
Appendix 4 New Relationships: A Guide for Caregivers and Practitioners

One of the highest-risk moments for a child's safety is when their protective caregiver enters a new relationship. This is not because new relationships are inherently unsafe, but because they can temporarily reduce protective capacity at exactly the time it needs to remain high.

This guidance applies whether the caregiver is currently in a new relationship, is considering one, or is likely to be in the future. It belongs in Domain 1 (Internal Capacity) and should be introduced in or after Session 3A (Healthy Relationships).

Lohmann et al., 2023; Shaughnessy et al., 2023.

Why new relationships create risk in this context

Risk mechanism	What it looks like	Practitioner action
Repetition of relational patterns	Caregivers who have had abusive or coercive relationships are statistically more likely, without intervention, to enter similar dynamics again. The same relational patterns that made the caregiver vulnerable to the original POC can operate again. CASP-R Domain 1 directly addresses this, but the risk remains, particularly in the period immediately after separation.	Explore in Session 3A and 3B. Revisit the caregiver's relationship goals worksheet (4B). Ask explicitly: 'If you were to meet someone new, what would you look for? What would be your early warning signs?'
Repetition of relational patterns	New relationships produce neurochemical changes (dopamine, oxytocin) that can reduce critical thinking and attunement to risk. A caregiver who has worked hard to maintain vigilance about the POC/Y-POC may find that vigilance reduces as they focus on a new partner.	Normalise this directly: 'New relationships are exciting and can feel all-consuming. It's completely natural. And it's also one of the times when it's most important to keep the safety plan active, because it's easy for things to slip when you're happy.'
Introduction of a new adult into the child's environment	A new partner means a new adult with potential access to children. That adult's risk profile is unknown. The speed at which new partners are introduced to children is a recognised safeguarding risk factor.	Discuss directly in the safety planning section. <i>'If you were to meet someone new, what would your rule be about when they meet your children?'</i> Encourage a minimum six-month period before any new partner is introduced. Support the caregiver to see this as protecting their children, not restricting their own freedom.
Children's response to a new partner	Children who have experienced abuse may respond to a new adult in the household with increased anxiety, attachment-seeking, regression or withdrawal. These signals can be misread as jealousy of the caregiver's new relationship rather than recognised as child welfare information.	Connect to Session 6D. 'If your children seemed more unsettled when someone new came into the house, what would that tell you? And how would you respond?'

The new relationship safety conversation – what to discuss with caregivers



Say to the caregiver:

"I want to talk about something that might seem a long way off, or it might be very current for you. At some point you may meet someone new. When that happens, there are some things I'd like you to carry with you – not to stop you having a relationship, but to make sure your children's safety stays at the centre of whatever you do next."

Cover the following points in whatever session this becomes relevant, or in a dedicated conversation if a new relationship is already in progress:

- Take it slowly. There is no safeguarding justification for introducing a new partner to children quickly. A minimum of six months before introduction is a reasonable guideline.
- Trust your instincts – and your children's. If your children seem afraid of, unsettled by, or avoid a new partner, take that seriously. Do not explain it away as jealousy.
- Keep the safety plan active. A new relationship does not suspend the safety plan for the POC/Y-POC. The two are separate.
- Tell someone you trust. If you are seeing someone new, tell at least one trusted person who knows your situation and who can offer a reality check.
- Be honest with yourself. Use what you've learned in Sessions 3A and 3B. Look at the qualities list. Look at your relationship goals. Does this person meet them?

Practitioner note – accessibility: Where there is an open child protection case, the introduction of a new adult into the household is a safeguarding event that should be reported to the allocated social worker. Ensure the caregiver understands this obligation clearly and without shame.