

## Interviewing Collateral Contacts

Collateral contacts can include the referral source, other family members, professionals who have contact with the family or people in the community, whose contact with one of the members may have given them knowledge that would relate to the family assessment. Collateral contacts may be able to provide information such as identifying information -- full name, dates of birth/age, address, parents' names and social security numbers -- as well as information about family dynamics and relationships.

It is important to remember when interviewing extended family members that loyalties are often conflicted: they may wish to believe the child's story but feel it would be wrong to provide negative information about the parent. They also may want to focus on the fact that other family members are not "doing their part" to help the child or family.

Child welfare professionals can help families deal with these conflicted loyalties by:

- asking family members to focus on the safety of the child or children;
- letting family members know that the child welfare professional believes the child;
- urging family members to spend energy on helping family members rather than defending the family against outsiders; and
- being sensitive to family members who may be asked to help in ways that burden them financially or emotionally.

Family members can serve as valuable resources. They can provide corroborating information as well as providing concrete help, such as financial, emotional, or physical aid to the family. Family members might also be able to provide an informal or kinship care placement for the identified child and siblings if the non-offending parent cannot protect the child or children from abuse or retaliation.

Family members should also be made aware of any community resources which can be of help to them, especially if they are to provide care to the children. Special attention should be given to any religious beliefs, especially in regard to the selection of counselors. If possible, children should remain in their home school districts, to minimize the impact of the trauma, separation and placement. If the children are placed with a non-relative, every effort should be made to ensure that the child is able to attend family functions, have sibling visits, and maintain cultural and religious ties to their own community. Support should be given to caregivers, including transportation assistance and coordination of visits in the most home-like setting possible.

Referral sources and other community professionals are also important resources. For instance, school personnel, especially teachers and school nurses, are also excellent sources of corroborating information that can help you confirm or deny the allegation being considered. They may be able to offer information on children's behaviors; have insight into the child's relationship with his/her family members; or have observed medical or psychological conditions that might be associated with the current allegation.

Because of the information they are required to share, school personnel (as well as other community professionals) often feel uninformed. They often want to know more

## **Interviewing Collateral Contacts**

about the family than can be released due to confidentiality requirements of the laws. The child welfare professional should share information with the teacher or nurse up to the limits of the law and their own agency's policy. The child welfare professional should explain why more information cannot be shared and should also educate the referral source regarding the meaning of the various findings. It is important to emphasize to them that any information released cannot be shared with others.

The child welfare professional should also pursue having releases signed by the parent and/or child in order to be able to share needed information with collateral contacts, as it relates to the child's health, safety and treatment.