PRACTICE RESOURCE

Documenting Violence: A Practice Guide for Caseworkers

Use this resource to document violence clearly, recognise survivors' resistance and protective actions, and keep responsibility with the person using violence.

CORE PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

Be accurate about the violence, visible about resistance, and clear about responsibility.

Write clear, dignified records that support safety and accountability.

CENTRAL TABLELANDS AND BLUE MOUNTAINS Community Legal Centre

Version 1 November 2026

BEFORE YOU WRITE

Gather the context

Avoid the “shopping list”

Not “DV included assaults, verbal abuse, financial abuse and isolation.” Establish who did what to whom, when, how often, in what circumstances, and whether the conduct forms a pattern.

Document behaviour and impact

Record specific actions, their effects on the survivor and children, and the survivor’s resistance and protective actions.

Look for the missing piece

If conduct appears confusing or contradictory, explore the context before interpreting or labelling it.

Map patterns, not only incidents

Consider how behaviours interact over time to create control, fear, entrapment or harm.

Identify excluding conduct

Record actions that isolate, ostracise, marginalise or restrict access to family, community, culture, services or resources.

Identify factors that may elevate risk

Consider mental ill-health, substance use, separation and other relevant circumstances, without treating them as causes or excuses for violence.

Articulate vulnerabilities and barriers

Record relevant vulnerabilities while avoiding labels that reduce the survivor to those vulnerabilities.

Move beyond chronology

A timeline may support accuracy, but the final account should explain patterns, context, impact, resistance and responsibility.

BEFORE YOU WRITE

Consider the whole picture

Document how culture, identity, disability and structural conditions shape the person's experience, options, risks and protective actions. Avoid stereotypes and do not treat these circumstances as causes of violence.

Ask what support is safe, accessible and acceptable to the person. Record relevant barriers, strengths, community connections and protective factors without reducing the person to a cultural identity, diagnosis, visa status or disadvantage.

Cultural identity and community

Kinship, community connections and access to culturally safe support, including First Nations community-controlled services.

Disability and accessibility

Communication or accessibility needs, and any reliance on the person using violence for care, mobility, medication, communication or finances.

Migration and visa status

Threats involving sponsorship or deportation, and access to translated information and independent migration advice.

Sexuality and gender identity

Relationship context, including threats of outing, discrimination or isolation affecting LGBTQIA+ people.

Structural barriers

Financial hardship, housing insecurity, transport barriers, geographic isolation and limited local services.

Interpreters

A qualified, independent interpreter is required where needed. Do not use children, relatives, friends or the person using violence as interpreters.

BEGINNING TO WRITE

Describe actions

Do not mutualise violence

Avoid “domestic violence relationship”, “parental conflict”, “toxic relationship”, “poor communication” or “the family has a history of violence.” These imply shared responsibility and obscure patterns of coercion and control.

Record instead

Who did what to whom? What words, actions, threats or omissions were involved? When and how often? Is it part of a pattern? What was the impact on the survivor, children and family functioning? What did the survivor and children do in response?

INSTEAD OF

“There was domestic violence in the relationship.”

BE SPECIFIC ABOUT WHAT HAS OCCURRED

“The father repeatedly monitored the mother’s phone, restricted her access to money and threatened to take the children if she left. She concealed emergency funds and arranged a safety plan with the school.”

Map the pattern

Ask how the pattern has constrained the survivor’s choices and affected daily life. Do not limit assessment to the worst or most recent event. Explore how behaviours operate together over time. Consider:

- coercion, intimidation and threats
- physical and sexualised violence
- financial, technological, emotional and spiritual abuse
- isolation and excluding conduct
- interference with parenting, work, study, health care or relationships
- use of children, services or legal processes as tools of control
- escalation during pregnancy, separation or court proceedings

Resistance and parenting

Honour resistance and protective actions

Survivors always respond to violence, although their actions may be subtle or misunderstood. Do not describe a response as “failure to protect”, “non-engagement” or “alienation.”

Ask

- What did you do when that happened?
- How did you try to reduce the harm or keep yourself and the children safe?
- What were you most concerned might happen?
- How did you protect the children or preserve their routines?
- What made other options unsafe or unavailable?
- What would someone need to understand for your actions to make sense?

Assess the person using violence as a parent

Using violence against a parent is a parenting choice. Examine how the behaviour of the person causing harm’s affects:

- the children’s safety, development and wellbeing;
- the survivor’s parenting capacity;
- household stability and routines;
- the children’s relationships with family, community and culture;
- the practical and emotional parenting load;
- the ability to co-parent safely.

Keep expectations high

Record accountability through sustained behaviour, not merely promises, program attendance or professional compliance. Ask whether the person names their behaviour without minimising or blaming; understands its impact; respects boundaries and court orders; demonstrates sustained change; and supports the survivor’s parenting and the children’s recovery.

BEGINNING TO WRITE

Ask sensitively about sexual violence

Prepare the person, obtain permission and allow silence.
“I need to ask a difficult question because it may affect your safety. Is it okay to continue?”

“Have you ever felt pressured, frightened or forced into sexual activity you did not want?”
OR
“I am going to explain the definition of sexual coercion/ violence/ what could be considered sexual assault legally, you do not have to disclose anything to me if you are not comfortable, I am explaining this is so you understand your options for victims services, and for options in reporting.”

Be prepared for the response.

Do not assume that the absence of physical resistance or an explicit “no” means consent.

Explain confidentiality and its limits.

Respond without judgment.

Follow the survivor’s pace.

Write for clarity and dignity

- Use active voice: “He struck her”, not “she was assaulted”.
- Attribute each behaviour to the person responsible.
- Use direct quotations where helpful.
- Record dates and frequency where possible, recognising trauma may affect chronological recall.
- Avoid labels such as *hysterical, manipulative, emotionally detached, uncooperative* or *colluding with the violent father*.
- Record cultural context, structural barriers, strengths and protective factors.
- Never treat mental ill-health, substance use or unemployment as causes or excuses for violence.

Make clear how each piece of information is known

Observed	What the worker directly saw or heard.
Reported	What the survivor, child or another person said. Identify the source and use direct quotations where helpful.
Corroborated	Information supported by another record or source. Name the source and state what it confirms.
Assessed	The worker’s professional interpretation. Explain the facts, observations and reasoning on which it is based.
Unknown or disputed	Information not established, or about which accounts differ. Record each account accurately without treating disagreement as proof that one person is unreliable.

Describe uncertainty precisely and neutrally

Record what the person could and could not recall. Avoid credibility labels or assumptions about why details are uncertain.

INSTEAD OF

“She was inconsistent about when it happened.”

WRITE

“She reported that the incident occurred in early 2026 but could not recall the exact date. She associated it with the period shortly after the family moved house.”

EVIDENCE AND REVIEW

Quick documentation check

- Have I identified who did what to whom?
- Have I documented a pattern rather than only incidents?
- Have I described the impact on the survivor, children and family functioning?
- Have I recorded resistance, strengths and protective actions?
- Have I explained the context of behaviour that could be misinterpreted?
- Have I assessed the person using violence's parenting choices and accountability?
- Have I avoided mutualising, passive, euphemistic and victim-blaming language?
- Would the survivor recognise this as a fair and dignified account?
- Is the record specific enough to support safety planning and informed decisions?

Useful formula

Person responsible + specific behaviour + pattern/context + impact + survivor's resistance or protective response.

Avoiding mutualisation

AVOID	PREFER	EXAMPLE
There was DV during the relationship.	[Source] reported that [person] used a pattern of [specific behaviours] against [person] during [period], resulting in [specific impacts].	Leila reported that Sam checked her phone daily and withheld her bank card over three months. She said she could not pay for transport and began keeping emergency funds with a friend.
She was in an abusive relationship.	[Person] reportedly used [specific behaviours] against her. She responded by [resistance or protective actions].	Jo reported that Alex stood across the doorway when Jo tried to leave, saying, "If you go outside, I'll hurt you." Jo said they went quiet and did what Alex asked to reduce escalation.
The parties have a dysfunctional or toxic relationship.	[Person] used a pattern of [specific behaviours] towards [person], affecting [safety, choices or daily functioning].	Morgan reported that Taylor hid the car keys and threatened to harm her dog when she planned to attend family and community cultural events.
Mutual combat.	[Person A] used [behaviour]. [Person B] responded by [action]. Record context, purpose, power dynamics and consequences.	Nina reported that Lee grabbed her wrist and blocked the exit. She pushed Lee's arm away to free her wrist and leave the room.
She has a history of abuse.	[Source] reported that [person] used [specific behaviours] against her on [dates or over period]. This affected her by [impact].	Eva reported that Chris slapped her face and pushed her against a wall on two occasions. She described pain and stopped attending evening classes.
History of control and emotional manipulation.	Over [period], [person] reportedly used [specific controlling behaviours], restricting her [choices, relationships, finances, movements or parenting].	Priya reported that Jordan hid the car keys when she had arranged medical appointments and told the children, "Your mum doesn't know what she's doing."
She suffered physical and psychological DV.	[Person] reportedly [specific physical act] and repeatedly [specific coercive behaviour] against her, causing [impact].	Sofia reported that Pat pushed her into a door and sent daily threatening messages. She described shoulder pain and fear of leaving home.

Use the examples above to replace vague, passive or mutualising statements with specific, contextualised descriptions.

Note: Use these as templates only.

Use verified facts; do not infer details.

Specific, contextualised descriptions

AVOID	PREFER	EXAMPLE
Child impacted by DV.	[Source] reported that [person] used [behaviour] against [parent or child]. The child [saw, heard or experienced] this and responded by [action].	Leila reported that Sam shouted threats while Mia was beside her. Mia covered her ears and later had difficulty sleeping.
Parental alienation.	The child reportedly expressed reluctance to have contact in the context of [experiences]. [Parent] responded by [specific protective action].	Mia said, "I don't want Dad to shout at me again." Leila reported seeking advice and requesting supervised visits.
There was a failure to protect the children.	[Person] used violence that endangered the children and constrained the other parent's protective options. She attempted to protect them by [actions] while facing [barriers or threats].	Sam threw a chair near the children and threatened to hurt Leila if she took them outside. She moved them behind a closed bedroom door.
Parental conflict.	[Person] used [specific conduct] towards the other parent. The other parent responded by [resistance or protective action].	Priya reported that Jordan told the children speaking her first language was "wrong" and contradicted her cultural teaching.
Poor parental communication.	[Person] repeatedly [specific communication behaviour], interfering with [decisions, routines or safe parenting].	Chris sent repeated abusive messages when Eva asked about medication. Eva contacted the treating clinician directly for instructions.
High-conflict parent dispute.	[Person] used [threats, harassment, intimidation or legal processes] to [control or pressure] the other parent, affecting [safety, parenting or children].	Taylor threatened to collect the child from school unless Morgan withdrew a request for supervised contact. Morgan sought legal advice and informed the school.
She allowed contact despite the risk.	She agreed to [contact arrangement] after [person] reportedly threatened [consequence]. She reduced risk by [protective action].	Leila agreed to a handover after Sam threatened to come to her home. She requested a public location and brought a trusted adult.
The child refused contact.	The child expressed [words or behaviour] about contact in the context of [experiences].	Mia became distressed before visits and said, "I don't want Dad to shout at me again."

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND CONSENT

Ask sensitively and record precisely

AVOID	PREFER	EXAMPLE
Victim of FDV and sexual assaults.	[Person] used [specific family-violence behaviours] and sexually assaulted [person]. She responded by [action], and impacts included [effects].	Aisha reported that Karim pressured her for sex, threatened to disclose private information and pushed her onto the bed. She said she did not freely consent.
She did not resist or say no.	She reported feeling [pressured, frightened or forced] and did not freely and voluntarily consent. Record specific conduct and circumstances without inferring details.	Explain consent and confidentiality, allow silence, respond without judgment and follow the survivor's pace. Absence of physical resistance or an explicit "no" does not establish consent.

RESISTANCE AND PROTECTIVE ACTIONS

Make the context visible

AVOID	PREFER	EXAMPLE
She was non-engaging.	She [specific action or non-action] in the context of [threat, constraint or previous harm]. She reported that this was intended to [reduce harm, avoid escalation or preserve safety].	Rosa delayed calls because Daniel checked her phone and threatened her. She requested calls during work breaks so support could continue safely.
She was uncooperative.	She declined or delayed [specific action] because [reported concern or barrier]. She instead [protective or alternative action].	Jo declined a home visit because Alex had threatened visitors. Jo requested an appointment at the service and arranged transport with a friend.
She kept returning to the relationship.	She returned on [occasion or over period] while facing [threats, financial constraints, housing barriers or concerns for children]. She continued to [protective actions].	Eva returned home because Chris threatened to collect the children and she had no alternative accommodation. She continued contacting a housing worker and kept documents with her sister.

EXAMPLE

Rosa reported delaying an appointment after Daniel threatened to follow her and confront the caseworker. She contacted the service from a safe phone, requested a different appointment time and arranged transport with a trusted relative. She said these actions were intended to avoid Daniel's behaviour escalating while maintaining contact with the service.

EXAMPLE

Leila reported that Sam drove at high speed with the children in the car and threatened to take them away if she contacted police. She said his threats made it unsafe to challenge him while the children were present. Leila instructed the children to fasten their seatbelts, kept them calm and contacted a trusted relative once safe.

This resource draws on:

- ‘Changing the Narrative: Language at the Heart of Justice and Healing’, by Arlia Fleming
- Resources from the Centre for Response-Based Practice and the Safe & Together Model.

Disclaimer and use

This guide provides general practice guidance only. It is not legal advice, clinical advice or a substitute for professional judgment, organisational policies, supervision, cultural consultation or relevant risk-assessment procedures. Adapt its use to each person’s circumstances and your local legal and practice requirements.

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Please acknowledge Arlia Fleming and the original resource when doing so. Improvements and feedback are welcomed. Please feel free to contact Arlia@ctbmclc.org.au.