

Building a Safer Child Support Program for Survivors: Findings from the New York Family Safety Questions Pilot Study

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Background

Nearly one in two women and more than two in five men will experience domestic violence (DV) in their lifetime.¹ In New York, it is estimated that 44.2% of women will experience some form of DV at the hands of an intimate partner at some point during their lifetime.² In order to leave an unsafe situation, nearly all survivors (90%) report needing access to financial support, and many rely on public benefit programs and community service providers.^{3,4} In addition to public assistance programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), receiving child support can be a critical source of income for both the custodial parent and children, which can mean the difference between staying in an abusive situation and leaving.³ Past research shows that up to 93% of custodial parents with current or former abusive partners want to pursue child support.⁵ Accessing child support services and applying for public assistance, however, can be complicated and could pose a risk to survivors.

The Safe Access for Victims' Economic Security (SAVES) Center, funded by the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS), provides research, training, technical assistance, and policy, and collaboration guidance to increase safe access to child support and parenting time for survivors of domestic violence. The SAVES Center is a partnership among :

- ▶ Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), Division of Child Support Services (DCSS)
- ▶ Center for Policy Research (CPR)
- ▶ Battered Women's Justice Project (BWJP)
- ▶ Centre for Public Impact (CPI)

For more information, visit savescenter.org.

¹ Leemis, R. W., Friar, N., Khatiwada, S., Chen, M. S., Kresnow, M. J., Smith, S. G., ... & Basile, K. C. (2022). The national intimate partner and sexual violence survey: 2016/2017 report on intimate partner violence. https://www.cdc.gov/nisvs/documentation/NISVSReportonIPV_2022.pdf

² Smith S.G., Khatiwada S., Richardson L, Basile K.C, Friar N.W, Chen J, Zhang Kudon H, & Leemis R.W. (2023) The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2016/2017 State Report. Atlanta (GA): Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. <https://icasa.org/uploads/documents/Stats-and-Facts/NISVS-2016-2017-State-Report-508.pdf>

³ Goodman, S. (2018). The difference between surviving and not surviving: Public benefits programs and domestic and sexual violence victims' economic security. *National Resource Center on Domestic Violence and the Center on Poverty and Inequality*.

⁴ National Domestic Violence Hotline, National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, & the National Latina Network. (2018). "We would have had to stay": Survivors' economic security and access to public benefits programs. https://vawnet.org/sites/default/files/assets/files/2018-11/NRCDV_PublicBenefits-WeWouldHaveHadToStay-Nov2018.pdf

⁵ Pearson, J., Griswold, E. A., & Thoennes, N. (2001). Balancing Safety and Self-Sufficiency: Lessons on Serving Victims of Domestic Violence for Child Support and Public Assistance Agencies. *Violence Against Women*, 7(2), 176-192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778010122182389>

Ensuring that the pursuit of child support is safe for survivors of DV is a primary goal of the Safe Access for Victims' Economic Security (SAVES) Center and the thirteen sites awarded demonstration grants as part of the SAVES initiative sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Services (OCSS). The New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA), Division of Child Support Services (DCSS), which operates as one of the thirteen SAVES demonstration sites, sought to improve the safety of the child support program by screening for safety concerns throughout the child support process. New York is one of nineteen states with a family violence indicator (FVI) rate—a marker for cases with a safety concern in the child support program—under 5%. In 2020, the year prior to the SAVES award, New York's FVI rate was 3.31%. Making the process of obtaining child support safer for survivors starts with screening for safety concerns during the process of applying for public assistance benefits (which will result in an automatic referral or enrolling in the child support program).

DCSS, in conjunction with partners at the NY Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (OPDV) (the NY SAVES team), designed and conducted the New York Family Safety Questions Pilot Study. The NY SAVES team, in partnership with researchers at the Center for Policy Research (CPR) under the SAVES Center, designed and tested two different screening questionnaires, one focused primarily on experiences of DV (behavioral questions) and one focused primarily on child support actions that might pose a risk for survivors (operational questions). The New York Family Safety Questions Pilot Study provides further evidence of the need for routine safety screening in the child support program. This brief describes the development, implementation, and results of the New York Family Safety Questions Pilot Study. The brief concludes with lessons for the field on implementing screening for safety within the child support program.

Description of New York's Family Safety Questions Pilot Study

The NY SAVES team designed a pilot study to assess disclosure rates when using two types of safety questions—behavioral and operational—among parents enrolling in child support services. Agency staff also provided a resource flyer to all parents at the time of screening to educate parents about how to access child support safely. This section describes the development and implementation of the Family Safety Questions Pilot Study.

The Family Safety Questions for this pilot study were adapted from previous research and developed by the NY SAVES team, the SAVES Center, the New York SAVES Advisory Council members, and the federal Office of Child Support Services (OCSS). The NY SAVES team consulted an Impact Expert Advisory Group (IEAG) of DV survivors throughout the development of the screening questions, the implementation of the pilot study, and the ultimate statewide implementation of a screening process for DV.

The purpose of the pilot study was to:

- 1) Determine the rate of disclosure of a safety concern by parents who engage with the child support program.
- 2) Determine whether different types of questions, behavioral or operational, were associated with the disclosure of a safety concern.
- 3) Determine the feasibility of implementing universal DV screening in the child support process.

Implementation of New York's Family Safety Questions Pilot Study

New York's Family Safety Questions Pilot Study was implemented across 12 local social services districts over a ten-month period from October 1, 2023, through July 31, 2024. Prior to implementation, the NY SAVES team conducted a planning phase to develop the approach to the Family Safety Questions Pilot Study, which included:

- **Convening child support pilot district staff** to walk through the steps of the child support process and document areas that may create a safety concern. The NY SAVES team conducted in-person site visits at each of the 12 pilot study districts. The site visits sought to understand child support agency processes and procedures, particularly those that may be unique to that pilot study district, and identify steps in the process where a potential safety risk may be a concern. Each site visit discussion generated a list of priorities for change in child support services operations.
- **Meeting with public benefits district staff** to document the process to apply for public benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The NY SAVES team held in-person or virtual meetings with the public assistance agency staff and the agency's Domestic Violence Liaisons (DVLs) in each of the 12 pilot districts. These meetings documented the process for public assistance applications and referrals to the child support program, identifying safety concerns and potential areas for improvement.
- **Convening survivors in Impact Expert Advisory Groups (IEAGs).** The IEAG sessions were convened with DV survivors who provided insight on their experiences with the child support system and other related public assistance agencies. Sixty-one survivors across the 12 pilot study districts volunteered to participate and share their experiences. The survivors participating in the IEAG shared obstacles they faced accessing the systems, areas of potential safety concerns, and recommendations for systems change.
- **Holding discussions with DV community service providers** in each pilot district. Following the IEAG sessions, local DV community service providers were invited to provide additional context related to the issues raised during the IEAG sessions and share their thoughts on the application and referral procedures for child support services and public benefits as it relates to supporting survivors. These meetings helped the SAVES team identify steps in these processes that can pose a safety risk for survivors and develop potential solutions for improvement.

Based on the information gathered during the planning phase, the NY SAVES team developed two types of screening forms, the operational (LDSS-5226) and behavioral (LDSS-5227) versions of the Family Safety Questions. In addition to the screening forms, they developed a resource for parents titled “Getting Child Support Safely: What You Should Know” (LDSS-5228). The [“Getting Child Support Safely: What You Should Know”](#) resource was created to provide information about the standard activities that occur when working with the child support program while highlighting the importance of safety to assist survivors in making informed decisions about whether to proceed with child support services. The idea came out of the early mapping sessions conducted by the NY SAVES team with child support staff in the pilot districts and during IEAG discussions with survivors. The NY Saves team created this resource based on a similar document that has been provided to parents primarily in the New York City region. Pilot districts were instructed to provide the resource to all parents along with the screening forms. All questions across the two screening forms were designed to be answered with a “yes” or “no” response, where a “yes” response indicates a safety concern. One form asked questions primarily related to safety concerns during the child support process (six operational questions), and the other form asked questions primarily related to DV behaviors of the other parent (eleven behavioral questions).

Once developed, the NY SAVES team implemented the tools in the 12 pilot study districts in two phases. Phase I occurred between October 1, 2023 – February 29, 2024, and Phase II occurred between March 1, 2024 – July 31, 2024. Districts using the behavioral questions in Phase I switched to the operational questions in Phase II and vice versa. The two different forms were treated as separate conditions in the evaluation and never given to the same parent. All parents received the “Getting Child Support Safely: What You Should Know” document with the screening form. The 12 pilot study districts were in urban and rural areas with caseloads ranging from small (e.g., Fulton County with 2,570 cases) to large (Kings County, a borough of New York City, with approximately 60,000 cases). The resource document and screening form were provided to all parents enrolling in child support services across the pilot study districts. Each district was also encouraged to provide a screening form to both custodial and noncustodial parents with whom they had any significant interaction, regardless of the current stage of child support services. However, only a few districts reported giving the screening tool to noncustodial parents.

The NY SAVES team provided ongoing technical assistance to the pilot study districts to support their use of the Family Safety Questions throughout both phases of the pilot study. The technical assistance provided by the NY SAVES team included:

- Development and distribution of a reference guide with frequently asked questions related to the pilot study.
- Monthly office hours held virtually where pilot districts could drop in to discuss challenges, questions, accomplishments, or best practices.
- Individual quarterly calls with each pilot study district to discuss screening questions, completion of the Family Safety Questions, and ongoing data collection.
- Peer-to-peer support, including one-on-one meetings between two pilot study districts, to support the sharing of best practices for districts having difficulties with implementing the pilot study forms.

Parents who appeared in person at pilot district child support offices were asked to complete the screening form, either in hard copy or through an online screening form as part of an interview process with a child support worker. As part of the screening process, all parents were provided the “Getting Child Support Safely: What You Should Know” document (via in-person, mail, or email) with the screening form. Notably, the online screening form was completed by pilot study district staff only; no data was submitted directly to CPR by parents. Non-identifiable data was transmitted to CPR via a secure link for entry and analysis. One district used tablets to test whether paper or electronic completion of the questions affected disclosure, but results did not indicate a significant difference. However, the district reported that workers preferred the paper version, noting the tablet seemed to make it more difficult to discuss the child support process with the parent. Due to data collection limitations, the forms did not include a question that asked whether the custodial parent or noncustodial parent completed the form.

Key Findings

New York’s Family Safety Screening Pilot study was designed to determine the rate of a safety disclosure among parents receiving child support services and the types of questions that yield a safety disclosure. The pilot study tested methods of implementation and the type of questions (behavioral or operational) that enable a disclosure of a safety concern on a case. Results were separately analyzed at the end of each pilot study phase and combined across both phases. CPR conducted a descriptive analysis to report on the response rate to each safety question on both screening forms and to determine if there were any differences in the rate of disclosure by type of form the parents completed.

Universal and routine screening for domestic violence (DV) safety concerns using direct and specific questions yields a 40% disclosure rate among parents opening child support cases.

Results

During the ten-month pilot study, parents in the 12 pilot study districts completed nearly 6,000 forms. The Family Safety Questions and the “Getting Child support Safely: What You Should Know” resource were offered to any parent seeking child support services. Across both phases, 3,061 behavioral questionnaires and 2,852 operational questionnaires were completed.

Overall, approximately 40% of parents who completed a screening form disclosed a safety concern with the other parent on the case. As shown below in Figure 1, 39.37% of all completed behavioral forms had at least one “yes” response, and 40.21% of all completed operational forms had at least one “yes” response. Thus, there were no differences in disclosure rates on the behavioral versus operational questions.

Figure 1. Percent of Screening Tools with at Least One “Yes” Response



Figure 2 shows the percentage of “yes” responses for each question on the behavioral screening tools. As shown below, the screening forms varied in the number of questions asked, and the behavioral tool included some questions relevant to the child support process (e.g., the behavioral questions had some overlap with the operational questions).

Figure 2. Percentage of “Yes” Responses for Behavioral Screening Tool by Question

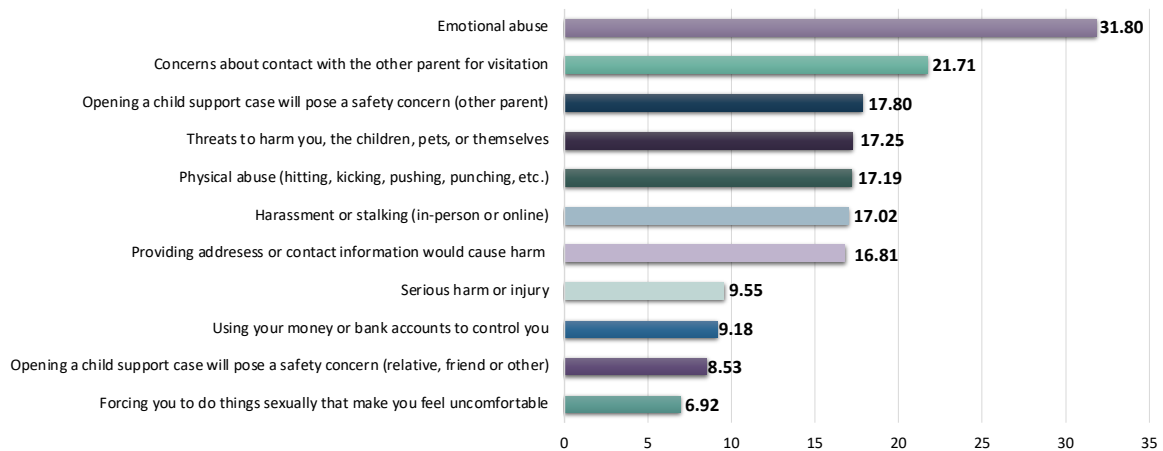
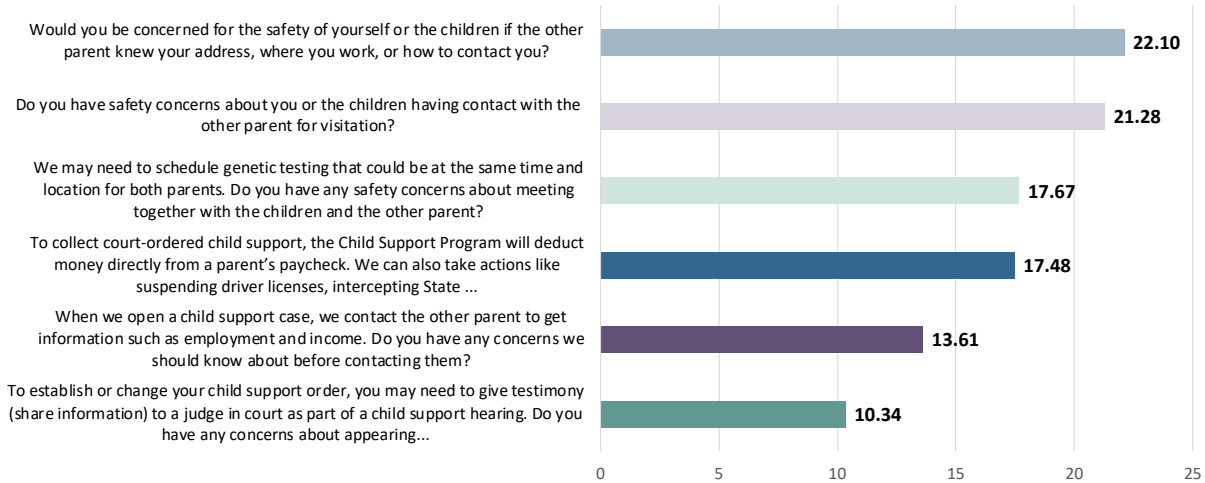


Figure 3 shows the percentage of “yes” responses for each question on the operational screening tool.

Figure 3. Percentage of “Yes” Responses for Operational Screening Tool by Question



Results from the New York pilot study indicate that asking direct, specific questions universally to parents at any point when they interact with the child support agency yields disclosures of safety concerns in approximately 40% of cases. The most common questions that received a “yes” response were those related to concerns about visitation and sharing address or contact information. To see the full list of questions for both screening tools, see Appendix A.

Conclusion

Lessons for the Field

The New York Family Safety Questions Pilot Study provides the first preliminary evidence to support updated federal guidance from OCSS on screening for safety concerns in the child support system.⁶ Important lessons learned from this pilot include:

- Providing educational material on how to access child support safely and then screening for safety should be a universal and routine part of the child support process, as outlined in the OCSS [memorandum regarding model screening questions and practices](#).
- Regardless of the screening form completed, asking direct and specific questions of parents yielded a disclosure of at least one safety concern among 40% of the clients that were screened.
- Gathering routine information from child support clients on safety concerns through screening can raise awareness of safety concerns and may lead to conversations about potential modifications to the child support process to help improve safety.
- New York successfully developed and seamlessly implemented a new screening process for safety into its current child support processes. The final combined screening form, which took the most common “yes” responses to questions from each piloted form was

⁶ Domestic Violence Expert-Informed Model Screening Questions and Practices. (2022). Office of Child Support Enforcement. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/dv_guidance_and_model_questions.pdf

implemented statewide. The New York Family Safety Questions Pilot Study demonstrates that more robust screening measures can be effectively integrated into the child support process.

The New York Family Safety Questions Pilot Study serves as an example and resource for other state and local child support agencies. Helpful practices for implementing safety screening on a large-scale basis include supporting local agencies by providing technical assistance and peer-to-peer support across implementing offices. New York's Family Safety Questions Pilot Study also incorporated the voices of survivors to identify policies and actions that may pose potential safety concerns during the child support process, help develop a resource document, and create new screening questions to test the effectiveness of this approach. Through the Family Safety Questions Pilot Study, the NY SAVES team established a survivor-informed screening process to support disclosures of DV and enhance safety in the child support program that can be replicated in child support agencies more broadly.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A – Family Safety Questions

Family Safety Questions - Behavioral

If you have any concerns about getting child support safely, the New York State Child Support Program is here to help you. We have resources, policies, and procedures designed to help you access our services in a safer manner. We ask everyone applying for child support these questions to help us provide the right services.

Completing this form is voluntary. If you answer yes to any of the following questions, there are options available that can make this process safer. You can talk privately with a child support worker about steps to help keep you and the children safe during this process. Any information you provide will be kept confidential, except if there is reason to believe the children are being harmed or in imminent danger.

Your answers to the questions below will not be shared with the other parent. We will not share personal details like addresses, employment information, or contact information with either parent. **However**, the name of the county in which you apply for services will be included in court documents or orders.

Have you, or the children for whom you seek child support services, experienced the following by the other parent?

1. Using your money or bank accounts to control you
☐Yes ☐No
2. Emotional abuse (threatening, yelling, mocking you, putting you down, making you think you are crazy, etc.)
☐Yes ☐No
3. Harassment or stalking (in-person or online)
☐Yes ☐No
4. Threats to harm you, the children, pets, or themselves
☐Yes ☐No
5. Physical abuse (hitting, kicking, pushing, punching, etc.)
☐Yes ☐No
6. Forcing you to do things sexually that make you feel uncomfortable
☐Yes ☐No

7. Serious harm or Injury

☐Yes ☐No

8. Do you believe that opening a child support case will pose a safety concern for you and/or the children with:

a. The other parent?

☐Yes ☐No

b. Someone else? (relative, friend or other)

☐Yes ☐No

9. Do you have concerns about you or the children having contact with the other parent for visitation?

☐Yes ☐No

10. Would requiring you to provide where you live or your contact information to the other parent or another party cause you or the children harassment, abuse, serious harm, or injury?

☐Yes ☐No

Additional information about our safety options is available in the document titled *Getting Child Support Safely: What You Should Know*.

Situations change and your safety is always a priority. You may change your answers to these questions at any time by contacting your child support worker.

Family Safety Questions – Operational

If you have any concerns about getting child support safely, the New York State Child Support Program is here to help you. We have resources, policies, and procedures designed to help you access our services in a safer manner. We ask everyone applying for child support these questions to help us provide the right services.

Completing this form is voluntary. If you answer yes to any of the following questions, there are options available that can make this process safer. You can talk privately with a child support worker about steps to help keep you and the children safe during this process. Any information you provide will be kept confidential, except if there is reason to believe the children are being harmed or in imminent danger.

Your answers to the questions below will not be shared with the other parent. We will not share personal details like addresses, employment information, or contact information with either parent. **However**, the name of the county in which you apply for services will be included in court documents or orders.

1. Would you be concerned for the safety of yourself or the children if the other parent knew your address, where you work, or how to contact you?
☐Yes ☐No
2. When we open a child support case, we contact the other parent to get information such as employment and income. Do you have any concerns we should know about before contacting them?
☐Yes ☐No
3. We may need to schedule genetic testing that could be at the same time and location for both parents. Do you have any safety concerns about meeting together with the children and the other parent?
☐Yes ☐No
4. To collect court-ordered child support, the Child Support Program will deduct money directly from a parent's paycheck. We can also take actions like suspending driver licenses, intercepting State and federal tax returns, denying passports, and suspending professional and recreational licenses (e.g., medical or law license, hunting, fishing, etc.) if the parent does not pay their support. Would any of these actions put you or the children at risk of physical, emotional and/or financial harm?
☐Yes ☐No

5. To establish or change your child support order, you may need to give testimony (share information) to a judge in court as part of a child support hearing. Do you have any concerns about appearing in court?

☐Yes ☐No

6. Do you have safety concerns about you or the children having contact with the other parent for visitation?

☐Yes ☐No

Additional information about our safety options is available in the document titled *Getting Child Support Safely: What You Should Know*.

Situations change and your safety is always a priority. You may change your answers to these questions at any time by contacting your child support worker.