

WV Birth to Three Personal Safety Guidelines

(Adapted from the First Steps Personal Safety Guidelines, Solutions Consulting Group LLC, 2002)

The home visit has never been, nor ever will be, a totally controlled situation. With the increase in street crime, gang activity and drug use in some communities, it is important for practitioners to be aware of how to protect your personal safety. Planning ahead and being prepared for difficult situations can decrease your risk. The responsibility for personal safety rests with the individual practitioner making safe choices before, during and after the home visit. The decision to initiate and/or continue a home visit/community visit is up to the practitioner. The following guidelines are designed to assist each practitioner in making an informed decision, thereby decreasing threat to personal safety.

Guidelines for Home Visiting

- Keep an appointment calendar at your agency/home office listing which families you plan to visit and stick to the order. If you work from a home office, be sure that someone knows where you have secured your schedule (including addresses for appointments) so they can access it in an emergency. (This is the only time your appointment calendar is to be shared with your agency/home office.)
- Let your agency/home office know when you leave and when you plan to return. If you plan to go home after your last visit, call your agency when you finish.
- If you have a major change in your itinerary during the day, let your agency/home office know that you are changing your schedule and when to expect you to arrive at the end of the day.
- Inform your agency or home office, that if at anytime you do not arrive back at the designated time, to call the police and provide your itinerary for the day.
- Know your neighborhoods. If you are unfamiliar with the address/neighborhood of the family's home, take time to learn about it. Identify the safest routes for getting there and back.
- Pinpoint ahead of time where you can seek help – for example, identify where the nearest fire station, police station, gas station, community buildings, apartment complex office are located. You may want to stop by and let them know that you make home visits in the area.
- Arrange your work schedule so new or questionable visits are early in the day. You will be less likely to find loiterers congregating on street corners, and you won't get stuck in a potentially unsafe neighborhood after dark.
- Check the visits you scheduled to be sure you have the address, phone number, driving directions, and correct time of appointment.
- Plan your visits in advance. If possible, call ahead and make sure that the family or other care giver agency is expecting you and understands the general purpose of your visit. Make sure to carry all supplies with you that you plan to use on the visit.
- The family is under no obligation to answer the door and let you in if you arrive unannounced.
- If you arrive and it appears that it is not a convenient time for your home visit, offer to reschedule the visit for another time.
- If using an elevator, always send it to the basement before getting on so you don't end up with a stranger in a deserted basement. Stand next to the control panel and push all floors if you feel you need more chances to escape.
- Trust your instincts about people waiting to get on the elevator with you, or a person already on the elevator. Wait for another elevator if you need to. If someone suspicious gets on with you, get off as soon as possible.
- Lock or conceal your purse in the trunk of your car before leaving the office. Take only the items necessary to do your job. Select activities, materials, brochures, etc that you will need each day and arrange them to fit in a briefcase or tote bag.

- Carry a cell phone on your person and have emergency numbers programmed for quick reference.
- Wear sensible and appropriate clothes and shoes.
- Avoid wearing expensive jewelry. Don't wear scarves or jewelry around your neck. Carry a minimal amount of cash. Have change for a pay phone.
- Carry two sets of car keys. One set to use and one set to have in reserve and hidden in your briefcase or tote bag.

Guidelines for Use of a Car

- Keep your car in good repair. Know who to call if it should break down.
- Try to keep your gas tank at least half full.
- Carry emergency flat tire repair kit or spare tire with you.
- Keep a flashlight in your car.
- Always wear your seatbelt.
- Always lock your car. Drive with car doors locked and windows rolled up.
- Carry your keys in your hand when leaving the office or from home visit to car.
- Keep a map of local communities in your car for confirmation of directions. You can download or purchase county maps at www.wvdot.com.

Guidelines for Neighborhood Surveillance

While in your car:

- Pay attention to what's happening around you. Drive around the area and/or block where the family lives observing potential hiding places (e.g. bushes, fences, etc.)
- Avoid groups of people who appear to be loitering, drinking, fighting, etc.
- Pay attention to signs like "No Trespassing", "Beware of Dog"; they may be an indicator of the attitude of the resident toward strangers.
- Signs in windows like "Neighborhood Watch", "Safe House" are indicators that others in the community have an increased awareness of crime in the neighborhood.
- In situations where you are not sure of the neighborhood or the home situation, you may want to call your office before entering the home, and request a return call within 15 minutes. Have an agreed upon code word that you will use if you are in a dangerous situation. Your office would call the police if you use this code word.

Parking and Leaving the Car

- Choose a parking place that is in the open and near a light source that offers the safest walking route to the dwelling.
- It is always better to park on the street than in a driveway or alley so there is no danger of being blocked in when you want to leave.
- Do not block anyone's parking space.
- Back your car into driveways. Park in the direction you want to go when you leave.
- Beware of dead-end streets.
- Do not leave anything of value inside your car. Always lock your car. Do not open your trunk prior to going inside the family's house. Onlookers may be tempted by the contents.
- Be cautious of animals: dogs, geese, etc even if they appear to be restrained in some manner. Attract the attention of the homeowner if animals might be loose and/or pose a threat to your safety.
- Watch for rubble and broken glass when you park to avoid chances of getting a flat tire.

Approaching the Residence

- Maintain a self-confident, self-assured posture and attitude.
- Whenever possible, keep to the middle of the sidewalk and avoid dark alleyways, groups of loiterers.
- If a group is blocking the doorway to the family's dwelling, look for another entrance. If there is not another entrance and the group seems hostile, walk away and reschedule your visit.
- If you are verbally confronted, maintain a professional manner. Repeat your response directly and don't attempt to answer verbal challenges.
- Pause at the door before knocking and listen. If you hear loud quarreling, sounds of fighting, or some other disturbance, leave immediately.
- Knock at the door, identify yourself and your role, and use the family's name. Do not stand in front of the door when you knock or while waiting for someone to come to the door.
- Do not enter a home unless there is an adult present. If a child answers the door, tell the child to get their mother. If their mother or another adult caregiver is not in the home, you will then have to decide if Child Protective Services needs to be called.
- TRUST YOUR GUT. Do not enter homes when you suspect that an unsafe situation exists. Leave immediately if you ever feel yourself to be in danger. Always remember you are a guest in the family's home.

While in the Home

- Be courteous and professional when introducing yourself to the family. Tell them your name, the agency/home office you represent, and why you are there. Give them your business card and show, if necessary, official identification.
- Every home visit is an opportunity to create and build rapport, trust and partnership. Each home visit should be organized to respect the needs of the individual child/family.
- Ask permission to be seated. Try to sit in a hard chair if possible to avoid wet stuffed chairs and insect infestations. Try to sit with your back towards a wall and such that you will not be blocked from the nearest door. Be aware of exits from the home.
- Ask permission to hold or handle a child before doing so; explain what you are doing so that the family member understands. Use the opportunity to model activities, but encourage the family member to participate in the visit.
- Use the same principle inside the dwelling that you used outside. Don't assume a house animal won't bite.
- Be alert to signs of violence or sexual advances towards you, however subtle, from either a family member or other persons in the home.
- If you feel frightened or unsafe during a home visit, listen to your feelings, remain calm but leave as quickly as possible.
- Be aware of other people in the dwelling and traffic in and out of the house. If weapons are visible (guns and knives), you may choose to leave and conduct the visit at another place or time.
- Before going to another room in the house or using a phone or sink, always ask permission. Remember you are a guest in their home. If it is a dark area of the house, have the family go first and turn on the lights.
- At the end of the home visit, set goals and objectives for the visit, complete documentation with the family or other care giver and schedule your next visit.

Leaving the Residence

- When you have completed the home visit, thank the family or other care giver for allowing you to come into her home and visit
- Be aware of what is going on around you outside the dwelling and if things have changed. Do the activities affect you and your safety?
- Have your keys in your hand. Check inside and under your car before you get in.
- If someone is leaning up against your car or tampering with your car, return to the home and call for help.
- Get into your car quickly and lock the doors.
- Watch for small animals and children playing around or under your car before driving away.
- Watch for cars following when you leave. NEVER stop if someone tries to stop you or indicates you should pull over. Proceed to a well-lighted business or the nearest police or fire station for assistance.

If You Are In a Tight Situation

- Respond calmly and relaxed, as a confident 'helper'.
- Make sure you explain your role clearly, since some angry situations may be due to confusion about your role/intentions.
- Try not to show any facial expression. Do not show fear.
- Control your breathing. Speak slowly and lower the pitch of your voice.
- Maintain eye contact, but do not try to stare anyone down.
- Don't challenge, but don't tolerate nonsense or crazy behavior, rudeness, or name calling.
- Keep your statements matter-of-fact, simple and direct. Don't appear bossy, demanding, threatening, lecturing, accusing or brusque.
- Keep a physical distance of at least three feet. Don't reach out to touch the person, don't stand in front of him/her, and don't turn your back to the person.
- Check your watch; say you need to call your office because they are waiting for you to check in.
- Repeat why you are there.
- Stand up without quick or threatening movement and leave the house.
- If you are in trouble, attract help any way you can. Scream or blow your car horn.
- Call 9-1-1 or police and tell them the type of incident, time of occurrence and location.

Conclusion

Make sure someone always knows where you are. Rehearse ahead of time what you would do or say in an unsafe situation. Be as aware as possible of actions you can take to reduce your risks. If you have a situation where you feel you cannot make a safe home visit, request that the team make arrangements to provide services in a safe location. Remember, if the location is unsafe for home visits, as a mandatory reporter, you should make a report to Child Protective Services. For questions, please contact your Regional Technical Assistance Specialist, or someone else in the WV Birth to Three State office.