

Child Support Process:

Resource for DV Advocates



Introduction

This resource is for advocates working with domestic violence (DV) survivors who are receiving or could benefit from child support services. It outlines each stage of the public child support process and highlights key safety considerations and support strategies.

The public child support program provides critical financial support for single parents and their children, offering free or low-cost services such as locating the other parent, genetic testing, and enforcing orders. However, the process can be complex and may pose safety risks for DV survivors.

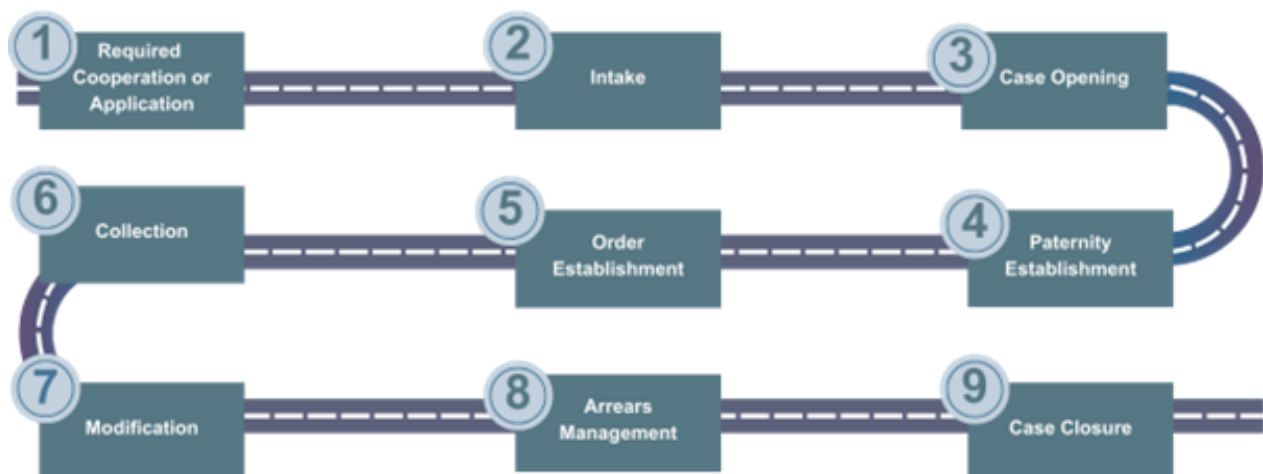
Because child support practices vary by state, tribe, or locality, this guide provides general information alongside trauma-informed approaches, risk reduction strategies, and collaboration tips. Survivors can share safety concerns with child support staff at any point.

Additional training and jurisdiction-specific materials are recommended. Survivors navigating the private child support system may face different processes.

Learn More

- Visit the federal Office of Child Support Services website for an [overview of child support](#), [glossary](#), and [local office contacts](#).
- Explore the [SAVES Center's](#) e-learning course, [Child Support 101: Building a Framework for Domestic Violence Advocates](#), designed to help DV advocates support survivors navigating the child support system.

The Child Support Process



Overview of the Stage	How Advocates can Support Survivors
Stage 1: Required Cooperation or Application	
<p>The public child support process is initiated in two general ways. Parents who participate in some public assistance programs (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Medicaid, and in some jurisdictions, child care assistance and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)), are automatically referred to and required to participate in the child support program. This is known as a cooperation requirement. Its purpose is to identify and locate the noncustodial parent (NCP), establish a child support order, obtain payments, and in most jurisdictions, reimburse the government for public assistance benefits paid to the family. If cooperating with child support might place the custodial parent (CP) or child in danger, the CP can file a request for a good cause exemption.</p> <p>Parents can apply for child support services through a child support office. For CPs that are not required to cooperate with child support through a public assistance program, and voluntarily apply for services, there may be an application fee dependent on the jurisdiction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with agency partners to identify which public assistance programs in your jurisdiction require cooperation with child support • Clarify which agency is responsible for enforcing cooperation and what the process typically involves • Make sure survivors are aware of potential consequences (often referred to as sanctions), such as public assistance benefit loss, if they are unable to cooperate • Let survivors know they may be eligible for a good cause exemption from cooperation if doing so could cause physical or emotional harm to themselves or their child(ren) • Support survivors in understanding the process of requesting a good cause exemption in your jurisdiction, including what documentation may be needed and when personal statements may be accepted • If good cause was not requested or was denied, child support staff may be able to close a case as an “inappropriate referral” from the public assistance program if safety concerns are present; collaborate with survivors to raise these concerns and request closure when needed • Ensure survivors are informed about any application fees or related costs and explore available waivers or assistance when needed
Stage 2: Intake	
<p>The child support intake process involves completing an application and providing information about both the CP’s and NCP’s identity, address, employment, earnings and other financial information. In some jurisdictions, applications also include information on safety and ask about any history of violence. If the survivor has been certified through their jurisdiction’s address confidentiality program, they should provide this address.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge that completing the child support application — and sharing information about the abuser — can be emotionally difficult; survivors may need time, support, or reassurance during this process • Advise survivors to take precautions and ensure that any paper or digital application materials are stored or submitted safely to reduce the risk of discovery by the abuser • In some jurisdictions, child support staff may be mandated reporters, meaning that they are legally required to report suspected child abuse and neglect to the local child welfare agency; survivors should be aware of this ahead of time so they can make informed decisions about what to share • Revisit the survivor’s safety plan together, especially when entering new stages of the child support process that could create safety concerns • If the survivor has an order of protection, help them safely and confidentially share that information with child support staff to enhance their safety planning
Stage 3: Case Opening	
<p>When a child support case is opened, the NCP will be notified by mail or a legal process server that they have been named as the NCP and may be liable for child support. The NCP will be asked to appear at a court hearing or meeting at the child support office to establish a child support order and asked to bring relevant documents pertaining to employment, earnings, and expenses. The child support worker may also need to gather additional information from both parents.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help survivors prepare for the possibility that case notifications — such as hearing dates or requests for information — might create safety concerns; develop or update a safety plan accordingly • Support survivors in requesting that a Family Violence Indicator (FVI) be added to their case, if the agency has not done so already, to alert child support staff to a safety concern and prevent disclosure of the survivor’s address on child support notices and clarify whether those protections extend to court communications

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Stage 4: Paternity Establishment <p>If parents are unmarried, paternity (or legal fatherhood), will need to be established. This is frequently done by both parents voluntarily signing a form at the hospital when the child is born. If parents do not agree, paternity can be established through genetic testing followed by signing administrative forms or a contested court hearing. Each method used to establish paternity may involve CP and NCP contact.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inform survivors that signing the acknowledgment of paternity form is completely voluntary and ensure they feel no pressure to do so • Discuss the safety options available for each method of establishing paternity, such as scheduling separate times and locations for genetic testing • If a court appearance is required, explore available safety accommodations — like remote hearings or courthouse escorts — and help survivors access them and develop or update a safety plan accordingly
Stage 5: Order Establishment <p>Child support orders are based on a statewide or tribe-specific formula. Both parents must provide information on their income and expenses. They must also provide information on any health insurance options that might be available to their child through their employer. Establishing a child support order may require both parents to attend a court hearing and/or an agency-based negotiation. In most jurisdictions, establishing a parenting time order is separate from the child support order establishment process for never-married parents and those interested in parenting time will be told to file a separate motion in a family court. Divorcing parents will get custody and parenting time addressed along with child support in their divorce decree.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand that the child support order establishment process can feel upsetting for both CPs and NCPs — for example, they may view the statewide formula as impersonal, they may view the order amount as too high or too low, and/or they may have safety concerns about the order establishment process • It is important to know that court documents and medical support orders may contain the CP's and/or child's contact information • Help survivors understand that in most jurisdictions, the number of days or overnights the NCP spends with the child may be used to reduce the child support order, but that credit is only available for those who have joint physical custody orders or agreed-upon, written parenting time plans which are generally not available for unmarried parents who only pursue child support services • Be prepared to explain that child support staff do not address visitation issues, and that parents must go through a separate court process • Clarify if time the child spends with each parent is used in calculating the child support order and if so, explore options for third party documentation to be required for parenting time credit • If parenting time orders may be included during child support establishment, connect survivors with available legal services and resources for parenting time assistance as parenting time can be used as a control mechanism by the abuser • If court actions are necessary to establish a child support order and the CP and NCP may be required to appear together, work with survivors and court staff to identify and request available safety measures for court appearances, including options for virtual participation, separate waiting areas, or courthouse escorts; develop or update a safety plan accordingly
Stage 6: Collection <p>Child support payments are usually made through automatic wage withholding by the NCP's employer. When child support is not paid for a legally designated period of time, the child support agency can implement various enforcement actions against the NCP such as suspending driver's licenses and attaching federal income tax refunds. In many jurisdictions, these enforcement actions occur automatically once non-payment reaches certain thresholds. In other jurisdictions, enforcement actions are initiated by child support workers. Nonpayment can also lead to contempt actions and in some jurisdictions, incarceration.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let survivors know that payments are often automatically withheld from the NCP's paycheck and deposited directly into the CP's account; while this reduces contact, it may still lead to safety concerns— safety planning can help manage these concerns • Enforcement actions may occur automatically when a non-payment threshold has been reached and CPs are usually not consulted; the survivor may require some help with safety planning around enforcement actions • If a court appearance is required due to enforcement, help survivors access available safety accommodations such as remote hearings, separate entrances, or courthouse escorts; develop or update a safety plan accordingly

Overview of the Stage	How Advocates can Support Survivors
Stage 7: Modification	
Child support orders are not automatically adjusted to reflect changes in employment, earnings, and needs. The child support agency must review the order every three years, and parents may also request a review when financial or other parenting changes occur. These reviews may lead to the upward or downward modification of the order as well as a decision not to change the order.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let survivors know that modification review, which involves sharing financial or parenting information, can sometimes create safety concerns; help them prepare an updated safety plan • If a joint meeting or court appearance is required, be aware of the available safety protections and work with survivors to identify and access safety accommodations such as remote participation or secure courthouse navigation options; develop or update a safety plan accordingly
Stage 8: Arrears Management	
Unpaid child support accumulates arrears (child support debt). Many jurisdictions charge interest on arrears and some also charge penalties. As a result, arrears balances grow quickly over time. Child support agencies can forgive some debt if the money is owed to the jurisdiction for public assistance benefits previously paid to the family. Some jurisdictions have programs to forgive arrears owed to the jurisdiction if it was accumulated when the NCP was incarcerated, unemployed, disabled, or at the discretion of the child support worker. Debt that is owed to the CP can only be forgiven if the CP agrees to do so.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain that CPs are not consulted or involved in programs that forgive NCP arrears that are owed to the jurisdiction for past public assistance paid to the family • Explain that the CP would have to initiate a request to the child support agency to forgive arrears that are owed to the CP • Help survivors recognize signs of pressure or coercion around arrears forgiveness; in some jurisdictions, the child support program may require demonstration of a “good faith” measure such as a year or more of complete payment of current support to the CP • When arrears forgiveness involves a court appearance, assist survivors in accessing safety measures such as remote hearings, safe waiting spaces, or courthouse escorts; develop or update a safety plan accordingly
Stage 9: Case Closure	
CPs who are not required to cooperate with child support can request that their case be closed at any time. Additionally, CPs that are required to cooperate may request closure when they stop receiving benefits from the public assistance program that has a child support cooperation requirement. Child support workers can close cases for a variety of reasons including safety concerns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain that CPs who are not required to cooperate with child support may request case closure at any time; cases that are closed can later be reopened • Clarify that for CPs receiving public benefits that require cooperation with child support, it may be possible to request case closure due to safety concerns

Final Note

This document is a general resource and should be supplemented with training and information on local procedures, state or tribal law, and available support. Effective use depends on shared responsibility among child support programs, courts, and advocates to keep survivors safe.



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Child Support Services
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