

MINIMUM STANDARDS PROTOCOL FOR THE INVESTIGATION OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

PROCESS CHECKLIST

Purpose:

Experience has shown throughout the state of California that multi-disciplinary and multi-agency responses to a specific population are improved and enhanced when the partners are cooperating. A written county protocol can help initiate such cooperation. There are several advantages to a *written* protocol for the investigation of child abuse and neglect. First, the very process of developing the written document builds cooperation and support among the key players. A written document formalizes what is already working well within a county or region and allows for a clear understanding of the practices and procedures agreed upon. A written protocol also survives the inevitable change in personnel in the key agencies affected by the protocol. Lastly, a written protocol facilitates training.

This checklist below is intended to be used in the effort to develop a protocol for a particular county or region. It is meant as an organizational tool and not a rigid plan. It anticipates five distinct phases – preparation, writing, adoption, training and revision. The five phases literally span years, not weeks or months. This is an effort worth an investment of time and resources for it directly speaks to the quality of child abuse investigations.

I. PREPARATION

A. Gathering and committing the protocol committee:

The core committee should consist of the following 'key' representatives : the district attorney's office, law enforcement agencies (the larger the role of a particular agency, the more crucial their role as a key partner), child protective services and the medical community. Representatives from many other entities such as schools, tribes, county counsel, and so on may serve as ad hoc members of the committee. The members of the key agencies should be prepared to commit to a 6 -12 month schedule of regular meetings. Consider inviting mid-level management to participate as key committee members - those with sufficient authority to speak for their agency and yet close enough to the front lines to know what is going on in the field.

Checklist:

- Key members identified and invited to the initial meeting.
- Ad hoc members identified who may participate at a later date.
- Team members have an opportunity to talk about their role and the preliminary goals they have for the protocol.
- Key members should assure that their agency leaders/supervisors have fully committed to the project (See Adopting section that follows)

B. Setting the meeting structure:

The committee should be strongly encouraged to adopt a regular once a week or twice a month meeting schedule. Anything less than once a week or twice a month and the group will likely lose momentum. All key members should commit to the schedule from the outset.

Checklist:

- Regular meeting time and location established.
- Location(s) reserved for a 6 -12 month period.

C. Setting goals:

Some committees might wish to try to delve right into the development of the protocol. Other groups may find it very helpful to spend the first several meetings reviewing the Minimum Standard Protocol (MSP), developing strategies to meet or exceed the minimum standards and identifying the barriers that have to be overcome in order for successful implementation of the protocol. Certainly, the protocol should strive for excellence and innovation in the area of child abuse investigation; however, the ideal must be able to be implemented by the resources available to the member agencies. On the other hand, the lack of resources is a real barrier to success; but it should not be an excuse for giving up on the goal to improve the delivery of services to children suspected of being abused or neglected. In fact, the protocol process is an excellent way to identify the barriers and commit to a multi-agency approach to overcoming them.

Checklist:

- MSP reviewed and discussed by the committee.
- Evaluation of current jurisdiction resources and responses in comparison to the MSP.
- Strategies developed for meeting or exceeding the minimum standards.
- Obstacles or barriers to successful implementation identified (e.g. sources of non-cooperation among agencies, lack of funding resources, clashes in agency goals.)
- Strategies developed to overcome the barriers (e.g. inter-agency MOU's, special court orders relating to juvenile court records, funding commitments secured, common educational needs identified)

D. Developing a Timeline:

Protocol development can be a lengthy process that gets bogged down quickly if there is no direction or focus. A timeline, deadlines or benchmarks can be helpful in keeping the work on track.

Checklist:

- A timeline for significant events (e.g. first draft due, revisions completed, final draft completed) is agreed upon by the key agencies and distributed to the group.

II. WRITING THE PROTOCOL

The actual writing of the protocol can be the responsibility of a single committee member who memorializes the discussions of the committee. Another approach is to assign various sections to different committee members. In either event, the entire committee should be given the opportunity to review and comment upon each of the sections. Ultimately, one committee member should act as editor with the job of coordinating and formatting the final protocol.

First draft - The first draft is just a starting point; the author should anticipate and welcome numerous revisions. Each committee member should feel ownership over the final document knowing he or she made contributions throughout. However, once the committee agrees on the content for a particular section, it is strongly encouraged that, unless there is a critical need, there are no more revisions. Otherwise, the committee could get mired in a cycle of endless “fine tuning” that slows progress on the larger project.

Checklist:

- Writing assignments are made.
- A primary editor is selected and assigned the job of coordinating and formatting the final protocol.
- A date is set for completion of the first draft.
- First drafts are reviewed by the committee, including ad hoc members as appropriate.
- Revisions are made, section by section, as needed after all agency review and comment.
- The final version is approved by the key committee members.
- The primary editor compiles the sections and formats the document.
- Final review of the final protocol by the key committee members and ad hoc members.

III. ADOPTING THE FINAL PROTOCOL

Successful implementation of the protocol depends on “buy in” from all the relevant agencies (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, Police Chief, etc) After all, the protocol is meant to be a blueprint for the way these agencies coordinate their multi-agency response to child abuse investigations within the county.

Checklist:

- Identify those agency leaders who need to officially endorse the protocol.
- Gather the necessary endorsements. (It is strongly recommended that a signature page be included at the end of the protocol where the head of each agency acknowledges his or her approval of and agreement with the protocol. Some counties arrange for a signing event that marks the official ratification of the protocol.
- Distribute copies of the protocol to all relevant agencies with an explanatory cover letter.

IV. TRAINING

The professionals on the front lines in law enforcement, prosecution, CPS, the schools, etc. need to be aware of the protocol in order to implement it. The protocol committee should take an active role in scheduling and even conducting the trainings. Otherwise all that good, hard work ends up in a document that sits on a shelf and makes no real impact on the quality of child abuse investigations. One time training is not enough; the training needs to be ongoing as line personnel at the various agencies cycle through the front lines. Quite frankly, this is the phase where many counties simply drop the ball because the continuing demands on time and energy are so great. Ongoing training is so critical that the protocol committee needs to develop a far reaching strategy for ensuring it happens.

Checklist:

- Identify key agency trainers early in the process.
- Develop two training presentations – one that is short (for executive summary and law enforcement line up trainings 10 – 15 minutes is recommended) and one that is longer for line staff who will be responsible for the implementation of the protocol.
- Work with each agency's in-house training structure to get training on the protocol incorporated into new employee and annual training curricula.
- Establish a training calendar that includes all relevant agencies.
- Keep a log of all trainings conducted.
- Review the training log to evaluate progress.
- Repeat the trainings on a regular schedule (e.g. every six months, annually)

V. UPDATING THE PROTOCOL

Within the first three years of the protocol's implementation the protocol should be evaluated to see what works and what does not. Are there new elements or considerations that need to be incorporated? A protocol committee needs to be assembled to write, adopt and train on a revised protocol.

Checklist:

- A protocol revision committee is constituted and commits to regular meetings.
- The protocol is evaluated and revisions are agreed upon.
- The revised protocol is endorsed and distributed.

March 7, 2011