



## **Guidance for ADR Practitioners**

Dear Colleague,

I am writing this letter to colleagues working in the alternative dispute resolution (ADR) field who are interested in learning more about the use of court-based ADR processes for cases involving children when there is a history of domestic violence between the parents.

As an experienced mediator, I have been working in the dispute resolution field for the past 19 years. The majority of my career has focused on helping parents and families in conflict. Currently, I work for the Circuit Court of Cook County, Domestic Violence Division, as the child relief expediter. The Expediter program was established as a part of the Family Court Enhancement Project (FCEP), a federally-funded grant by the Office on Violence against Women. The purpose of FCEP was to improve how court systems address child-related relief in cases with domestic violence. In my current role, I facilitate an ADR process for parents with orders of protection who, on a voluntary basis, want to work on issues regarding their children. This may include decision making, parenting time, exchange of the children, communication, financial support, and other child-related concerns. I do not negotiate whether there will be an order of protection; my focus is solely the child-related relief addressed in the order of protection.

As an ADR professional with many years of experience, I have received various levels of training in domestic violence. I have always incorporated a thorough screening process to determine if mediation is appropriate and to see if adjustments to the process are needed to address safety concerns. However, my involvement in FCEP has taken my skill set to a new level. My understanding of domestic violence, and the impact it has on parents and children, has increased dramatically, as has my knowledge of the risks and benefits of using ADR processes when domestic violence is present. My screening process has changed, my reality testing skills have improved, my approach to shuttle negotiation is different, and I believe my clients are now walking out of the courthouse with safer parenting arrangements as a result of FCEP activities.

I attribute a great deal of my professional development during FCEP to the training I received on the SAFeR Approach, developed by the Battered Women's Justice Project (BWJP) and their national partners. By incorporating SAFeR into my mediation practice, I can better identify when domestic violence is present, better understand the nature and context of the abuse, work with parents to understand the effects and implications of the abuse, and ultimately help parents craft safer parenting plans that take these concerns into account. I believe that, as ADR professionals, we have the responsibility to improve how we handle cases with domestic violence, and SAFeR is a great place to start. To learn more about BWJP, the SAFeR Approach, and domestic violence-informed decision making, please visit [www.bwjp.org](http://www.bwjp.org).

It is incredibly important that we share our lessons learned through FCEP with other ADR professionals working with families in conflict. If you are interested in learning more about the work we did in Cook County, or would like to discuss best practices regarding the use of ADR processes on cases with DV, please contact me at [stephanie.senuta@cookcountyl.gov](mailto:stephanie.senuta@cookcountyl.gov) or at 312.325.9097. I look forward to continuing to learn from one another.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Senuta  
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