation Guide is informed by six practice positions. These principles are informed by evidence and practitioner experience, and may already be a part of your work. They will assist you to focus on engaging parents in non-judgmental, non-stigmatising conversations about their parenting role, and their child's social and emotional wellbeing.



## Child-aware and parent-sensitive

A child-aware approach acknowledges and considers the experiences of the client's children, and ensures children are visible in all conversations.

It incorporates the role of those children in the client's life, whether or not working with children is part of the practitioner's scope of practice.

A child-inclusive approach involves children in conversations about what is happening for them, and their social and emotional wellbeing, where it is appropriate to do so.

In the context of FDV, a parent-sensitive approach assumes that children's safety and their social and emotional wellbeing are significant motivators for both mothers and fathers. It sees the parenting role as a central feature of meaning and motivation in the client's life.

Mothers who experience violence often feel a great sense of shame regarding their inability to parent how they want to. A parent-sensitive approach finds ways to have curious conversations about children without reinforcing stigma or shame.

In working with fathers who engage in family violence, a parent-sensitive approach finds ways to have conversations with them about their children, their children's safety, and the effects of their violence on their children's wellbeing, without stigmatising or shaming them.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>



## Curiosity

A curious stance involves taking an interest in how coercion, control, threats and put-downs may be impacting upon family relationships, rather than simply asking questions in order to identify problems and complete an assessment.

Being curious about the effects of FDV on children ensures a focus on the kinds of environments both mothers and fathers would prefer in providing the best possible care for their child's mental health.

Being curious asks you to:

- be sensitive to the parent's potential fear of being judged by others
- be sensitive to the parent's own self-judgment and sense of shame
- ensure you do not ask a mother to take responsibility for violence that is out of her control; and
- assume that a father using violence has preferences for safety and respect in his relationships with his children.<sup>4,5,6,7</sup>



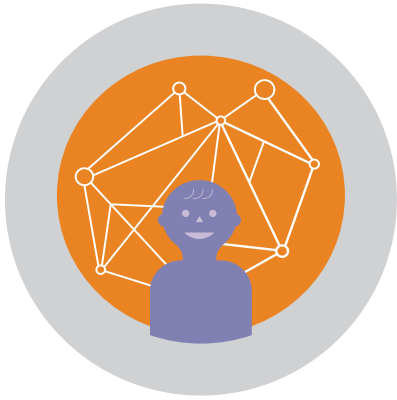
## Respect

As practitioners become more familiar with the effects of men's violence on the lives of women and children, respectful practice with fathers who use violence may become more difficult. However, a lack of respect in conversations with fathers who abuse, or lectures about why violence is wrong can cause them to disengage with services, putting their partners and children at risk.

Similarly, respectful practice with mothers experiencing violence means working at their pace and not telling them what they should and shouldn't do, particularly in regard to leaving their partner. This can potentially mean increased risk for the safety of mothers and children and should be considered in conjunction with a safety plan.

Respect asks you to:

- acknowledge and validate the parenting status of your clients, regardless of what shape it takes
- respect parents' knowledge and understanding of their own children and family, even when violence is present
- view parents as more than just their experience of violence, even those who are using violence
- acknowledge a father's capacity to do things differently and cease his violence
- be open to the possibility a father may hold values, beliefs, hopes and strengths that contradict his abusive behaviour
- recognise the steps a mother has taken to try to keep her children safe and lessen the effects of violence
- respect a mother's parenting efforts despite the undermining effects of violence on her parenting and sense of self.<sup>1,6,8</sup>



## Contextual understandings

Like all experiences of adversity faced by families, understanding the broader context and circumstances surrounding issues of FDV is important.

Mothers and children who are affected by FDV can find their cultural, spiritual and social connections restricted. An understanding of this can be important when supporting women and children to reconnect with their identities. For fathers, elements of the cultural or spiritual beliefs or remembering their history can reconnect them with ethics of safety, connection and respect.

However, practitioners need to take care not to imply or reinforce understandings that the context provides either an explanation or justification for the presence of violence and abuse in the family.



## Collaboration

This involves supporting parents in feeling confident and competent, providing them with choices, and encouraging their active participation and empowerment. Shared decision-making and the recognition of the client's right to self-direction require relationships built on trust to facilitate meaningful participation.<sup>2,4,5,9</sup>

Both mothers and fathers may feel a profound sense of hopelessness when there is FDV. Mothers may feel that they have limited choices because of the coercion and threats they are experiencing, as well as limited access to financial and social supports. Therefore, it is important to encourage them to think about their own knowledge and understandings of their child, in order to begin to plan for safety.

Fathers who access services may also disclose a sense of inevitability over their use of violence. This can involve descriptions of violence as 'snapping' or 'just losing it'. It is often not until they speak with professionals that they can begin to work on a plan of support, which will allow them to take full responsibility for their use of violence and its impacts on their children and partner.

When working with fathers who use violence and mothers who are being subjected to violence, collaboration is made more possible by seeking to understand:

- What is problematic for them?
- What are they most worried about for themselves and their children?
- What is important to them?
- What might they be hoping for?

An important element of collaboration is to link these things with future steps they can take in responding to violence in their lives and the lives of their children.

Developing and actively maintaining trusted interagency relationships is also important, as it enables practitioners to respond to clients' needs in a more holistic way.<sup>12,10,11</sup>



## Strengths and hopes

This involves identifying, highlighting, reinforcing and building upon the hopes, strengths, efforts, capabilities and positive qualities of parents, and the resources available to them.

Strengths and hopes may seem inaccessible for parents affected by violence, either as perpetrators or victims. This is why it is important to identify parenting ethics that underline the hopes parents have for their children and the factors they deem important in their relationship with their child.

Strength-based approaches:

- focus on what is working well and enhance those factors
- acknowledge parents' efforts as well as their strengths, the strengths of the child and of the family, and the resources available to them; and
- promote self-compassion among parents if a lack of self-compassion is impeding future steps.

For fathers who are using violence, this might involve an exploration of the opportunities for connection and trust that are lost through his use of coercion, control, threats or put-downs. Practitioners working with a mother experiencing FDV may emphasise her strengths in maintaining family routines.<sup>2,7,8,14,15</sup>

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## Parent-child relationship

### Engagement questions for fathers

How would you describe your relationship with (child's name)?

How do you think (child's name) would describe their relationship with you?

What is important to you as a father?

What kind of relationship do you hope for with (child's name)?

What would you like (child's name) to learn from you?

How do you hope (child's name) remembers you when they look back on this time?

### Exploring the impacts of FDV on children

How is your use of violence affecting your relationship with (child's name)?

How do you think your violence is affecting how (child's name) feels about you as their father?

How might your violence be affecting (child's name), in ways that aren't obvious to you?

How have you responded in the past when you've realised how you have affected (child's name)?

What steps could you take in relation to your violence to help your relationship with (child's name)?



## Emotions and behaviours

### Engagement questions for fathers

Could you tell me a bit about (child's name)?

What do they enjoy doing?

What are they good at?

What is it you appreciate about (child's name)?

What happens for (child's name) when they're upset?

What do you find a bit challenging about them, but still appreciate?

### Exploring the impacts of FDV on children

What do you notice about (child's name) that shows you they are worried about what might happen next?

How do their emotions and behaviours change in response to your violence?

Have there been times when you have stopped your use of violence when you've noticed how it's affecting (child's name)?

How do you respond when you're finding (child's name)'s emotions and behaviours difficult? What is that like for them?

What steps could you take in relation to your violence to help (child's name)'s emotions and behaviours?



## Routines

### Engagement questions for fathers

What activities do you and (child's name) enjoy doing together?

What do you find is the best day/time to do things with (child's name)?

What does your regular week with (child's name) look like?

What kinds of routines or regular family rituals do you have?

How does (child's name) go with managing daily routines (e.g. doing homework, going to bed, getting organised for school or sport)?

Do you have any small traditions in your family that you try to maintain?

### Exploring the impacts of FDV on children

How do you think your violence gets in the way of (child's name)'s routines and activities?

How do you respond when you're finding (child's name)'s routines difficult or inconvenient? What is that like for them?

What steps could you take in relation to your violence to help with (child's name)'s routines and activities?



## Communication and meaning-making

### Engagement questions for fathers

What opportunities do you get to spend time talking with (child's name)?

What are the best times for you and (child's name) to talk about things?

Are there particular activities they like to do that help them to talk?

What does (child's name) like to talk about?

What are some things (child's name) says or does to help you understand what they need?

### Exploring the impacts of FDV on children

Have you noticed any changes in how (child's name) talks or interacts with you? How do you think your violence affects this?

How do you think (child's name) makes sense of your use of violence?

To what extent do you think (child's name) might feel as though they are to blame for your use of violence?

What sorts of conversations have you had with (child's name) about the violence?

Have you had any conversations which have helped (child's name) to understand that the violence is not their fault in any way?



## Support networks

### Engagement questions for fathers

Who does (child's name) enjoy spending time with, outside of immediate family?

Who supports you as a family?

Who would appreciate the same things about (child's name) as you do?

Does (child's name) have any close friends or a group of friends?

As their parent, what's it's like for you to know (child's name) has these friendships/relationships? How come?

Are there things you do to support (child's name)'s friendships in any way?

### Exploring the impacts of FDV on children

How has your use of violence limited or undermined the significant relationships in (child's name)'s life?

What effects do you think this has on (child's name)?

Have there been connections (child's name) has been able to keep, despite your use of violence? What has made this possible?

What would you like for (child's name)'s connections with important people in their lives? How can you support these connections?

For more resources, visit [emergingminds.com.au/  
online-training](https://emergingminds.com.au/online-training)



## Parent-child relationship

### Engagement questions for mothers

How would you describe your relationship with (child's name)?

How do you think (child's name) would describe their relationship with you?

What is important to you as a mother?

What kind of relationship do you hope for with (child's name)?

What would you like (child's name) to learn from you?

How do you hope (child's name) will remember you when they look back on this time?

### Exploring the impacts of FDV on children

What is important to you in your relationship with (child's name)?

How has their father's use of violence undermined your relationship with (child's name)?

What has helped to limit the effects of his use of violence on your relationship with (child's name)?

How have you and (child's name) managed to have a relationship despite the violence?

How would you like to continue to nurture your relationship with (child's name)?



## Emotions and behaviours

### Engagement questions for mothers

Could you tell me a bit about (child's name)?

What do they enjoy doing?

What are they good at?

What is it you appreciate about (child's name)?

What happens for (child's name) when they're upset?

What do you find a bit challenging about them, but still appreciate?

### Exploring the impacts of FDV on children

How does (child's name) show you they are worried about their own or your safety?

What have you noticed about how (child's name)'s emotions and behaviours are immediately affected by an incident of violence?

How do you think (child's name)'s overall emotions and behaviours have changed as a result of living with the violence?

What have you found helpful in responding to (child's name) when you see they are affected in that way?

How would you like to continue to respond to (child's name)? What would help you to do that?



## Routines

### Engagement questions for mothers

What activities do you and (child's name) enjoy doing together?

What do you find is the best day/time to do things with (child's name)?

What does a regular week with (child's name) look like?

What kinds of routines or regular family rituals do you have?

How does (child's name) go with managing daily routines (e.g. doing homework, going to bed, getting organised for school or sport)?

Do you have any small traditions in your family that you try to maintain?

### Exploring the impacts of FDV on children

How has their father's use of violence affected these routines and activities?

How have you managed to preserve these routines and activities, despite the violence?

How has (child's name) tried to preserve their favourite routines and activities with you?

What might help you to maintain (child's name)'s routines and activities into the future?





## Communication and meaning-making

### Engagement questions for mothers

What opportunities do you get to spend time talking with (child's name)?

What are the best times for you and (child's name) to talk about things?

Are there particular activities they like to do that help them to talk?

What does (child's name) like to talk about?

What are some things (child's name) says or does to help you understand what they need?

### Exploring the impacts of FDV on children

How do you think (child's name) makes sense of their father's use of violence?

What sorts of conversations have you had with (child's name) about the violence?

To what extent do you think (child's name) might feel as though they are to blame for their father's use of violence?

Have you had any conversations which have helped (child's name) to understand that the violence is not their fault in any way?

How could you continue to support (child's name) to communicate with you about what's happening for them?



## Support networks

### Engagement questions for mothers

Who does (child's name) enjoy spending time with, outside of immediate family?

Who supports you as a family?

Who would appreciate the same things about (child's name) as you do?

Does (child's name) have any close friends or a group of friends?

As their parent, what's it like for you to know (child's name) has these friendships/relationships? Why?

Are there things you do to support (child's name)'s friendships in any way?

### Exploring the impacts of FDV on children

How has their father's use of violence limited or undermined (child's name)'s social and support networks?

How have you helped (child's name) to stay connected to significant relationships and networks, despite this violence?

What do you think will help maintain (child's name)'s support networks into the future?

For more resources, visit [emergingminds.com.au/  
online-training](https://emergingminds.com.au/online-training)