



**Firearms Violence Prevention:
Some Key Questions to Consider Asking in Working with Families (Updated 2024)**

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Critical conversations with clients and litigants can make a difference in raising awareness of risks, providing safety planning guidance, and supporting compliance with court orders.

Context is critical, however: be aware that creating rapport with your client and avoiding bias around owning or not owning firearms can help improve the information you gather and the impact of the information you provide. You may consider providing some initial context: *"We ask about firearms because when families/people are in crisis/there has been violence, there is a greater risk for injury or even death. We can help reduce that risk by removing firearms, even temporarily."*

Consider asking: "Do you feel comfortable talking with me about whether there are firearms in your home (or whether your partner/other party has access to firearms)?"

Provide context about why you are talking about firearms: "Easy access to firearms when there is conflict or a crisis in the home or the family can increase risk. We're concerned about suicide, unintentional shootings, injuries, and other harm that can occur to family members and others. There are some key steps that can be taken to reduce risk, however."

"Sometimes the conflict can create a situation where youth/children/adults may be thinking about suicide, struggling with depression, or not being supervised/cared for in ways that if there are firearms in the home, they may hurt themselves or others, intentionally or accidentally."

"As part of safety planning, it is important to talk about access to firearms and to consider ways to reduce risk for yourself and others."

"When a protective or restraining order is issued, the person/you will not be permitted to have firearms. If you are concerned that they still do or are worried about how the firearms will be removed or turned in, let's talk about that and make a plan."

"Do you or people in your home own or have access to firearms?" [may be helpful here to learn more about why: work, sport, collector, self-protection, etc.]

As part of domestic violence, suicide risks, and related safety concern screenings: "Are you afraid the other person might harm you, themselves, or others with a firearm?"

"Sometimes people don't threaten to harm others with a gun but knowing it is there can make you afraid. Does that happen in your relationship/family/situation?"

"Has the other party ever used a firearm against or pointed a firearm at you, a family member or friend, or threatened you/someone else with a firearm? Is that something that has occurred in your family? If yes, how, when, and where did it happen? What if anything happened as a result?"

"Has the other person done anything or said anything that leads you to believe/fear that they might use a firearm in an assault on you? If yes, what was done or said?"

"Has the other party (or you) ever threatened suicide? If yes, when, and where did it happen?"

"Has the other person ever spoken about imagining using a firearm to kill you or a family member? If yes, what was said?"

Be aware there may be concerns about the legality of the firearms (for example, if they are privately made/unregistered/lacking serial numbers) and be prepared to provide some context about why you are asking these types of questions: "Is the firearm (are the firearms) registered in you or the other person's name? If not, who owns the firearm(s)? Did you or a family member purchase, transfer, or give any of the firearms to the other person?"

Provide information about safe storage to reduce risk and consider asking: "Do you have information on safely storing firearms or Are firearms you or the other person own stored safely?" OR, "Where do you/other party store the firearms (i.e., gun safe, vehicle, closet, hidden, work, car, carries concealed on person)? Who has access to this location?"

There may already be prohibitions in place; for safety planning it can be helpful to explore these issues: "Do you know if you or the other person is restricted from having firearms? Has law enforcement ever removed a firearm from you or the other person before?" If yes, under what circumstances? How did they react? "Do you need information on how you can comply with a prohibition on not having firearms?"

There may be opportunities to explore access to firearms when talking about occupations and to share info about risks: "Do you or the other person need a firearm to do their job and does that concern you?"

Additional discussions around domestic violence for safety planning can help with coordination of related cases: "Has the other person ever been convicted of against you or another person?" If yes, you may want to gather more info on the status of any prohibition or sentence.

Criminal legal system involvement may be hard to talk about for some cases but can provide helpful information and opportunities for support: "Is the other person currently on probation? If yes, does their condition of release prohibit the possession of firearms?"

Some Harm Reduction Options

- Guns that remain in the home should be safely and appropriately stored.
- People can volunteer to have their firearms held by someone allowed to have the firearms (follow laws for transfer/storage), a law enforcement agency or a dealer.
- Under federal and many state laws, domestic violence restraining orders include prohibitions on firearms ownership or purchase. There are other civil orders that might be helpful, too. Learn about remedies to identify the best approach.
- Sometimes an extreme risk protection order may be appropriate when there is no concern about abuse or need for protection; they focus solely on removing firearms and ammunition and prohibiting someone from having guns and ammunition. They do not protect a specific individual from someone else the way domestic violence orders do but may be used to help with gun removal and to prevent future purchases.
- Sometimes there may be restrictions on someone having guns because they were in a mental health facility but this isn't true in all cases.