

# Parenting After Violence

A Guide for Practitioners



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for the Institute for Safe Families  
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Greetings,

This Guide is a culmination of years of work. Some time ago, in our commitment to creating “safe families,” we realized that those who worked at the intersection of child welfare, domestic violence and batterers’ intervention didn’t always talk – or listen – to each other very well. Practitioners from each of these systems – talented, earnest and dedicated – seemed to view families affected by domestic violence from their own, system-bound perspective. Yet, the families with whom they worked lived their lives in the intersection, in the messy terrain of trauma (oftentimes years of it), impacted grief, curious loyalties, and patterns of behavior that, while hurtful, seemed to be the only available path. We came together to teach and learn from each other, to argue, to sit in the messy ambivalence, and finally, to identify a way to **work together for the health and healing of whole families. At the center was always our concern for the children. We knew that we needed to help parents show their children a new way.**

**Children who have been exposed to domestic violence need our help, but more importantly, they need their parents’ help.** There are some parents who are simply unable to set aside their own hurts and make themselves available for the kind of deep listening and relationship that is necessary for their children’s healing. But many more are, if we provide them with the opportunity to be heard themselves, and teach them skills to be better listeners to and for their children.

**This Guide for Parenting After Violence suggests that listening is an essential ingredient in working with parents and children in the aftermath of domestic violence.** It introduces readers to a number of available curricula to guide this work and integrates knowledge of trauma theory and stages of change (especially for individuals and families traumatized by domestic violence), though always the listening is central. The Guide contains specific suggestions for techniques that enhance listening. Practitioners working with parents who have experienced violence must model, and teach them explicitly, how to better listen to their children in order for healing to occur.

The Guide provides some basic information about domestic violence; however it assumes that practitioners have such an understanding, which is crucial for this work. While the information and exercises may also be appropriate for other kinds of family experiences (loss, separation, divorce, other kinds of violence, and/or substance abuse, to name a few), **if domestic violence has been a factor in the life of the family or families with whom one is working, it is important to keep this central to the work of reparation and healing.** It is sometimes easier for other issues to become the focal point when there is domestic violence, which often contributes to the continued denial and silence about domestic violence in our society.

**Please take the time to read the introduction to the manual.** This will give you a more in-depth description of the theoretical underpinnings of this effort. It also offers a “narrative road map” for the guide and how you might use it.

We offer this to you with our most heartfelt gratitude to the families and practitioners who are dedicating their lives to transforming histories of family violence into stories of healing and wholeness.

Sincerely,

Darla Spence Coffey, West Chester University  
Martha Davis, Institute for Safe Families  
Sandra Dempsey, Institute for Safe Families

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A decision was made early in its conception to inform this Guide with experiences of children, mothers, and fathers who have been affected by domestic violence. In order to do this, focus groups were conducted at seven agencies in Philadelphia: Anti-Violence Partnership, Congreso de Latinos Unidos Domestic Violence Program, Lutheran Settlement House Domestic Violence Program, Menergy, Men’s Resource Center, People’s Emergency Center, and Youth Services, Incorporated. In addition, four adults who grew up with domestic violence in their homes as children were interviewed individually. I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the interviewees for their willingness to share their experiences and lend their “voices” to this work. It is my wish that this Guide reflects the experience, strength, and hope that they were so courageously willing to share. Thank you, too, to the practitioners who facilitated the focus groups and for facilitating the process of capturing these important perspectives. Thanks to Peter Cronholm, MD, for analyzing the survey data, and Malathie Dissanayake, for transcribing the interviews.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction



## Chapter 1: Introduction

This Guide for Parenting After Violence has been designed to assist service providers and practitioners in working with families in which domestic violence has occurred. While many of the principles and activities may be applicable to work with families that have experienced other kinds of trauma (community violence, child abuse, death, substance abuse, or divorce, to name a few), the Guide addresses domestic violence specifically in order to accentuate the unique dynamics of violence that occurs between intimate partners. In fact, domestic violence "overlaps" many of the other traumas listed above, and practitioners are encouraged to continually assess for the signs of domestic violence so that interventions are appropriate and comprehensive.

This Guide aims to assist parent educators, domestic violence advocates, abuser treatment providers, child treatment providers, and those who work in supervised visitation programs to facilitate healing in the individuals they work with and in their relationships affected by domestic violence. In fact, it is our hope that all those who work with children and families may benefit from this Guide, given the ubiquitous nature of domestic violence in today's world.

While there are good reasons to use gender-neutral language in the discussions of "victims" and "abusers" because we know that both men and women can be victims and abusers, this Guide more often uses "female" and "mother" when discussing victims/survivors and "male" and "father" when discussing abusers. Research continues to demonstrate that the majority of victims of domestic violence are female, and the majority of perpetrators are male. Therefore, the language in the Guide most often addresses these patterns.

Parenting after domestic violence is rife with challenges. For the victim/survivor, whether she has left the abusive relationship or not, there is a complex web of emotions, her own and her children's, that can complicate the simplest task. Very often, there has been an erosion of her authority as a parent that leaves her feeling powerless. For the perpetrator who is truly able to see the damage caused by his behavior, parenting after violence is also extremely difficult because of the ways in which the violence has affected the children and polluted their relationship with him. Restoring trust is difficult work and requires tenacity and an ability to tolerate frustration. Finally, it must be said that, without an abuser's firm commitment to change, parenting after violence may be a continuation of dominance, control, and terror, causing more harm to children caught in the "cross fire." As a resolute anti-violence advocate, I tend to avoid metaphors of violence. However, parenting in the aftermath of violence is in many ways like parenting in the aftermath of war. There are the numerous aftereffects of the violence (trauma-related symptoms) that affect all, and potential triggers for a return to abusive behavior. Parents need our help in parenting after violence in a way that is healing – for them and their children.

Working with parents to heal their relationships with their children after domestic violence involves:

- Helping parents understand the impact of domestic violence on their children and themselves;



- Supporting parents in talking to *and* listening to their children about their experiences of the violence;
- Providing parents with ways to encourage their children's resiliency; and
- Offering strategies for parents to strengthen their relationship with their children.

This Guide aims to assist practitioners in supporting parents and caregivers to establish a healing relationship with their children so that the negative effects of domestic violence can be ameliorated and children can be provided a safe, nurturing environment for further healing, growth and development.

### **What Mothers, Fathers, and Children Have to Say: A Focus Group Study**

In order to ground this Guide for Parenting After Violence in the experiences of women, men, and children who have been victimized by, perpetrated, and/or have been exposed to domestic violence, focus groups were conducted between March and December 2005 to gather information related to the challenges and supports needed for parenting after violence. Focus groups included non-offending parents, offending parents, and children exposed to domestic violence. The focus groups were conducted at seven agencies in Philadelphia: Anti-Violence Partnership, Congreso de Latinos Unidos Domestic Violence Program, Lutheran Settlement House Domestic Violence Program, Menenergy, Men's Resource Center, People's Emergency Center, and Youth Services, Incorporated. In addition, four adults who grew up with domestic violence in their homes as children were interviewed individually.

Focus group questions were developed by the Institute for Safe Families Parenting After Violence Clinical Network. A research proposal was developed by the principle investigator, Darla Spence Coffey, and was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of West Chester University to ensure human subjects protection.

### The Children's Perspective

Children were recruited from the Anti-Violence Partnership of Philadelphia and Congreso de Latinos Unidos. Providers from the two agencies, known to the children, engaged the children in a discussion of the following questions:

- How did the violence/abuse/fighting make you feel?
- If you were not in the room, did you know the domestic violence (*use terms violence, abuse, and/or fighting depending on your group*) was happening? How did you know?
- Sometimes children think that the violence is their fault, do you or did you think it was your fault? Tell me more about that.
- Do you think the violence was anyone's fault? If so, whose fault was it?
- Did you feel like you had to take sides? If yes, say more. (Was it safer to take sides?)
- Did you think other people (other adults or other children) knew about the violence/abuse/fighting in your home?
- Did you ever feel like you needed to protect either of your parents?
- Did you ever feel like you needed to protect your brother(s) or sister(s)?

- Were you ever worried about anyone's safety in your home because of the violence?
- Did anyone talk to you about the violence? What did they say?
- Did anyone ever talk to you about how to stay safe? What did they say?
- Who did you feel safest with? Tell me about that.
- Did anyone lie to you and/or deny that the violence/abuse/fighting was occurring?
- Did you talk about the violence/abuse/fighting with anyone in your family when it was happening? What did you do? Did you feel safe?
- Did you talk to anyone outside of your family about the violence when it was happening in your home? Who? Tell me about that.
- Do you ever feel angry at your parent for leaving or staying in the abusive relationship?
- If you had a chance to say what would have been helpful when the violence was happening, what would you say? From whom would you have liked help or think should or could have helped?

### The Parents' Perspective

The parents' perspectives were obtained through interviewing mothers recruited from Lutheran Settlement House, Congreso de Latinos Unidos, the Men's Resource Center, and the People's Emergency Center. Fathers were recruited from Menergy, the Men's Resource Center, and Youth Services, Incorporated. The parent focus group questions were developed to gain an understanding about their views of the violence and how they perceived their children, and their relationship with their children, being affected by the violence. In addition, there were questions designed to capture their ideas about parenting after the violence. Again, providers facilitated the focus group discussion, focusing on the questions below:

- Do you think your children were aware that there was violence/abuse/fighting in your relationship? Why or why not?
- How do think the violence/abuse/fighting has affected your children?
- Tell me about how the violence/abuse/fighting has affected your relationship with your children.
  - How has the violence/abuse/fighting affected your child's view of you as a parent?
- Have you talked to your children about the violence/abuse/fighting? If so, describe that conversation. If not, what keeps you from having that conversation?
- Describe the relationship that your children have their other parent (or the person who you have been involved with when there has been violence/abuse/fighting)?
  - Do you have concerns about that relationship? What are they?
  - Do you have concerns for the children's safety?
  - Do you have concerns for your own safety (in relation to visitation)?
  - What has been good about that relationship for the children? For you? What worries do you have?
  - What has been difficult about that relationship for the children? For you? What worries do you have?

- Tell me about ways in which you feel the other parent has interfered with your ability to parent.
  - What do you wish could be different?
- What do you need to see in the other parent to feel good about him/her co-parenting with you?
- Tell me some things you feel proud about as a parent.
- Tell me what might have been helpful to you take care of your children when there has been violence/abuse/fighting. (Support, resources, etc.)

### Adult Survivors of Childhood Exposure to Domestic Violence

Finally, It was decided that the perspective of adults who had grown up with domestic violence would add additional insight and perspective to the work of parenting after violence. To this end, four adults (two men and two women) who identified themselves as having experienced domestic violence as children were interviewed individually in order to capture their experiences. All identified their father as the perpetrator of the violence, and their mother as the victim. The interview questions are presented below.

- Who was the person who was abusive? Who was abused? What were your relationships like with your parents/caregivers?
- When did the abuse (physical, emotional and/or verbal) start? Did it continue throughout your growing up? Can you describe the pattern of abuse that occurred?
- As an adult, what are some of the key things that stand out for you about growing up in a home where domestic violence was present? What sort of impact do you feel your experience of domestic violence as a child has had on you an adult, in your personal relationships, choices you have made, etc.?
- How did you react to the violence during these stages?
  - Infant/toddler
  - Elementary age to pre-adolescence
  - Adolescence
  - Young adult
  - Adult
- What would you have wanted to happen to help you while you were growing up?
- What would you have wanted to happen to help your family while you were growing up?
- Because you grew up in a home where domestic violence was present, do you see yourself as different from other people? If so, how? How have you dealt with these differences?

In order to bring the Parenting After Violence Guide “to life,” themes and direct quotes that emerged from the focus groups and interviews have been integrated into the material throughout the Guide.

## Philosophical Foundation

This Guide for Parenting After Violence is grounded in the mission of the Institute for Safe Families, which strives to end family violence and promote family and community well-being. It may be used by parent educators, domestic violence advocates, abuser treatment providers, and others working with abusers and survivors of domestic violence to provide guidance in supporting parents to establish restorative and reparative relationships with their children. This reparation is crucial in order to interrupt the cycle of violence.

This Guide is grounded in an understanding of the fundamental power and importance of relationships. Paradoxically, the most damage that can be done to any individual frequently occurs within the context of an important relationship, and yet healing cannot take place except in the context of a relationship. Ideally, this healing takes place in the relationship where the damage has occurred, although sometimes that is simply not possible – for a number of reasons. Nevertheless, it is absolutely in the context of relationship – with professionals and those who genuinely care for the individual(s) – where healing must occur. Human beings need each other; we need to be in healthy, life-affirming, life-sustaining relationships. So, at its very core, this Guide is about relationships – mending broken relationships and creating relationships that will provide healing for all individuals involved.

## Guiding Principles

This work of facilitating and supporting restorative and reparative relationships between children and their parents after domestic violence is based on several principles gleaned from the literature and from experience working with children and parents after domestic violence. In approaching this work, one must consider each member of the family – children, victim, abuser – separately and together.

### The Children's Perspective

**Parenting after violence must involve placing children's needs  
and well-being at the very center.**

This work is guided, first and foremost, by what children exposed to domestic violence need from their parents/caregivers in order to heal. Engagement of the non-offending and offending parents/caregivers in a process of reparative parenting must be predicated on the following assumptions:

- Children need to be safe from violence; all violence must cease.\*

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\* All three perspectives include a statement that “all violence must cease.” True healing can only occur within a safe environment. However, it should be noted that definitely determining the end of violence is difficult. This is further complicated by the fact that domestic violence includes physical, as well as emotional violence, and that control over finances, decision-making and other areas of a relationship is, in effect, a form of violence and frequently part of the pattern of domestic violence. If a reasonable determination can be made about the end of physical violence and psychological/emotional abuse, it is worth engaging children, survivors, or abusers in the work of reparative parenting, in spite of lingering

- In order to heal, children, adolescents, and adult children (whether living at home or not) need the adults in their lives to be able to talk to them about the violence and to assume appropriate responsibility for what has happened.
- Children, adolescents, and adult children need to be able to have a safe relationship with both parents/caregivers if at all possible.
- Children are amazingly resilient and capable of forgiveness in relation to both their offending and non-offending parents/caregivers. However, it is vital that we not confuse children's coping skills for resilience (such as self-reliance, ability to care for parents/caregivers and/or younger siblings, and absence of acting-out behaviors, to name a few).

### The Victim/Survivor's Perspective

Engagement of the adult survivor of domestic violence in the work of parenting after violence must be predicated on the following assumptions:

- Safety is the primary concern; all violence must cease.
- Survivors of domestic violence are capable of being good parents/caregivers. Even in the midst of the violence, the non-offending parent may have taken many creative and courageous measures to ensure the safety of her children and to provide for their physical, emotional, and social needs, and continue to be motivated by their needs.
- Those who have been abused by their intimate partners continue to have relationships with their children. While it is likely that being a victim of domestic violence has had an effect on her parenting and/or relationship with her children, it should not be assumed that all of the effects have been negative. Being exposed to domestic violence affects children in many ways and is likely to make parenting more challenging.
- Those who have been abused by their intimate partners may want to have that partner continue to be involved in their children's life if this can be done safely.

### The Abuser's Perspective

Engagement of the perpetrator of domestic violence in parenting after violence must be predicated on the following assumptions:

- Safety is the primary concern; all violence must cease.
- Those who are violent in their intimate relationships very often continue to have relationships with their children, whether it is legal or illegal, official or unofficial contact. Even those who are not actively involved with their children often continue to exert an influence on the children and the non-offending parent, making it vital to engage the abusing parent as much as possible.
- Abusers who have made a commitment to nonabusive behavior are capable of being

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patterns of emotional and other forms of control, and should do so. The engagement process, itself, may actually serve as the necessary leverage and support to assist an abuser in committing to end abusive behavior. Furthermore, engaging children and survivors in a process of healing their relationship, regardless of the abuser's behavior, will still be therapeutic for them and can be a powerful antidote to the types of control that the abuser's behavior has had on them throughout the course of the violence.





good parents/caregivers.

- A parent/caregiver who is abusive may be ready to learn how to become a better parent/caregiver. In fact, this could be an important “point of entry” for their own process of recovery and taking responsibility for their behavior.

## Guide Overview

This Guide to Parenting After Violence provides practitioners with principles, guidelines, and exercises to guide parents in the process of restorative and reparative parenting that may be integrated into an existing parenting, domestic violence, and/or batterer intervention program. It is not a curriculum, per se, but rather an integrated compendium of existing curricula that is framed by a distinct theoretical framework. The curricula are referenced and the reader is encouraged to make direct use of these resources. The highlighted points set off in boxes are those of the author unless otherwise noted.

*Chapter 2* – provides a “Theoretical Framework for Parenting After Violence.” This has developed over the last several years of collaboration with service providers for domestic violence victims, abusers, and children. Working with parents to mend their relationships with their children and provide a therapeutic relationship within which their children can heal first requires understanding how “ready” a parent is to squarely face the issues and feelings involved in this work. Applying the “Transtheoretical Model of Change” (or “Stages of Change”) provides a helpful way to guide this work with parents. In addition, practitioners need to understand all the ways in which the trauma of domestic violence has affected the child, victim, and abuser. A discussion of “Trauma Theory” as it relates to readiness for change provides further depth in understanding and engaging parents.

*Chapter 3* – “A Model for Listening,” is a key element in providing the kind of relationship and environment for healing to occur. It may seem obvious that parents need to listen to their children. However, my work with mothers who were abused in their intimate relationships has shown me that listening is probably one of the most difficult things for parents to do – especially when what needs to be heard is a child’s anger, fear, blame, sadness, and grief about how domestic violence has affected their lives. Furthermore, in the process of engaging parents, service providers have an opportunity to teach, and model, the kind of listening that parents need to do with their children. This chapter provides a model for establishing a safe and healing environment in which to engage parents so that they may learn how to listen deeply to their children.

*Chapter 4* – “Working with All Parents,” draws heavily on the curriculum developed by Crager and Anderson (1997), on how to work with parents to *help them help their children* who have witnessed domestic violence. The chapter sets the tone for working with parents and outlines key issues to be addressed. While the chapter discusses working with “parents”, it is not recommended that abusers and victims be engaged in this process together – either in groups or in couples/family counseling. Working with a couple simultaneously when there has been intimate partner violence is extremely risky and may, in fact, put the victim at greater peril for victimization. Nevertheless, abusers and victims deal with many common issues in parenting after violence, and it was decided that it would be best to combine these issues together. In addition, providers working with *either* abusers *or* victims will benefit from understanding the commonalities for both parties.



*Chapters 5 and 6* – address issues specific to working with victims/survivors and abusers, respectively. These chapters will be helpful for providers working with either population, but it is recommended that, even if one works only with one population, the work will be enriched with a better understanding of the process with the other parent.

*Appendices* are included that provide handouts and a summary of resources for parenting curricula.

## **Gender and Culture**

It is important to note issues of gender and culture as they relate to this material. Domestic violence knows no barriers – it transcends race, culture, socioeconomic class, gender, and sexual orientation. These factors often have an effect on how domestic violence is viewed, how practitioners or the “helping system” is viewed, and how one understands the “rules” of relationships. In order to engage parents, it is important to pay attention to the differences that may relate to these factors. While it is outside the scope of this Guide to provide specific information on cultural contexts, norms, and traditions, it is vitally important that these factors and dynamics be fundamentally integrated to provide culturally relevant and sensitive service. In addition, practitioners need to be aware of the dynamics of their own gender, racial and cultural stereotypes, and generalizations when working with parents after violence.

Finally, it is also important to note that while offenders or survivors of domestic violence may not have a biological relationship with the children in their care, all are considered parents and/or caregivers and can/should be engaged in the healing process with their children to whatever extent possible. Therefore, the Guide is meant to address the many variations that families affected by domestic violence assume.

# **Chapter 2:**

## **A Theoretical Framework for Working with Parents**

## Chapter 2: A Theoretical Framework for Working with Parents

This chapter presents a theoretical framework to assist practitioners in working with parents to help them facilitate healing for their children in the aftermath of domestic violence. The framework consists of an understanding of how people change. Parenting after violence in a way that promotes healing will require changed beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. The Transtheoretical Model of Change, also known as the “Stages of Change,” developed by Drs. Proschaska and DiClemente provides a helpful way to understand how change occurs and apply this understanding in working with individuals who have been victims/survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence. A very readable description and explanation of this model can be found in *Changing for Good* (Proschaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1994). The Transtheoretical Model of Change also provides a way to understand the process that parents may go through in accepting that their children have been affected by the violence and to begin the process of repair. A handout for practitioners is provided in the appendices that may be used in training and/or in their work with parents.

One’s readiness for change is also very much affected by the trauma associated with domestic violence (or, in many circumstances, the long-term history of trauma dating back to childhood for many of the adults who have subsequently been victimized or perpetrated domestic violence). An application of Trauma Theory to the Stages of Change will assist practitioners to engage parents with sensitivity to how parents (and their children) have been affected by trauma.

### Stages of Change (or Readiness for Change)

#### Change Is a Process, Not an Event

It is important to keep in mind that making a change in one’s life is difficult. This is the human condition; we are ultimately creatures of habit. However, too often, when trying to help someone who is a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence, it is easy to get impatient about how long it takes him or her to make a change. When working with victims/survivors, if we are not careful, and in spite of our best intentions, we may inadvertently develop an attitude that “blames the victim.” This happens when we start to get frustrated and believe that if the client would only do what we know is best, everything would be all right. For victims of domestic violence, this may actually feel a lot like how their abuser treats them. The same principles may apply for many perpetrators of domestic violence. Many abusers have experienced childhood trauma; they have been victims, too. If we are not careful to engage them in a way that they can begin to reclaim personal power (helping them distinguish this from abusive power), they may resist our best efforts. Even for those abusers who do not have experiences of victimization, engaging them in a change process requires careful attention to their readiness for honest change. Otherwise, we may actually be colluding with them to “fake it” or just “go through the motions.” This is not a true change process. In any circumstance, it is important to understand the process of change and the factors that may influence someone’s readiness for change, especially as it relates to the effects of trauma.

The Transtheoretical Model of Change suggests that people become ready to make a change in stages. This is not to suggest that the process of change is linear; in fact, people typically

move back and forth on their way to a goal, and may in fact appear to be in more than one stage at a time. However, the Model provides a useful tool for those working with victims/survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence in that it guides the practitioner's actions.

The first stage, *Precontemplation*, is the stage of denial. For victims/survivors, this may be revealed in many forms: blaming oneself for the violence, denying the seriousness of the violence, having explanations or rationalizations for what is clearly “wrong” to you as the practitioner. However, at this stage, the victim/survivor is not prepared to deal with the facts and feelings associated with the domestic violence. When a victim/survivor is in this stage, it is important to respect the denial, recognize that it has played an important function in surviving the violence, and not just “break it down.” When working with abusers, this stage may be particularly frustrating. He, too, may have many explanations and rationalizations for his behavior. Blaming the victim for the violence is very common at this stage. Therefore, in both cases, it is helpful for a practitioner to keep in mind that, when someone denies that they have a problem (no matter how obvious to you), it makes no sense to develop a plan to address that problem and expect that they will (voluntarily) follow through. Instead, when someone is in denial, the approach that works best is one where the emphasis is on educating about domestic violence, gently pointing out discrepancies in their belief system (or creating cognitive dissonance), and using whatever leverage you may have to help the person see the need to change.

The second stage, *Contemplation*, is the point at which individuals begin to become more aware of the problem and more open to hearing how they might be able to change their lives. For victims/survivors at this stage, we need to remember to move slowly and help them to explore their ambivalence (because there will be ambivalence). Decisions about staying or leaving an abusive relationship, or otherwise seeking help in order to maximize safety and begin their own recovery, cannot really be made during this time of ambivalence, unless, with the practitioner's help, the victim/survivor is able to give voice to her ambivalence. When working with abusers, it is important to have a healthy respect for the inevitable ambivalence they will have around accepting responsibility for their behavior. Blaming someone, anyone, else for their behavior has become a habit, and the feelings of guilt, remorse, sadness, even anger, “just on the other side” of accepting responsibility for abusiveness may frighten them right back into minimization and rationalization. It is important that the practitioner be patient with, and even explore this ambivalence in order to truly engage the abuser in an “airing” of all of his thoughts and feelings. In this way, a move by an abuser to truly accept responsibility for his behavior will be more genuine.

The third stage, *Preparation*, involves planning to make a change. Whether working with victims/survivors or abusers, in this stage the provider can capitalize on the decision to make change a priority and begin to help the individual make realistic plans for that change. It might be necessary to “slow down” the “flight into health” that is common for people at this stage. This does not mean not supporting the plan and movement into action, but recognizing that this stage can be one of unrealistic expectations of self and others, which leaves the individual vulnerable to disappointment and a possible return to denial (out of a sense of hopelessness). When working with victims/survivors, it is extremely important to attend to

issues of safety, including letting them know that this time of change may present more dangers as the abuser begins to sense the shift in their relationship. For abusers, the plan developed in this stage may not take into account others' feelings. This is related to a pattern of narcissism and impaired empathy that is common for many abusers. (More about common characteristics of abusers is found in Chapter 6.) With both victims and abusers, the practitioner needs to remind them that change is hard and that *the practitioner is aware* that they may change their minds along the way. In doing this, the practitioner is creating a "safety net" in the working relationship if they do change their minds. If an individual has committed to make a change and then reverts back to "old behavior," he or she may feel ashamed, embarrassed, or fearful of being judged. In the face of these feelings, he or she may be inclined to actively or passively avoid the practitioner.

The fourth stage, **Action**, involves the client putting into action the plan for change that has been developed. The practitioner's role at this stage is to support and monitor the change, helping the individual to identify challenges to the new behavior, and always, reinforcing the need for safety.

The fifth stage, **Maintenance**, is an extended stage of consolidating the change. In this stage, new behaviors and coping skills will develop, and the practitioner's role is to support, monitor, and applaud the changes made. It is important for practitioners to educate individuals about this stage, because it actually requires much more work to maintain a change than most people anticipate. In order to "stay on course," individuals need to stay attuned to their emotions and their interpersonal and social environment and make adjustments as needed.

Although not an "official" stage in the Transtheoretical Model, it is important to address the likelihood of **Relapse**. The truth is that, with any change, "relapse" is more the rule than the exception, and yet, people often have unrealistic expectations and harsh judgments towards themselves and others when one who has begun to make changes reverts to old behavior. "Relapse" for victims/survivors may include returning to an abusive relationship, assuming responsibility for the abuse, and/or other behaviors that increase risk or fail to minimize the effects of violence to her and/or her children. For abusers, "relapse" is a return to abusive and/or controlling behavior, participating in behaviors that increase the risk of the return of such behavior, and/or minimizing the effects of their behavior. What practitioners need to communicate is that a relapse can be a learning opportunity. Individuals need to understand that whatever progress has been made is not automatically "erased" when a relapse occurs, and that, in fact, once a new behavior is practiced, it is easier to resume.

This brief description of the Transtheoretical Model of Change is meant to provide a way to understand individuals' readiness for change so that practitioners may develop stage-appropriate interventions and have a "map" to assist them in facilitating change. It is not meant as the only intervention or as a rationale for "more lenient" practices based on compassionate understanding. Holding someone accountable for their behavior is not inconsistent with understanding how people change or treating them with respect and compassion. If the relapse involves an abuser being violent to his partner, there *should* be consequences (legal and otherwise). These consequences should be clear and consistent. For some, being held accountable is the only way in which true motivation for change can

be realized. This is a strong argument for increased accountability for perpetrators of domestic violence.

The handout provided in **Appendix A** depicts the stages of change as they apply to engaging a victim/survivor of domestic violence, with examples of each stage and suggestions for the kind of practitioner response and intervention offered. While not depicted, parallels can be drawn for the process of engaging an abuser, and can be further informed by the “Restorative Framework” of the Fathering After Violence Initiative, discussed in Chapter 6. In working with abusers, the emphasis must be on helping them to assume responsibility for their abusive behavior. This is crucial in truly engaging abusers in a process of restorative and reparative parenting.

As a resource for working with parents to help them understand the process of change, the poem below can be also used as a handout (and is found in **Appendix B**). It is a good metaphor for the change process, a story in which victims/survivors and abusers may be able to recognize themselves (which, in and of itself, may help them move from Precontemplation to Contemplation!)

***“There’s A Hole In My Sidewalk: An Autobiography In Five Short Chapters”***

By Portia Nelson

**Chapter One**

I walk down the street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I fall in.  
I am lost... I am helpless.  
It isn’t my fault.  
It takes forever to find a way out.

**Chapter Two**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend I don’t see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can’t believe I am in this same place.  
But it isn’t my fault.  
It still takes a long time to get out.

**Chapter Three**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I see it is there.  
I still fall in... it’s a habit... but,  
My eyes are open,  
I know where I am.  
It *is* my fault.  
I get out immediately.

**Chapter Four**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I walk around it.

**Chapter Five**

I walk down another street.





## Parental Readiness for Accepting Children’s Experiences of Domestic Violence

A central component of the process of working with parents to develop restorative and reparative relationships with their children after domestic violence is helping them understand the effects of the violence on their children, and to guide them in having conversations with their children about their experiences. The Transtheoretical Model of Change can be helpful to practitioners in this process, in understanding how parents can ready themselves for this important healing work with their children.

There are actually many reasons why a parent may be reluctant to accept that their children have been exposed to and affected by domestic violence. For one, many parents consider only “bad” or “acting out” behavior as an indication that there is something “wrong” with their children. So if a child is well-behaved and seems otherwise well-adjusted, a parent may believe (with some relief) that his or her child has escaped the negative effects of the domestic violence. Parents need help recognizing that children react in many different ways to domestic violence and that internalizing the effects can be just as damaging as externalizing them. (More will be said about this in Chapter 4, “Working with All Parents.”) Given that accepting that their children have been impacted is especially difficult and may be painful for parents, it is helpful to apply the same understanding about the “stages of change” to this issue. There is a handout provided in **Appendix C** that may be used in this process. Similar to the previous chart, the chart shows that there are ways in which parents may present for each stage and some suggested appropriate responses.

## Understanding the Effects of Trauma on Readiness for Change

Because victims/survivors have experienced trauma due to domestic violence, and many victims/survivors *and* abusers have experiences of trauma in childhood, it is important to understand the ways trauma has affected them and may have an effect on the therapeutic relationship when working with them to develop healing relationships with their children. Trauma affects people in numerous ways: neurobiologically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Coping mechanisms like denial and dissociation, once necessary for survival, can actually interfere with healing. Also, motivation for change fluctuates. Motivation is a state of mind and feeling that exists within the context of relationship, but when one has been abused in an intimate relationship, relationships become scary. Trauma tends to erode people’s sense of trust in themselves, others, and the world. Therefore, engaging both domestic violence victims/survivors and abusers in good working relationships can be challenging. There may be times when clients appear ready for change, and then “run” from the very help they have sought. Finally, while a practitioner may be clear about wanting to empower the client, victims and abusers can seem “lost” in a position of helplessness. Learned (or forced) helplessness is a common phenomenon among those who have experienced trauma, and it takes time to unlearn this helplessness and begin to envision oneself as powerful and in charge of one’s own life.

Trauma complicates *Precontemplation* because surviving trauma often requires the very characteristics of this state – denial, minimization, rationalization, and even dissociation. Practitioners need to approach clients’ denial with respect for the survival mechanism that it has been, while also challenging the denial with the facts and consequences of the domestic violence. In this process, the practitioner needs to communicate his or her faith in the individual’s ability to cope with the feelings that are being “protected against” by the denial.

Experiences of trauma also confound the stage of **Contemplation**. Ambivalence is the primary dynamic during contemplation, and practitioners need to support the individual's exploration of her ambivalence by helping her to weigh the benefits and disadvantages of change. For trauma survivors, ambivalence itself can be very frightening – the individual wants to know with certainty which direction to go. The practitioner may be tempted at this stage to tell the individual what to do, and the individual may be initially relieved to receive this clear-cut guidance. However, it is important that the individual choose her own path for successful change. In addition, trauma affects the brain in such a way that emotions tend to rule behavior, creating a challenge in working with both survivors and abusers. Exploration of ambivalence requires rational thought – not at the exclusion of emotion, but in balance with the individual's emotion. Practitioners need to support individuals in learning how to contain their emotions in order to allow their natural intellectual abilities to emerge in making a decision for change.

The stage of **Preparation** may be difficult for those affected by trauma because it involves developing a plan of action and assumes that the individual believes in their ability to execute the plan, to be an *actor* in their lives and not just a *reactor*. As stated previously, learned (or forced) helplessness is often a sequel to trauma, and people who are convinced that they are helpless cannot easily make plans. For victims/survivors, survival has often meant trying to figure out what the abuser wants/needs and accommodating those wants/needs (at the expense of their own) in order to be safe. Even though the practitioner wants only what is best for the victim/survivor, and wants her to make the decision, victims/survivors are exceptionally adept at discerning others' wishes and complying. Abusers who have experienced trauma also often approach their lives from the position of reactors, rather than as actors, making the facilitation of rational thought and intentionality required in this stage more difficult.

Learned (or forced) helplessness may continue to cause difficulties in the **Action** stage of change for those affected by trauma. A resurgence of uncertainty may leave an individual vulnerable to an impulse to abandon the planned change. Practitioners need to be patient during this state, and steady in communicating confidence in the individual's ability to do what she/he has made a commitment to do.

Finally, **Maintenance** of change is challenging for many trauma survivors because of the steadiness, consistency, and discipline needed. Many trauma survivors, because of the effects of trauma on the brain, are overwhelmed with vacillating emotions. The inborn "flight or fight" response is exacerbated by experiences of trauma. This is true for both survivors and abusers affected by trauma. In addition, trauma conditions the brain to expect chaos and to not trust "calm." This may cause an individual to create chaos in order to feel "normal." Some refer to this as an "addiction" to trauma. Practitioners need to watch for this so as to prevent an individual's sabotage of the maintenance of change.

Practitioners are best prepared to engage with those who have experienced trauma by fully understanding the many ways in which the effects of trauma can complicate the change process. Further, it is helpful to actually teach trauma survivors about the effects of trauma. This can help them to understand their feelings and behavior and give them a sense of personal power in the process. Such power can be an immensely effective tool for those who have been rendered powerless in the face of trauma.

# **Chapter 3:**

## **A Model for Listening**

## Chapter 3: A Model for Listening

Working with parents to facilitate the development of healing relationships with their children is a process best done by modeling with parents what they need to do with their children. Living with domestic violence often requires children to be silent about their experiences, and their needs are often lost in the environment of domination and violence. More than anything else, children need to be listened to, have their experiences heard and validated, and have their lives attended to. Parents have the same needs. This section focuses on a framework for practitioners to use to engage parents, modeling the process the parents will need to use with their children. (Chapter 4, “Working with All Parents,” provides ways to teach parents how to listen to their children.)

The model for listening to and working with parents presented here is based on the body of literature available through *Hand in Hand: Nurturing the Parent-Child Connection*. *Hand in Hand* promotes a model of “connected parenting” that supports and empowers parents to engage in healing behaviors appropriate for parenting after violence. There are many *Hand in Hand* publications that would be helpful for practitioners in this process. It is recommended that readers explore the website [www.parentleaders.org](http://www.parentleaders.org) to view available resources. A summary of the model for listening can be found in *Parenting by Connection*, by Patty Wipfler, 2005.

The PLI literature identifies some important guiding principles for working with parents that provide the safe, therapeutic environment necessary to engage parents in a process of mending their relationships with their children and providing for their children’s healing. Among practitioners, the PLI principles are generally accepted “in the abstract” without any difficulty. However, one’s beliefs in these principles may be shaken when faced with parents who seem to have acted otherwise. The principles are identified below, and a discussion follows that underscores their importance for parenting after violence.

- **Parents are good.** In order to engage a parent in a therapeutic relationship that will lead to healing with his/her children, one must believe in their fundamental desire to be a good parent. It is necessary to start with the assumption that they love their children deeply, and they want their children to have good lives. Any evidence to the contrary must be viewed as a deviation from their very nature, perhaps the result of trauma – in childhood or adulthood – that has led them to act in ways contrary to their desires and basic nature.
- **Parents always try their very best: they will make great efforts to love and care well for their children.** The power of this belief in working with parents allows their fundamental desire to be unleashed from the chains of trauma that have “corrupted” their consistent desire to do well by their children. It is necessary to appreciate and support all the ways in which a parent has acted in ways to love and care for their children.
- **Parents treat their children with more kindness than they themselves received as children.** At a young age, people commit themselves to not repeating their parents’ mistakes. This is also true for parents who are survivors or abusers of domestic violence. Given the likelihood that these parents experienced trauma in childhood,



making good on this commitment is rife with challenges given the ways in which people tend to cope with trauma (denial, passivity, and/or aggression). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the ways in which parents have succeeded in treating their children better than they were treated in the course of their parenting. Most certainly, it is important to notice and recognize the ways in which they have tried.

- **While nurturing their children, parents deserve useful information, appreciation, and support.** Parenting is extremely difficult work that often goes unsupported and unappreciated. We can assist parents by providing information (parenting doesn't come with a "user's manual"! ) so they can learn from the challenges of parenting and enjoy their children fully.
- **When parents are well-supported, they take a natural interest in the well-being of all children, and their caring extends beyond their own families.**

As stated previously, applying these principles to parents who have been either victims or perpetrators of abuse may at times be extremely difficult. Sometimes accessing an abuser's "goodness" seems impossible. Similarly, the way in which a victim's parenting may have been compromised because of the domestic violence may lead one to question if she has "always tried her very best." However, if a practitioner can maintain these beliefs and attitudes in her or his work, parents will respond. Many parents simply need help getting (back) in touch with their love and desire to do their very best by their children in order to begin to repair their relationships with them. Many need to be taught very explicitly the skills for developing healthy relationships because they have not experienced healthy relationships themselves. There needs also to be recognition that parenting is vital to healthy development, *and* is extremely difficult work, in the best of circumstances. Practitioners need to listen to and empathize with parents' struggles and celebrate their successes in the process of parenting after violence.

### **The Value of Listening**

Being listened to closely as they express their feelings allows parents to unleash their hurt and reclaim their full intelligence in order to decide to behave differently. Unfortunately, many service providers have gotten into the habit of "talking at" parents and not listening to them. There are certainly times when it is most appropriate to provide information, education, or advice. There are other times when we need to confront or challenge inappropriate or abusive behavior. These times call for the practitioner to "take the floor." However, we also need to make sure that we spend a great deal of time listening.

*Moments of healing are more likely to occur when we are quietly listening and attending to our clients, giving them our full attention. The seeds of change are more often sown during a client's own revelations than when we point out the "pattern" or offer an interpretation.*

– Wipfler, Listening Partnerships (1991)

Working with parents in groups requires the practitioner to teach the parents to listen to each other. This is actually quite difficult work. Victims/survivors of domestic violence typically have a very difficult time being listened to. They have been silenced, and often feel uncomfortable when they “have the floor.” They are ready for someone else to talk; they are not sure what they even have to say. They may judge what they have to say as unimportant. Abusers, on the other hand, often have a difficult time listening. They are accustomed to doing the talking, directing, and controlling a relationship. For them, learning how to listen to others is a first step toward being able to listen to their children. Therefore, when working with a group of either victims/survivors or abusers, practitioners need to teach and create space for these new behaviors.

It may be useful in the context of group work with parents to direct the group to pair up and take turns listening to each other. Hand in Hand calls this “listening partnerships.” In “listening partnerships,” two parents take turns respectfully listening to the thinking, efforts, goals, and feelings of the other. The PLI provides some guidelines for this activity that include:

- Pay attention to your listening partner’s issues, not your own, during her turn.
- Appreciate your listening partner.
- Reassure her.
- Encourage her to take full pride in herself.
- Refrain from interrupting with your reactions.
- Refrain from asking questions to satisfy your curiosity.
- Believe that the hurt your listening partner chooses to work on will surface.
- Show interest in the story. Don’t offer your opinion about it.
- Help your listening partner focus on any hurt that emerges.
- Assist your listening partner to release the emotional tension she talks about.
- Counter the effects of guilt and confusion that your listening partner feels.

Listening partnerships give parents the chance to learn from their own experience and to notice and understand their own thoughts, feelings, and goals. Providing parents with the opportunity to practice listening skills not only teaches them how to do this with their children, but is a deeply healing experience for them, as well.

More information about and suggestions for assisting parents in listening to their children, as articulated by the principles of Hand in Hand: Nurturing the Parent-Child Connection and modified for parenting after violence, will be discussed in the next chapter.

# **Chapter 4:**

## **Working with All Parents**



## Chapter 4: Working with All Parents

This chapter is designed to help providers work with parents to help them understand the effects of domestic violence on their children and to prepare them to talk, and listen, to their children about the violence in order to facilitate their children's healing and repair the parent-child relationships. This chapter will deal with issues that are common for all parents, irrespective of their role in the domestic violence; subsequent chapters will deal with the issues specific to the abuser or victim respectively.

The assumptions and general outline for this chapter are based on the curriculum by Crager and Anderson (1997). 1) Parents, both survivors/victims and abusers, need to be educated fully about domestic violence, its dynamics, and the range of behaviors involved. 2) Parents also need to understand the effects that violence has on children and the feelings that children experience when living with violence. These are illustrated below with quotes from the focus groups and interviews done for this project. 3) It is important for all parents to learn what children need in order to heal, and then 4) to learn how to talk about the violence to their children and how to listen to them effectively.

***It is important to emphasize that working with parents together is not advised unless one can be absolutely certain that all violence and controlling behavior has ceased and that the abuser has made a commitment to non-abusive behavior.*** Without certainty about the cessation of violence, at best, it is impossible to create the necessary context of safety for full participation, and at worst, the danger for the victim and/or her children may increase. Therefore, this section is written to provide direction in working with groups of survivors/victims or groups of abusers ***separately*** (though the material can also be used to work with individuals).

There are a couple of things to remember when beginning work with parents related to parenting after violence. When engaging parents in this work, remember that they may also have more pressing needs, such as safety planning and shelter, abuser treatment, parenting skills, etc. It is difficult, and not particularly helpful, to engage parents in the difficult emotional work related to parenting after violence when they are pressed with other "real world" problems that need priority. In addition, consider parents' readiness for change when approaching them about this work (discussed in Chapter 2).

Finally, the emphasis during this work with parents is maximizing opportunities to *listen to the parent*. Parents respond to being listened to with close attention and being encouraged to give voice to their experiences, sadness, fears, and hopes. This helps parents to learn the importance and value of listening, making it possible for them to extend that gift to their children.

***It could be argued that one cannot help parents listen to their children without giving them the experience of being truly listened to, respected, and supported themselves.***

## Educating Parents about Domestic Violence

Preparing parents to talk and listen to their children about the violence must begin with clear, and irrefutable, definition and information about the dynamics of domestic violence. The Duluth model of the “Power and Control Wheel” (provided as a handout in **Appendix D**) is a useful tool to explain the range of behaviors included in domestic violence. Domestic violence must be viewed as a whole system of actions that one person uses to dominate and control another person. The system of actions includes physical, emotional, and sexual violence, and controlling behaviors that permeate the social, intellectual, spiritual, and financial realms.

Additional points to be shared with parents:

- Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive behavior that one person uses to maintain control over his or her partner. It is not caused by anger, stress, drugs or alcohol, the behavior of the victim, or other external forces.
- Domestic violence is always the responsibility of the abuser.
- There is never any circumstance when it is justifiable for a person to use violence against his or her partner.
- Perpetrators and victims of domestic violence come from all cultural, socioeconomic, religious, and educational backgrounds. There is not one “type” of person who is an abuser or a victim of domestic violence.
- Children who experience domestic violence in their families are victims of domestic violence, even when they do not physically witness the violence.
- Corporal punishment is not an acceptable form of punishment for children who have witnessed domestic violence (or for any children, for that matter).

When discussing any of the above information, Crager and Anderson (1997) advise that it is important not to argue about the definition or “causes” of domestic violence with parents. The practitioner can listen to their thoughts, but it is important to respectfully maintain that this definition and understanding of domestic violence is where the practitioner “starts” in his or her work.

## Teaching Parents about the Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

**Helping parents understand the effects of domestic violence on their children is the cornerstone to helping their children heal and to repairing their relationship with their children. It is through understanding how they and their children have been affected that the parent will begin to learn ways to talk and listen to their children about their experiences.**

### Children’s Experiences Living with Violence

It is important for parents to have a sense of the experiences that their children have had when they have lived with violence and the threat of violence.

*Fear* – Children who have been exposed to domestic violence feel fear about those whom they love the most, in the place where they should feel the safest – their home. Therefore, children need to be able to talk to someone they trust about their feelings. They need to learn ways to keep themselves safe and to know that they have a plan for what to do when there is violence. This way, the child can experience a sense of control over the situation.

*Anger* – Children are often angry at the abuser for the violence, but they are just as likely to be angry at the victim for not leaving the situation. Even more difficult for the victim, children may actually become angry when she does act to leave the situation. Therefore, children need to know that it is normal and okay to feel angry. Again, they need to be able to talk about these feelings with someone they trust and to learn to express their anger in non-destructive ways.

Within the children’s focus group, some children expressed anger at their mother for staying; others were angry at her for leaving.

- ❖ *“I am angry at my mom for breaking up the family. My dad had already left the house, there was no reason for us to move and leave our house and old neighborhood.”*

*Mixture of anger and love* – Children often feel torn between feelings of love and anger toward the abuser and/or the victim. Complicating this, children may feel guilty for having both of these feelings. Therefore, children need to learn that it is okay for them to feel both anger and love towards their parents. Children can begin to learn that they can love a parent even when they hate his/her behavior, and begin to understand that they are not “bad” if they love the abuser.

*Confusion about being able to love both parents.* Children who have been exposed to domestic violence often feel (or are made to feel by either or both of their parents) that they need to take sides (e.g. “if I love Mom, I can’t love Dad” and vice versa). Therefore, children need to be told – especially by their parents – that it is okay to love both parents at the same time.

Within the children’s focus group, the children reported feeling as though they needed to choose between their parents. Sometimes this involved taking care of their parents’ feelings at the expense of their own.

- ❖ *“My dad would tell us that my mom made him angry and that’s why he acted like that. I knew that wasn’t right.”*
- ❖ *“Cause if my mom told me something, it was like my dad was a bad man. I would have a definite ‘yes’ to my mom. But then if my dad said that my mom was a bad woman, I would just say ‘yeah.’ But I wouldn’t really mean it.”*

In spite of the violence perpetrated by their father towards their mother, children were also able to recall good times with their Dad and as a family.

- ❖ *“I remember something that was really fun that my dad did for us. We had went to the mall and he bought us hot chocolate. He came back and he pretended that it was coffee. I had a drink of some and I found out that it was really hot chocolate. We all had a good time.”*

- ❖ *“I miss waking up Saturday mornings and going to my parents’ room and laying there with my dad, laughing and talking and normally we would have breakfast and then we would wash the car together.”*

Loss – Children exposed to domestic violence have experienced many losses. They must learn to recognize and grieve these losses. An overarching loss is the loss of childhood. They feel the loss of a healthy, safe, “normal” family. If the victim leaves the abusive situation with her children, the children experience the loss of that parent. Even if there is no separation, domestic violence often involves threats of separation from one parent or the other. Living with such threats is an anticipated loss, with all the feelings of an actual loss. Finally, children lose a sense of safety and comfort in their own home, a birthright of every child. In dealing with these losses, children need to be able to talk and grieve with someone they trust. They need to be able to feel sad, angry, etc. in the face of these losses.

Within the children’s focus group, the loss of childhood was heard in the children’s worries, fears and experiences that they described. Some expressed this loss directly.

- ❖ *“I’m the man of the house... but I’m not a man.”*

The adult survivors reflected:

- ❖ *“I never had the opportunity to just be a kid.”*
- ❖ *“It was a very odd kind of role, very overly adult.”*

Feelings of guilt and responsibility – Children often feel guilt for causing the violence or not figuring out a way to stop it and protect their parent or parents. They may feel responsible for preventing the violence or the need to protect and take care of the victim and/or their siblings. Here it is important to help the child understand that the violence is not their fault, that this is an adult problem for the adults to work out.

Within the children’s focus group, the children described feeling as though the violence was their fault and/or that they should have been able to stop it.

- ❖ *Sometimes I thought they were arguing over me and my brother.”*
- ❖ *One day, my mom and dad were fighting and my dad told me to my face that I was not his son, so I blame myself that time because they were fighting about me.”*

An adult survivor noted:

- ❖ *“I was very well behaved because I did not want, you know, to provoke any abuse or violence. I mean I don’t think that was conscious for me at the time, but now when I look back, you know, that is certainly what I feel.”*

Feelings of responsibility were prevalent among the children. The children voiced feeling the need to play the “protector” role. Some assumed this role on their own; others were told that it was their “job” to take care of others.

- ❖ *“My mom would tell me to take care of my little brother and sister and keep them in the bedroom and not let them out.”*

- ❖ *“I’m the oldest so I always felt that I needed to protect my younger brothers and sisters.”*
- ❖ *“I felt like I needed to protect both of them (mom and dad).”*

*Life is unpredictable (never knowing when a crisis will erupt)* – When children are exposed to domestic violence, they feel vulnerable on a daily basis, with no power or control about what will happen. Healing will require them to find areas in their lives where they can have control and make plans and decisions. If there is any risk of continued violence (and even if there isn’t), it can help children feel a sense of renewed power to have a safety plan. Again, there is a need to create or restore a sense of stability and predictability – to have a structure and routine. This goes a long way in restoring a sense that life is not just a crisis waiting to happen.

An adult survivor reflected:

- ❖ *“I was afraid to have friends over and I think that I just got really involved in high school and did everything I could not to be home. So I think that a little bit of an escape and withdrawing is what I did.”*

### The Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

One should be prepared to encounter parents’ beliefs that their children did not witness and/or have not been affected by the domestic violence. In the 2005 Parenting After Violence parent focus groups, victims/survivors noted ways in which they attempted to hide or protect their children from knowledge of the abuse:

- ❖ *“Most of the time we would wait for the kids to be asleep, but I knew they were awake because the next day they would approach me and tell me that they heard us fighting.”*
- ❖ *“I would try to make sure that they were asleep before their father got home drunk because I knew he would come home and start up a fight. So the kids always knew and they would keep themselves from falling asleep to make sure that nothing happened to me.”*

In spite of their attempts to shield their children from the violence, these women were keenly aware of the many ways in which their children had been affected by being exposed to domestic violence – emotionally, behaviorally, physically, cognitively, and socially – and they had concerns about their children’s future.

- ❖ *“They [the children] were often afraid and confused.”*
- ❖ *“They became very emotional whenever there was arguing.”*
- ❖ *“They sensed the tension.”*
- ❖ *“I see that they are jumpy, nervous.”*
- ❖ *“My daughter is very clingy.” [This mother reports that this behavior started “in utero.”]*
- ❖ *“It’s even affected my daughter’s health. She suffers from asthma and it gets worse when she witnesses the violence. She also eats her nails to the skin.”*
- ❖ *“I can see that it affected my children with their homework and school work.”*

- ❖ *“My son is very distant, doesn’t have any friends.”*
- ❖ *“My son is abusive to his wife and it all has to do with what he witnessed as a child with his father, my husband.”*

In general, the abusers were less aware of the effects of the domestic violence on their children than victims/survivors; however they did voice concerns about how the violence would affect their children in the future. One noted:

- ❖ *“I am sure it will affect them in the future in their relationships, how they deal with each other.”*

The focus groups of children revealed that most of the children did, in fact, know about the violence. In their words,

- ❖ *“I heard them cursing, arguing, everything.”*
- ❖ *“It sounded serious when they were yelling.”*
- ❖ *“It started in their room, but then they would carry it downstairs.”*

Adult survivors recalled being aware of the abuse from a very early age.

- ❖ *“Rapidly, I started to become more aware of the turmoil when I was around five and six.”*
- ❖ *“He would come home drunk. They would be out partying and then they would come home and he would start.”*
- ❖ *“During that time, I would stay up every night until they came home because that’s when the fight started.”*
- ❖ *“The time he hit her (mother) in the kitchen, I was in the next room.”*

The descriptions of the violence from the adult children interviewed for this project continued to be quite detailed, into adulthood, indicating the impact of the violence on them to this day:

- ❖ *“One Christmas he was drunk, he was strangling her and I was waiting up at the top of the steps and then walked down. My mother pushed him away when she saw me.”*
- ❖ *“And I just remember that my dad was sort of dragging my mom across the room because she did not want to go for a walk after dinner or something.”*
- ❖ *“I was listening to my parents shouting at each other and cursing, my dad throwing things. And the next morning [there would be] a broken window or a hole in a wall or something and I remember feeling afraid.”*

These results of the focus groups notwithstanding, many parents initially report that they do not see the effects of the violence on their children. They may see that their children are acting “normal,” doing well in school, and playing with their friends. It is important to affirm their observations and not argue with this. Children respond to domestic violence in various ways over time. Performing well in school, maintaining friendships, and “behaving well” is





absolutely possible for children exposed to domestic violence, and may, in fact, be signs of resilience born of support from others in their lives.

However, at this stage, it is important to engage the parents in a process where they can begin to understand that, in spite of these good signs, it is highly unlikely that their children have been unaffected. In fact, some children exposed to domestic violence cope by focusing on the kinds of things that please their parents (success in school, good behavior, etc.) In helping parents understand this, you will support them in engaging their children in conversations about the violence even when they think their children have been “unaffected,” in order to prepare them for a time when this coping strategy may begin to break down. It is not uncommon for children to “suddenly” start acting differently when there is a change in their lives. A move, a disappointment at school, the end of a friendship or relationship, and/or entering adolescence are a few of the transitions that may trigger repressed feelings related to the violence.

It is also important to keep in mind that introducing the effects of domestic violence on their children is very likely to unleash a range of feelings for the parent – this can, and perhaps should be, upsetting to the parents. “Should be” because it is only when parents can begin to empathize – put themselves “in their children’s shoes” that they can begin to earnestly listen to their children. (Parents who are not upset about this are either guarding against these feelings with every ounce of defense that they can muster or are not capable of empathy at this stage and may in fact be dangerous.) Both survivors and abusers may have difficulty empathizing with their children or viewing the world through their eyes. For both, true empathy can unleash guilt about not protecting the children (survivor) or their hurtful behavior (abuser). Empathy tends to be particularly difficult for the abuser because, over the course of the violence, he may have learned to objectify his victims (the children and their mother) in order to justify his behavior. However, learning empathy is the cornerstone to the reparative process (more will be said about this later).

***The guilt that parents may feel is an impediment to their children’s healing (and their own). This is not to suggest that you can just “wish” someone’s guilt away. This is often an important emotion to feel in a parent’s own recovery process. However, you must communicate the importance of being able to move past this in order to change their relationship with their children.***

When introducing to parents the range of effects that the domestic violence may have had on their children, it is important to try and help them see the situation from the children’s point of view, to feel what the children may feel/have felt. Furthermore, it is helpful to engage parents in a conversation about what they think their children have learned from the domestic violence, and to connect their children’s behavior to what they have witnessed. As parents react to the information provided, take time to help them express and normalize their feelings. Support them in the difficult work of tolerating this information so that they can learn to then tolerate listening to their children tell their own stories.



Further information to assist providers in this part of parenting after violence work can be found in the publication, Parenting in the Context of Domestic Violence, Judicial Council of California, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children, & the Courts, March 2003. This can be found at: [www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/resources/publications](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/resources/publications). Three handouts on the effects of domestic violence on children that address the differential ways in which children may be affected can be found in **Appendix E, F, and G**. **Appendix H** is a handout about the long-term results of children living in violent homes.

### **What Children Need To Heal**

Once parents understand all the ways in which children have been affected by domestic violence, it is important to help them understand how to create an environment where their children can heal. During this stage, it is important to communicate to parents your optimism about children's ability to heal and your belief that the parents are capable of being an important part of the healing process.

It is important to teach parents what children need in order to heal from their exposure to domestic violence. The following concepts may be taught to parents to allow them to create a context for such recovery.

A sense of safety – Healing cannot occur as long as the abuse continues.

Structure, limits, and predictability – Part of creating a sense of safety for children includes establishing a routine that is predictable and includes structure and limits. The unpredictable nature of domestic violence is detrimental to healthy child development. In addition, most homes in which there is domestic violence either have very rigid structure or very little structure at all. Either family members are extremely inhibited in their behavior and/or emotional expression, or it is extremely chaotic. Setting limits for children, into adolescence, is one of the ways in which parents express their love and concern for their children. However, in families in which there has been domestic violence, the limits have often been either extreme and punitive or nonexistent. Establishing safe, clearly defined limits for behavior is vital to establishing an environment for healing after there has been domestic violence.

Strong bond to primary caregiver – It is important to explain to parents the importance of the child's relationship with the primary caregiver. Explaining to the abusive partner, especially if a noncustodial parent, the importance of this relationship may help him to see how supporting the primary caregiver is one way to aid in the healing of his children.

Children's belief that she can protect them – Children need to believe that their primary parent can protect them. This can be especially difficult if there is a history of the parent not being able to do this, but it is helpful to work with a parent on how to communicate that they take their "job" of protecting their children seriously. It also helps reverse a pattern of the children feeling responsible to protect the victim.

Feel respect for her – It is important that you as the provider communicate the utmost respect for the children's primary caregiver at all times. This models for the children that she deserves respect. Children often "lose respect" for the victim of domestic violence. This may be because they begin to identify with the abuser (it is actually preferable to identify with the

abuser than to identify with the victim who is seen as helpless and powerless). Learning to respect their mother again is an important part of the healing process for children.

*Feel supported in being close to her* – Children need to be supported, by providers working with the children and/or the adults in the family, in being close to their primary caregiver. Perpetrators of abuse need to know how important it is for children to feel close to their other parent and instructed to support that relationship.

*Not feel responsible to take care of adults* – Children often take on the role of “taking care” of the adults in situations of domestic violence. They may actually take on caretaking responsibilities, as well as feel the “pull” to make the adults feel better. This reversal of roles needs to be corrected.

*Good boundaries regarding information* – Children often know much more than the adults think they do, and this cannot be helped. However, it is important that the adults not engage the children in discussions of details of the abuse with which they may not be familiar. This can overwhelm their capacities to handle the information. In addition, when there is a separation between the adults because of the domestic violence, it is important that the adults handle the “adult decisions” and not involve the children in issues related to visitation orders, finances, etc. This does not mean refusing to answer children’s questions, but it does mean not initiating conversations about topics that children are unaware of in an effort to get the children “on their side.”

*Feel that parents are healing* – In order to heal, children need to know that their parents are taking care of themselves, that they are involved in a process for their own healing. Children desperately want their parents to heal, and need to know that the adults are doing what is needed to take care of their own needs.

*Strong social relationships, including siblings* – It is important that children’s relationships with others are supported. This will mean that the adults need to give the children permission to talk about their feelings with others.

*Psychoeducational groups or specialized therapy* – Children may need additional help to heal in the aftermath of domestic violence. Providers need to identify such needs, communicate them to the parents, and facilitate appropriate referrals for services. Both parents need to be supportive of their children participating in such services, and talk to their children about their own experiences getting help.

*Clear social messages about responsibility for violence* – Everyone involved with children exposed to domestic violence needs to give a consistent message about who is responsible for the violence – the person who is violent. This helps to clear up the belief that children may have that they are responsible, as well as any misconceptions that the victim is responsible for the violence.

*If safe, have contact with non-custodial parent* – Children usually desire to continue to have a relationship with their non-custodial parent. This desire needs to be heard and understood and, if there can be assurance that the contact is safe, that relationship to be supported.

Children heal when they have opportunities to describe what they have experienced; express their emotional distress in words, artwork, and play; release their emotional distress through crying, tantrums, and laughter; and ask questions that allow for the correction of their

misconceptions. When children hear a consistent message that the abuse is not their fault, they are relieved from feeling guilty or responsible. In order to gain a sense of empowerment, children need to learn constructive actions that they can take. Overcoming a sense of powerlessness will support healthy development and a sense of competence. Children need opportunities to repair the damage that domestic violence has wreaked on their relationship with their mother. They may also need attention to repairing their relationships with their siblings, and permission to develop close relationships with other caring, non-abusive adults, including respectful men.

Finally, children are damaged when a parent has been hurt by domestic violence. They need to see their parents heal. They need to see their siblings heal. And ideally, they need to see the parent who has been abusive engage in his own healing and commit to non-violence.

**Appendix I** is a handout that shows aspects of a safe environment that will support children's healing that may be useful in working with parents.

### Talking to Children About The Violence

There were questions asked in each of the focus groups, and in the individual interviews with the adult survivors, about whether any conversations had taken place within their families about the violence.

Among the victims/survivors, most reported that they had not had specific conversations with their children about the domestic violence. Many expressed not knowing how, or if they should, talk to their children about the violence.

- ❖ *“Sometimes you're afraid to talk to them about what's going on.”*
- ❖ *“My son is only six years old and I can't find the words. I don't know how to tell him.”*

Many abusers offered reasons why they have chosen not to talk to their children about the domestic violence.

- ❖ *“My daughter is too young. There is no reason to have that conversation. If I see her going through that road, I might get involved. I might share a little bit about what went on between me and her mother. No room for it until it presents itself.”*
- ❖ *“I haven't talked to my kids. I have thought about it. I didn't want to have them relive the trauma.”*

A few shared their attempts to initiate the conversation:

- ❖ *“My son... was in a fight and he broke his hand. I asked if he could have avoided it. He said no. I tell him, 'leave the violence alone. Don't go this route.’”*
- ❖ *“I have [talked to my kids about the violence]. It made me cry in front of them. I got emotional. I talk to them every chance I get. That was something I had to do. I tell them: never follow in my footsteps. I had to tell them that wasn't right. My oldest one got it, but the youngest shrugs it off.”*

Among the adult survivors, none of the respondents recall conversations about the violence, either with their parents or others outside of the home, when they were children. However, most of them reported having found ways to “break the silence” in adulthood, and that it has been healing.

- ❖ *“So when he (father) died I began to talk about it little bit. And I would not necessarily tell [my mother] about what my experience was in the beginning, but I would ask her about her life. ...I would say it must have been so hard for you to grow up this way. You were so young and you had these young kids and he never helped you. I could talk with her more when I was a peer about this. Something that should have happened with her own peer group that never did. And then... after she was able to kind of tell me what it was like for her, then I was able to start to tell her what it was like for me in great detail. But it was too hard for her. But, I don’t know, a couple of years ago, she was able to say to me “that must have been so hard for you; I am sorry that that happened.” And that was the moment that the healing took place. We met as the mother that I needed today and she could acknowledge what it must have been like for me as a child, and I believe deep in my heart that children need that from their parents.”*
- ❖ *“I had a class on women studies. We were reading about violence against women, all sorts of violence, like violation of reproductive rights, and all. At the end of the class we were asked to write a paper about our experience of violence against women. And so it’s kind of hard not to answer that question truthfully and so that was the first time I really did open up about it, in this paper, and talked about, you know, the violence against my mother growing up.”*

### Helping Parents Talk To Their Children About The Domestic Violence

Given the difficulty in having conversations about the violence, this section suggests ways to help parents with this important process. The curriculum by Crager and Anderson (1997) is an excellent resource that includes suggested exercises to facilitate this process; excerpts and some elaboration of that curriculum are below.

Helping parents talk to their children about the domestic violence is a key part of the healing process. Parents need help in understanding what their children need to hear, and in preparing to listen and respond to their children. In order to prepare parents for this process, one must first appreciate and understand the ambivalence that many parents feel. There are typically many obstacles, as reflected in the quotes above and summarized in the possible reactions that are noted below:

- I have tried to talk about it. My child won’t listen.
- I feel uncomfortable.
- I’m scared to bring it up.
- I don’t know what to say.
- I don’t have the time.
- I’m embarrassed.
- I’m afraid I’ll make things worse.

- I don't think it's such a big deal.
- It's over now, why talk about it.
- I don't want them to hate their Dad.
- They won't understand.
- They didn't know it happened.
- They are too young to hear about it.
- They'll just be more scared.
- They'll tell other people.
- Their Dad will be mad.

One must counter these obstacles with the very good reasons for talking to their children about the domestic violence:

It communicates and provides support to the children:

- Although some believe that children do not know what is happening because they have not actually *seen* the violence, most children are very aware of the violence.
- Children often feel responsible and may need to be reassured that *none of the violence is their fault*.
- Some children are afraid to talk for fear of causing further worry and upset. It is often a huge relief to children to have this silence broken and be able to share their thoughts and feelings instead of bottling them up.
- Not talking to children can send a message that what is happening is unspeakable, which sometimes means that children learn not to talk about their own experiences of violence.
- It is helpful to explain to children that violence is wrong so that they do not grow up thinking that it is acceptable.
- Parents may want to let their children know that there are people outside the family who could help them to deal with how the violence is affecting them.

Talking with children about the violence increases their children's safety:

- Some parents find out after they have left violent relationships that their ex-partner was also being violent or abusive towards their children – and that the children did not tell them because they did not want to worry them and/or did not know that it is okay to talk about violence or abuse.
- Talking to children about the violence allows for planning what they could do in an emergency situation (e.g., calling the police or a trusted friend/neighbor).

Principles To Guide The Conversation With Children

In order to help prepare the parent to initiate conversation with their children, it is important to be explicit about the following principles to guide the conversation:

- Talk to children about the domestic violence when they are ready.
- Accept that they may not be willing or able to talk about it right away.

- Encourage children to talk about their feelings and experiences.
- Even if they are not ready to talk, initiating the conversation sends an important message that you are ready to listen when they are ready to talk.
- Recognize that sometimes the way children communicate is nonverbal (behavior) and not just talking. Pay close attention and spend time with them even if they are not talking.
- Listen without interruption or explanation.
- Acknowledge that it is hard/scary for them.
- Show understanding.
- Let them know it is not their fault.
- Remind them that you love them.
- Let them know you will try to keep them safe and act in a way that is safe.
- Let them know the violence is not okay.
- Always act in a way that is non-threatening and non-violent with your kids.
- Take them to counseling if they need it.
- Set limits respectfully when your child is behavior becomes violent.

There may be a number of obstacles to conversation about the violence. Children may have their own denial about domestic violence. When children are in denial about the domestic violence, they learn to deny and not talk about their feelings; they may come to believe that violence is normal. If they recognize that it is not “normal,” they become confused and are afraid to talk about it. Children may blame themselves, develop unrealistic beliefs about the causes of the violence, or feel like they are “crazy.” In general, children learn that it is not okay to ask about the violence or discuss it; they feel lonely and isolated from their friends.

***It's a lot scarier for kids when no one ever talks to them about the violence.***

– Crager and Anderson, 1997

Once such obstacles have been identified, it is helpful to give examples of ways to overcome such obstacles. Crager and Anderson suggest the following tips:

- Be patient. Do not push it. Try another time. They usually hear you anyway.
- Acknowledge that it may be uncomfortable for you to talk about the violence. Try to get more comfortable by talking to someone you trust.
- Acknowledge that it may be scary for you to remember the violence. It is scary for your kids, too. Once you start talking, it may feel less scary.
- Acknowledge that saying that you do not have time is probably because it is difficult, or you do not feel capable of talking to your child about it.

Finally, it is important for parents to try and think ahead of time about the ways in which their children may respond when they want to talk to them. Below are typical responses. It is helpful to go over this with parents preparing to talk to their children.

- The child may ignore the parent.





- The child may change the subject (“I’m hungry.”).
- The child may blame you (“If you were nicer to him, he wouldn’t hit you,” or “You should have done what he said.”).
- The child may “block out” the conversation by putting her hands over her ears.
- The child may act out his frustration (kick his Lego set, hit his sister, knock something over, etc.).
- The child may avoid the conversation (run to her room and slam the door).
- The child may try and take care of the adult’s feelings in the conversation, and avoid their own feelings (say, “Don’t worry, Mom,” and try and cheer you up).
- The child may become abusive (it is, after all, learned behavior). They may scream at you, call you names and say, “You’re so mean to my Mom.”
- The child may listen quietly, without saying anything. The parent can feel like they are not getting through, but chances are that the child is absorbing everything that is being said.
- The child may deny or minimize the situation (say, “It’s no big deal.”).

Parents need to know that once they have decided to talk to their children, they need to be prepared that the children may ask them some difficult questions or could refuse to talk about it at all. It is also important to help parents understand that they do not need to give their children detailed accounts of the violence – instead they should try to focus on how it has affected the children and their relationships within the family. Parents need help knowing how to follow cues from their children, stay with them at a pace that suits them, and be as honest and open as they can, taking into account their age and understanding. If the children talk to them about how they are feeling, the parent needs to respond sympathetically. For the victim of violence, it is also important to remember that the violence is not *their* fault either. This information, and more useful tips, can be found at the following website: [www/bbc.co.uk/relationships/domestic\\_violence](http://www/bbc.co.uk/relationships/domestic_violence).

### How to Listen to Children

As discussed in Chapter 3, listening is hard. Helping a parent listen to his/her children about their experiences and feelings related to domestic violence is especially difficult. It is helpful to explain to parents that many of us have the tendency to do everything except listen, including telling our own experiences, offering advice, denying the other person’s feelings, trying to analyze a situation, changing the subject, asking questions, defending the other person, or expressing pity. While there is nothing wrong with any of these responses, and they may even be appropriate at times, they are not the same as listening.

Crager and Anderson (1997) provide helpful steps to teach parents how to (and how not to) listen. Beyond the “basics,” the authors also provide guidance on how to listen for and accept feelings. The emphasis is on responding in a way that lets the child know that you understand. Hand in Hand, mentioned in Chapter 3, also provides some specific listening tools that could be very effective in parenting after violence (Wipler, P., 2005).



## ***Listening Tools***

***Special Time*** – The adult sets aside a distinct period of time – from five minutes to an hour – during which he will focus undivided attention on the child, doing whatever play the child chooses, within the limits of safety and reason. This basic tool helps a child feel that his parent is on his side, and that his ideas and interests are worthy. Special Time can both build and repair close parent/child connections.

This activity is especially valuable for children exposed to domestic violence, correcting the many times in which they were “invisible” or inhibited from play.

***Playlistening*** – The adult takes the less powerful role in play. The adult notices what allows the child to laugh (without being tickled), promotes the child’s laughter, and allows the child to explore play in the more powerful role. Laughter and fun build children’s confidence and help parents feel close, too.

This activity can actually be quite uncomfortable for victims/survivors of domestic violence because it requires the intentional relinquishing of power. In addition, “play” can be difficult; living with domestic violence is a very serious existence and the victim/survivor may have lost contact with her playful side. Abusers may have difficulty with this as well, for similar reasons. It might be helpful to describe these activities with parents and give them an opportunity to express feelings about the activity before attempting it. Also, the parent who feels uncomfortable could be advised to try this in “small doses.”

***Staylistening*** – The adult stays close to a child who is shedding emotions through crying, tantrums, trembling, or raging. The adult listens and allows the child to express his/her feelings of hurt. At last, when the child is finished, s/he can feel the caring the adult has offered, and s/he can relax, learn, and play well again. This tool restores children’s sense of connection, hope, and confidence after incidents of hurt, and preserves children’s ability to learn in challenging situations.

“Staying with” a child who is expressing emotions is an important component of listening and developing a healing relationship. It is important to stress with parents that if you stay with the emotion, and communicate that you are listening and attending, what begins with a reaction to having the television turned off, for example, can become an opportunity for the child to release deeper emotions related to her experiences of domestic violence.

***Setting Limits*** – The adult takes responsibility to stop behavior that is hurtful or thoughtless, without directing blame or hurtful actions toward the child. Or, the adult holds out a reasonable expectation, such as sitting in a car seat, without backing down and without angry or hurtful actions toward the child. When the child’s feelings about the limit or the expectation erupt, the adult stays and offers closeness, because having his feelings listened to will restore the child’s ability to think clearly again. Together with ***Staylistening***, this tool meets children’s need to offload the feelings of upset that interfere with close connections and good judgment, while maintaining the limits and expectations they need to be their best.

It may be hard to see that setting limits is a kind of listening, but done in the way described above is exactly that. It gives the parent an opportunity to both tune in to the child’s feelings (being expressed in behavior) and attend to it, while also correcting the child’s behavior. This

kind of activity can be especially useful in helping parents develop alternatives for physical punishment

*Redirecting* – When listening to a child’s feelings isn’t possible at the moment, the adult helps the child bring his attention away from the upset by offering a focus on an activity that is fun, engaging, or useful. This tool does not address the roots of the child’s tension, but can be used as a short-term solution when time, safety, and resources are in short supply. This tool helps children develop options for handling upsets in situations where they do not have the emotional support of the people around them.

This activity provides an option for parents who may be dealing with children’s emotions at “inopportune times.” It provides a way for the parent to listen and attend to the emotions that the child is experiencing, and also supports the child in learning how to tolerate their emotions.

This chapter has provided a framework for working with parents on the key issues that will help them develop restorative and reparative relationships with their children after domestic violence. More specific information related to discipline, visitation, child development, and communication, and additional issues is addressed in the curriculum by Crager & Anderson (1997). That curriculum provides an outline, informational materials, and homework exercises for parents that are very useful for practitioners. Readers can access this guide at <http://www.mincava.umn.edu>.

# **Chapter 5:**

## **Special Issues when Working with Victims/Survivors**

## Chapter 5: Special Issues when Working with Victims/Survivors

Working with survivors of domestic violence requires understanding of the ways that the domestic violence has affected them as individuals, as well as how it may have affected their relationships with their children. Because the statistics on domestic violence continue to demonstrate that the majority of victims of domestic violence are women, this chapter will predominantly address how mothers and mother-child relationships are affected.

The first thing to recognize when working with mothers who have been abused by their intimate partner is that these women often make decisions to stay with or leave their abuser based on their concern for their children. Providers need to respect and support the decisions that these women have made on behalf of their children and not judge those decisions hastily. It is far easier to be an outsider “looking in” and decide that a mother should have done something differently than she did, or more quickly than she did. Furthermore, many women continue to feel responsible for the effects of the domestic violence on their children, and their relationships with their children becomes infused with feelings of guilt or regret. These feelings are important to attend to, and one must assist the women in forgiving themselves and letting go of these emotions in order to be the best parents for their children that they can be today.

Research suggests that, when working with mothers who have been victimized by domestic violence, it is important to understand that, for many of these women, the trauma associated with domestic violence compounds experiences of violence and trauma that they experienced as children. In fact, mothers who were victims in their childhood and adolescence have poorer outcomes than those victimized “only” in adulthood, and their outcomes are generally worse. (Dubowitz, Black, Kerr, Morrel, Hussey, Everson, and Starr, 2001).

When mothers are victimized by domestic violence, their children’s health and well-being can be threatened. Furthermore, there tend to be “role differentiation” problems between mothers and children in these circumstances, which is problematic for both the child’s development and the mother-child relationship. Some research has suggested that children are further affected by the mother’s compromised ability to attend to and be emotionally available to their children. In general, mothers who have been victims of domestic violence are less tolerant of the everyday stressors associated with raising children. This can mean that the children are more vulnerable to be abuse by their mothers, or at the very least, bear the brunt of excessive forms of discipline.

Levendosky, Lynch, and Graham-Bermann (2000) suggest that there is a range of effects on parenting for mothers victimized by domestic violence. The authors found that many mothers experience reduced emotional energy or time to devote to their children and increased anger at their children. On the other hand, there may also be some “positive” effects of the mothers’ victimization. The stress associated with being a victim of domestic violence does not always translate into diminished parenting. Many mothers actually show increased empathy towards their children and increased sensitivity to their children’s feelings. Many women caught in a violent relationship work actively protect their children. This fact is important to keep in

mind when working with mothers, acknowledging and affirming all the ways in which they have done their very best to protect and care for their children.

Even when women leave an abusive relationship, it is widely accepted that their lives, and the job of parenting, becomes more difficult in many ways. (This may actually help explain why some women choose to return to an abusive relationship – coupled with the abusers’ promises to end their abusive behavior.) During the post-separation time, survivors of domestic violence may experience serious financial or work-related difficulties, physical problems, and emotional challenges. Women may experience depression, anxiety, feelings of being overwhelmed, distraction, and/or frustration that may interfere with their ability to parent (Levondosky & Graham-Bermann 2001).

The parenting of children who have been exposed and affected by domestic violence carries particular challenges. Children may express anger at their mother and blame her for the violence and/or the disruption in lives since a separation. They may miss their father or other caregiver, and be angry that he is no longer in their lives. Children will often test limits with their mother. In many relationships, the father or male caregiver has assumed a primary role in disciplining the children. Now that she is on her own, the children may not respect her authority or may act out in ways that test her ability to discipline them.

In the course of things, children may actually begin to “remind” the mother of the abuser. This can be particularly challenging because it triggers feelings of fear, anger, and powerlessness associated with the domestic violence. In these situations, children may be vulnerable to abuse by the mother simply because they are “smaller” than the abuser. The anger directed at the children is really misplaced anger (and maybe rage) that “belongs” to the abuser. On the other hand, some children’s behavior may actually remind the victim of herself. When she sees a child acting passively or “not defending herself,” the mother may become angry at the child. This is also misplaced anger – and connected to the anger that a woman may feel towards herself about the violence and related to feelings of self-blame.

Working with survivors of domestic violence requires careful attention to these dynamics. Paramount, however, is continued and careful attention to helping survivors/victims be safe. Even after leaving an abusive relationship, they continue to be in serious danger of continued violence. In fact, the danger often increases immediately after separation, and providers should assist mothers in developing post-separation safety plans and engage them in conversations about the increased danger.

The following guidelines will assist practitioners in dealing with the likely dynamics for mothers and their children after domestic violence has ceased. Information for this section has again been adopted from Crager & Anderson (1997). It is recommended that practitioners access this guide, which can be found at this website: <http://www.mincava.umn.edu>.

## The Effects of Domestic Violence on the Victim/Survivor

It is useful to help victims understand how the domestic violence has affected them as individuals. Below are some of the ways in which a woman may have been affected by being in a violent relationship.

- Exhausted
- Insulted, humiliated
- No privacy
- No freedom to express ideas
- Constant fear for herself and children
- No freedom to spend money
- Limited contact with friends and family members
- Having the rules she sets for the children undermined or changed
- No help with the children
- No time for herself
- Blamed and punished for children's misbehavior
- Sees her children being punished abusively
- No security in terms of her sense of safety, stability

## The Effects of Domestic Violence on Parenting

In the focus groups, the women discussed many ways in which the violence had affected their relationship with their children, in the ways their children treated them, and in the ways they felt about their mothering.

- ❖ *“My kids blame me because their father is in jail.”*
- ❖ *“I stayed with their father because they begged me not to leave... and now I am the bad parent.”*
- ❖ *“The kids copy the words that he used to yell at me.”*
- ❖ *“My son (seven years old) has told me that he wants to kill me.”*
- ❖ *“I feel like a failure, not just as a wife but also as a mother.”*
- ❖ *“I scream and yell, and then feel guilty for screaming. It wasn't right for my husband to yell at me, so it isn't right if I do it.”*

Some women recognized that their relationship with their children was affected by their children assuming a “protector” role towards them.

- ❖ *“My oldest daughter would often jump in the middle of our fights, even hitting and fighting with my boyfriend to protect me.”*
- ❖ *“My oldest son told me that he hid under the kitchen cabinet when he [the father] was beating me because he was afraid I would get hurt.”*
- ❖ *“I know my son feels like he has to help me and protect me when we argue.”*

- ❖ *“My daughter and son have both jumped between me and my boyfriend to try and stop him from hitting me.”*
- ❖ *“My daughter used to tell me to go to the store to get me out of the house [when we started to fight].”*
- ❖ *“I notice that my kids show more concern for me in general.”*

These dynamics almost certainly affect the way that a mother parents her children. It is helpful to engage women in identifying the ways in which the violence, control, and threats of violence may have affected their ability to be the kind of mother they want to be. The range of feelings that mothers identified in the groups that affect their relationship with their children include:

- Being constantly afraid for their children
- Feeling powerless to protect their children
- Feelings of guilt about the violence
- Feelings of shame
- Feeling that they have no authority as a mother
- Being afraid of losing their children
- Pattern of being undermined as a mother by their abusive partners
- Feelings of blame for being a bad mother

In many cases, living with violence and threats of violence, and the inability to exercise any control over their own lives affects mothers’ behavior towards their children as well. Some of the ways in which domestic violence affects mothers, both during and after the relationship with the abuser, include:

- Being overly permissive with the children
- Being overprotective of the children at times when they do not need her protection
- Being unable to pay enough attention to the children because they are overwhelmed by the violence
- Being afraid of what will happen when the children misbehave in front of the abuser
- Needing to rescue children from the abuser’s discipline/abuse
- Having difficulty maintaining structure or routines because of the violence
- Being unable to contain anger at the abuser, and turning it on the children
- Having little energy for the children because of stress and fatigue
- Abusing drugs/alcohol as a way to cope with the violence
- Giving children whatever they want because of feelings of guilt
- Being afraid to discipline because the abuser has threatened to report her to DHS or sue her for custody of the children

Finally, many times the domestic violence affects the ways that children act towards their mother. Below are some ways that children may respond to their mother:

- View her the way the abuser labels her (stupid, crazy, etc.)



- View her as weak because she “takes” the abuser’s abuse
- Do not respect her
- Do not listen to her
- Put her down
- Use power and control tactics against her
- Use physical violence against her
- Demand that she do what they want
- Treat her exactly the way the abuser does
- Try to take care of her all the time

Domestic violence can affect a mother in a lot of different ways. Lots of mothers who have been abused experience the following:

- Blame themselves for the violence and its impact on their children
- Loss of respect from the children and loss of authority with them
- Feelings towards the abuser that come out at the children
- High levels of anxiety and stress in daily life
- Fear of leaving the abuser because of the impact on the children

In order to help mothers repair their relationships with their children, it is helpful to identify the kinds of things that children need to hear from their mothers. Below are some points to discuss with mothers to prepare them for this process:

- The violence is not/was not EVER okay.
- The violence is not/was not your fault.
- It must be/must have been scary for you.
- I will listen to you.
- You can tell me how you feel; it is important.
- I’m sorry you had to see/hear it.
- You do not deserve to have this in your family.
- I will keep you safe.
- There is nothing you could have done to prevent/change it.
- We can talk about what to do to keep you safe if it happens again.
- I care about you. You are important.

A word about mothers apologizing to their children is important here. This in no way suggests that the victim of domestic violence is responsible for the violence. However, it is important for mothers to express their sorrow that their children have had to endure what no child should ever be exposed to. This sort of conversation can be healing for both the mother and child, and provide a way for the child to talk about their feelings about the violence. Many children hesitate to talk about the violence because they do not want their mothers to feel badly. (Children are uncanny protectors and will often “err” on this side of protecting

their mothers, even at their own emotional expense.) Having their mothers express their sorrow about their children's experiences of fear, anger, and other emotions associated with having one parent or caregiver threaten or harm the other, frees children to own those feelings, which is important in their healing process.

### **Safety Planning for Victims/Survivors of Domestic Violence**

As stated previously, attention to safety must remain the first priority in working with victims/survivors of domestic violence. Engaging women in discussion about how to plan for their own and their children's safety is extremely important. In addition, in order to maximize safety, women need to be able to identify and understand all the ways in which an abuser may use the children to maintain control. It is helpful to explain that while many abusers want to be good fathers, they may still use the children to gain control over their children's mothers. The ways in which abusive partners might use children against their mothers include:

- Criticizing the mother in front of the children.
- Getting children to take his side against her.
- Questioning children about their mother's activities.
- Yelling at the mother when the kids misbehave.
- Blaming the mother for the separation or divorce.
- Telling the children that the mother is crazy or a drunk or an addict, etc.
- Getting other family members to speak badly about the mother to the children.

Safety planning is important whether the victim stays or leaves the abusive relationship. In either case, it is helpful to discuss with mothers how to help their children identify "warning signs" of danger. Some of these include:

- Mother and father are arguing.
- Father is raising his voice.
- Father and/or mother is drunk/high.
- Father is name-calling or threatening.
- Father is slamming doors, stomping around.

When such signs emerge, children should be encouraged to do anything to stay safe, particularly things that have been planned. Some things children can do to stay safe include:

- Stay out of the way.
- Go to their rooms.
- Leave the house and go somewhere safe: a neighbor's house, a relative's house, or outside.
- Dial 911 if there is a phone where the father cannot hear them.
- Never try to physically stop the violence

Mothers need to tell their children that the children *cannot control* the abuser's behavior.

### Safety Planning for When the Children Visit Their Fathers

In the focus groups, some mothers expressed concerns about their children's safety in relationship to the abuser:

- ❖ *“Every time he picks them [the children] up I’m always afraid that I’m never going to see them again. That’s why I always tell the oldest to be aware of his surroundings and to look out for his younger siblings. I always make sure before they leave to always make sure that they are not being taken out of the state.”*
- ❖ *“He hits them too much. He used to say, ‘I’m not raising two sissies.’”*
- ❖ *“I came home from work... he had smashed their Lego boat... broken a coffee cup on the floor.”*

If a mother is afraid that her child's father may be abusive during visitation exchanges, she should be encouraged to request supervised visitation. She could ask a legal advocate at a domestic violence program to help her with arranging this. In addition, Crager and Anderson (1997) suggest the following:

- Visitation rules should be clearly written in any legal documents, and the mother should be sure to follow them herself. The rules should include very specific details about location, time, days, and arrangements for the safe transfer of the children.
- The mother needs to be consistent with the visitation/parenting plan. She should be supported in recognizing any attempts at manipulating or threatening her to change it.
- The mother should avoid all arguments with the child's father about visitation. If he wants to argue about it, she should be advised to hang up the phone or leave the situation.
- If there is no supervised visitation, the mother should arrange for the father to pick up the children at someone else's house. Ideally, this person knows the situation and understands the risk to the mother.
- The mother should have as little contact with the abuser as possible, over the phone and in person.
- The mother should try to make her child's experience as positive as possible, even though this can be extremely difficult. (More will be said about this later.)

### Orders for Protection

If a woman is separated from her children's father and she does not already have an order for protection (PFA: Protection From Abuse), she may want to consider getting one. If she does not have a protection order or a court-approved parenting plan, the father can legally have access to the children at any time. A PFA is a legal document issued by the court that is designed to protect a person from further domestic violence and allows the court to award certain considerations to victims of domestic violence (e.g., custody of their children, use of certain property, etc.). If a mother needs to restrict her children's father's access to the children, she will need a PFA even if a no-contact order has already been issued. The no-contact order requires him to stay away from the adult victim, but does not prevent him from having contact with their children.

The petitioner is not charged for filing an order for protection. The court can provide the following protections in the PFA:

- Give one parent custody and set a visitation schedule for the other parent's contact with the children;
- Order the respondent from causing the petitioner any physical harm, bodily injury, assault, including sexual assault; and from molesting, harassing, threatening, or stalking the petitioner;
- Order the respondent to stay away from the petitioner's residence, workplace, and school, and the daycare or schools of the children;
- Restrain the respondent from coming near the petitioner and from any contact whatsoever, in person or through others, directly or indirectly;
- Order the use/possession of essential personal effects or a vehicle; and
- Order one party to undergo drug/alcohol treatment, batterers' treatment, or counseling.

The more complete and detailed information a victim provides about the violence, the stronger the case she has will be. The victim can prove that the violence took place by telling the court in her own words what happened or by submitting documents (witness declarations, police reports, medical records, conviction records or dockets, pictures of bruises, pictures of property damage, batterers' treatment reports, statements from counselors, evaluations, etc.) to verify her claims.

PFAs may be issued for a fixed period or for one year. Orders restraining the respondent from contacting his minor children, however, may last only up to a year. A petitioner may apply for renewal of the order within three months before its expiration. It is extremely important that anyone working with victims of domestic violence to know and understand these procedures in order to best help them to stay safe.

This chapter has addressed issues specific to the relationship between the victim/survivor of domestic violence and her children. Again, to obtain more information, materials, and exercises, access the curriculum by Crager and Anderson at <http://www.mincava.umn.edu/>.

# **Chapter 6:**

## **Special Issues When Working With Abusers**

## Chapter 6: Special Issues When Working With Abusers

It has been suggested that formerly abusive fathers *who have taken responsibility for their violence* (italics added) could, for the sake of their children, establish emotionally supportive relationships with them (Worley, Walksh, & Lewis, 2004). Working with abusers to help them establish and nurture healing relationships with their children is a relatively new area. Some batterers' treatment programs have found that focusing on parenting after violence may be a way to more fully engage batterers in taking responsibility for their behavior and making a commitment to non-abusive behavior.

This chapter provides some guidelines and tips for working with perpetrators of domestic violence. Again, because statistics show that most abusers are men, the majority of this content will be focused on working with fathers. However, the principles and guidelines could be used with female perpetrators of domestic violence as well.

Information from Lundy Bancroft, provided in handouts at the Parenting After Violence conference in Philadelphia on December 7, 2005, has been integrated into this chapter. Bancroft has written extensively on fathering after violence, and readers may want to obtain his book (co-written with Jay Silverman), [The Batterer as Parent: Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Family Dynamics](#) (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

### History of Childhood Abuse among Abusers

In order to engage perpetrators of domestic violence and help them gain insight and change their relationships and behavior with their children, it is important to understand who they are and the ways in which they are likely to approach parenting. Therefore, this chapter begins with a summary of recent literature about domestic violence perpetrators.

A qualitative study reported by Worley, Walsh, and Lewis (2004) examined the parenting experiences of male perpetrators of domestic violence and found that the men studied routinely revealed that they had experienced unloving, rejecting, and dangerous parenting as children. This history of maltreatment during childhood most certainly leaves a mark on the male child, leaving the abused child vulnerable to perpetrating abusive behavior. These men have difficulty forming secure attachments and tend to be hypersensitive to abandonment, so any perceived threat of abandonment (emotional as well as physical) can trigger violent behavior. Unmet, frustrated attachment needs left over from childhood may be activated in adulthood, leading to susceptibility to reactions of extreme anger. This is likely to be played out in their attachments to their adult intimate partners, but also in their relationships with their children. The participants of this qualitative study seemed to continue to minimize their own violence upon their female partners, despite having recently completed anti-violence training interventions. This is a cautionary note for all who work with abusers.

### Characteristics of Men who Perpetrate Domestic Violence

For those who do not work regularly with perpetrators of domestic violence, it may be helpful to provide some "common" characteristics that many abusers share. This is not to suggest that all perpetrators of domestic violence have all of these characteristics, but it is helpful to

understand the range of behaviors that may impact one's work with an abuser in a treatment process aimed at facilitating a healing relationship between him and his children. It is in that spirit that the following list of characteristics is offered. These characteristics were offered by Bancroft at the 2005 "Parenting After Violence" conference sponsored by the Philadelphia Department of Human Services and the Institute for Safe Families, and have been further elaborated upon here. [Note: The author takes full responsibility for the elaboration of these characteristics.]

Men who abuse may:

*Be controlling* – A hallmark of domestic violence is the power and control that abusers wield over their intimate partners, and often the children as well (see Power and Control Wheel in **Appendix D**). It is difficult to relinquish this power, even in the therapeutic relationship, as it is typically a strong defense against the overwhelming feelings of powerlessness that abusers feel, maybe since childhood.

*Feel entitled or be self-centered* – Related to abusers' position of power and control is often a strong sense of entitlement that they might feel. If an abuser has been excluded from his children's lives, he may feel only anger about this and a sense that he is being deprived of something to which he is unquestionably entitled. Engaging an abuser in a process of repairing his relationship with his children must address this sense of entitlement head on, helping him to see that one is not simply "entitled" to love or forgiveness, but that these are things that one must earn. The tendency for self-centeredness also makes it extremely difficult to engage fathers in exercises to increase their empathy about what their children have experienced (as well as their victims). Increased empathy is the cornerstone to a process of building a reparative relationship. (More will be said about this later.)

*Believe he is the victim* – Many abusers are reluctant to engage in treatment because their perception (guided by the self-centeredness mentioned above) is that they have done nothing wrong and they are in fact being "punished" for something that is not their fault. In other words, they see themselves as the (primary) victims. This may be especially true for fathers who have been denied access or regular contact with their children. Complicating this is the fact that many abusers have been victims during childhood, and engaging them in a process of identifying their victimization, mourning accompanying losses, and healing from this part of childhood is a necessary part of the overall healing process for them (and often a part of batterers' intervention programs). One needs to help abusers to separate out when they may have been victimized and how they have proceeded to victimize others. It is now time for them to attend to their own healing AND make a commitment to stopping the cycle of violence.

*Be manipulative, and offer a good "public" image* – It is not uncommon for providers to be charmed by abusers, who may sometimes even present to the public as the "better parent." Providers need to be careful about this, particularly if they are in a position to provide recommendations for child custody and/or visitation arrangements. (More will be said about this later.)

*Be skillfully dishonest* – Related to abusers' propensity for manipulation and feelings of entitlement, their ability to deceive (even, or perhaps especially, themselves) can be remarkable. This is why most batterers' intervention programs require that the abusers permit the staff to contact the victim to obtain "her side" of the story.



*Present well early in the therapeutic relationship* – Victims of domestic violence frequently tell stories of how different, and wonderful, the abuser was early in the relationship. This is often true when abusers are beginning in the treatment process, as well. Providers need to be cautious of a parallel sort of “honeymoon” phase as they work to engage perpetrators.

*Externalize responsibility* – Recovery is not possible without assuming responsibility for one’s behavior, and this is often the most difficult piece of work with abusers. Related to habits of dishonesty and feeling wrongly accused (and the true victim), the tendency for abusers to externalize responsibility may be the key obstacle in helping them to see that they have hurt their children because of their behavior and they need to do something about it.

*Punish or retaliate* – When abusers feel as though they have been wronged in any way, one needs to be prepared, and prepare the children and victims, that there may be some attempt at retaliation. For instance, if an abuser perceives that he has been doing what he needs to do to resume contact with his children and is still not granted such access through the courts, he may attempt to “punish” the victim, the children, and/or the provider.

*Abuse serially* – When a victim has separated from her abuser, the provider needs to be alert to subsequent relationships that the abuser may develop. There is a strong likelihood, if the abuser has not engaged earnestly in a treatment process and committed to non-violence, that he will be abusive in his next relationship. This has serious ramifications for the children who may continue to be at risk for exposure to domestic violence in new relationships.

*Become more dangerous post separation* – It is a sad fact that the period after separation is an extremely dangerous time for victims and their children. All work with victims, abusers, and children must continue to focus on safety as the number one priority, and may call for ongoing revisions of safety plans.

### **Parenting by Perpetrators of Domestic Violence**

In the focus groups, the abusers varied in how much and what they noticed about how the violence had affected their relationship with their children.

- ❖ *“My younger ones cling to me. My older, not so much, he doesn’t know what mood I will be in today.”*
- ❖ *“My son reacted... he became sensitized to anyone who raised a voice. He would start to cry, demanded we stop.”*
- ❖ *“My oldest is more standoffish. He is more under his mom than me. I can just look at him and he is intimidated by me.”*
- ❖ *“They can forget and still love you. She forgets the things her mother and I went through.”*
- ❖ *“I don’t want him to be scared of me.”*
- ❖ *“I will hit them if I have to. It helps if there is a little fear... ‘Is it better to be feared or loved?’”*
- ❖ *“I had to work extra hard to establish a relationship with my son.”*
- ❖ *“They [the children] do not want to be around too much...”*

- ❖ “*I feel bad, guilty – it affects things.*”
- ❖ “*The kids use the same words to me that we [the adults] used to each other.*”

There is a great deal of research on the parenting styles of perpetrators of domestic violence. (Bancroft and Silverman summarize this research in the book, *The Batterer as Parent*, mentioned earlier.) Work with abusers requires that providers understand these behaviors in order to help abusers to recognize their parenting styles and the effects that their behavior may have had on their children and their relationship with their children. Below is a list of some of the ways in which abusers might behave in their relationships with their children that need to be corrected for healing to occur in the parent-child relationship. (Again, this is not to suggest that all abusers act in these ways.)

*Controlling* – As stated previously, the pattern of power and control that is ubiquitous with perpetrators of domestic violence gets played out in parent-child relationships as well. In fact, victims of domestic violence often assume the polar opposite position, being overly permissive in an attempt to “balance” the abuser. Both positions are unhealthy for child development.

*Authoritarian* – This is a “top-down” way of abusers being with their children. With this style of parenting, children are not permitted to question the parent and the parent expects to be obeyed, period. Again, victims of domestic violence may assume the opposite style, that is, permissiveness, which can be confusing to the children. In fact, abusers may justify their approach by saying that, because the other parent is so permissive, they have to be more authoritative.

*Under-involved* – Many abusers are only peripherally involved with their children. When engaging them in a process of repairing their relationship with their children, it is important that providers help these abusers understand that, just because they now want to be involved, does not mean that their children will readily accept them. They cannot go from non-involvement to involvement without addressing the feelings that the children may have had about their “absentee” parent.

*Undermining and/or interfering with the mothers’ parenting* – Undermining the other parents’ parenting is one way in which abusers maintain control over their victims. In order to engage in a process of restorative parenting, abusers must actively support the other parent.

Below are some ways in which abusers may undermine or interfere with the mothers’ parenting:

- Criticizing the mother in front of the children
- Changing the rules for the children to make her look bad
- Yelling at the mother when the children misbehave
- Telling the children that their mother is crazy or a drunk or an addict, etc.
- Getting other family members to speak badly about the mother to the children
- Teaching the children to put their mother down and call her names

*Using the children as weapons* – There is no better way to continue to control a victim of domestic violence than through her children. If abusers are engaged in using the children as a

way to control, punish, or retaliate against the victim for attempts to stop the violence, they are not ready to establish a healing, non-violent relationship with their children.

Below are some ways in which an abuser may use the children as a weapon against the victim.

- Get children to take his side against her
- Question children about the mother's activities
- Intentionally withhold money for the children's needs
- Use visitation as a way to control/harass her
- Make the mother responsible for taking care of all the children's needs, and then blame her when not all their needs are met

*Having a limited sense of age-appropriateness* – Abusers may have unrealistic expectations of their children, lacking awareness of child development and age-appropriate behaviors. In fact, lack of such understanding may lead the children to be vulnerable to abuse by the abuser when he gets angry at behavior that he does not understand is age-appropriate. It might be necessary to educate abusers on appropriate child development and behavior in order to help them establish age-appropriate expectations for their children and their relationship.

*Good under observation* – Providers need to be aware that abusers may be able to demonstrate exemplary behavior under observation and still not be safe for unsupervised contact with his children. (Remember the note above about being able to put on a good “public image”?)

*Tending to see children as personal possessions* – Working with abusers to restore their relationship with their children may actually require a fundamental shift in the way in which they have previously related to their children. The kinds of relationships that many abusers have, with other adults as well as their children, are often characterized by objectification. They “handle” these relationships and do not interact in a reciprocal manner as with full-dimensional people. Helping them to have a relationship with their children means helping them to learn how to relate to others in a deeply different way.

*Rarely improving post-separation* – Providers must be careful to guard against the assumption that abusers' parenting will “spontaneously” improve after separation. While this may be true in some cases, chances are equally good that abusers will develop even more dangerous ways of behaving with their children. In fact, there may be a higher risk of child abuse after separation.

### **Continued Risks to Children from Perpetrators of Domestic Violence**

Work with perpetrators of domestic violence related to their relationships with their children must be approached with caution. There are many risks for children who are in contact with their fathers/caregivers who have been abusive to their mothers. Bancroft and Silverman (2002) suggest the following risks for children:

- Risk of continued undermining of the mother's parenting and damage to the mother-child relationship
- Risk of continued exposure to authoritarian and/or neglectful parenting
- Risk of exposure to new threats or violence, psychological maltreatment, or direct victimization by the batterer

- Risk of learning violence-supportive beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors
- Risk of being abducted or otherwise used as a tool of the perpetrator
- Risk of exposure to violence in the perpetrator's subsequent relationship(s)

Bancroft and Silverman suggest gathering the following information when assessing a perpetrator's risk to his children:

- Perpetrator's history of physical or sexual abuse and neglect of his children
- Level of continuing danger to the non-abusing parent
- History of using children in or exposing them to violent events
- Level of coercive control that the perpetrator has exercised in the past
- Degree to which the perpetrator feels entitled to access to the children and to other family privileges
- History of substance abuse and mental illness
- Willingness to accept the decisions of the victim and of social institutions, such as law enforcement and the courts
- Risk of child abduction

### **Impact Of Domestic Violence On The Perpetrator**

In the same way that work with victims of domestic violence should begin with helping them to understand how domestic violence may have affected them as individuals and as parents, work with abusers should do the same. Some of the ways in which being perpetrators of domestic violence may have affected abusers include:

- Loss of trust from partner
- Loss of intimacy
- Loss of respect
- Loss of self respect
- Fear of getting caught
- Possible arrest and jail time if police are called
- Possible loss of job and friends
- Possible loss of partner and children

Some of the ways in which abusers' relationships with their children may be affected include:

- The children are afraid of him
- The children run away when he tries to show them affection
- The children withhold information about their lives
- The children don't ask him for help or support
- The children do not talk freely with him
- The children are not able to have fun with him because they are afraid of what he might do
- The children lie to him to protect themselves or their mother

- The children use violence against him
- The children do not respect him

### Fathering After Violence

The work in supporting fathering after violence is still developing, but there are very good reasons to pursue the engagement of fathers in repair of their relationships with their children. In the victim/survivor focus groups, many mothers identified a desire to support the relationship between the children and their father/father figure, in spite of the abuse:

- ❖ *“He does ‘fatherly’ things with them. Takes them to the park, teaches them right from wrong, plays games and acts silly with them.”*
- ❖ *“Their father loves them, and the children love their father. They get to spend time with him.”*
- ❖ *“My son’s relationship with his father is okay... but he knows about his abusiveness to his girlfriends.”*
- ❖ *“My children look up to him. He was a parent to all of them (even though not a biological parent to all the children). They respect him... even though he is abusive.”*
- ❖ *“My son wrote a letter to his father letting him know that he forgave him for his behavior (toward me) when we were together. I don’t want them to feel resentment towards him – everyone deserves a chance.”*

Nevertheless, the women also identified some concerns and “conditions” on their willingness to co-parent with a formerly abusive partner. These should be kept in mind when engaging abusers:

- ❖ *“I need to see some effort from him. I want him to be more responsible.”*
- ❖ *“I need him to be more financially responsible – for himself and the children. The kids need to see him go to work everyday.”*
- ❖ *“I don’t want to have to beg for help.”*
- ❖ *“I want him to spend time with our son without me having to ask him to.”*
- ❖ *“I don’t believe that you can put the children first if you put their mom last.”*

Fathering After Violence (FAV) is a national initiative pioneered by Juan Carlos Areán and Ann Fleck Henderson and developed by the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPF) and its partners to enhance the safety and well-being of women and children by motivating men to renounce their violence and become better fathers (or father figures) and more supportive parenting partners. (Fleck-Henderson & Arean, 2004). FAV is not a program per se or a quick solution to a complex problem. Rather, it is a conceptual framework to help end violence against women by using fatherhood as a leading approach. Using this framework as a starting point, the FVPF and other practitioners have developed culturally appropriate practical tools, prevention and intervention strategies, and policy and practice recommendations. FAV proposes engaging abusive fathers by helping them develop empathy for their children and using this empathy as a motivator to change their behavior. It uses an assessment framework to help practitioners discern which fathers might be appropriate to work with to repair their

relationships with their children. The FAV initiative is described in some detail below. This information is taken from the website [www.endabuse.org](http://www.endabuse.org); full reference provided in the Resources and References in **Appendix K** and **Appendix L**.

### **Guiding Principles for Fathering After Violence**

The Fathering After Violence initiative provides the following guiding principles for the work of Fathering After Violence. It is suggested that any provider adopt these principles when engaging abusers in a process to focus on parenting and their relationship with their children.

- The safety of women and children is always the first priority.
- This initiative must be continually informed and guided by the experiences of battered women and their children.
- This initiative does not endorse nor encourage automatic contact between the offending fathers and their children or parenting partners.
- In any domestic violence intervention, there must be critical awareness of the cultural context in which parenting happens.
- Violence against women and children is a tool of domination and control used primarily by men and rooted in sexism and male entitlement.
- Abuse is a deliberate choice and a learned behavior and therefore can be unlearned.
- Some men choose to change their abusive behavior and heal their relationships; others continue to choose violence.
- Working with fathers is an essential piece of ending violence against women and children.
- Fathers who have used violence need close observation to prevent further harm.
- Work with fathers must embrace notions of non-violence broadly.
- Service coordination among providers of domestic violence services is essential.
- The reparative process between abusive fathers and their children often is long and complex and is not appropriate for all men.

### **Fathering After Violence: The Reparative Framework**

The reparative framework proposed by the Fathering After Violence Initiative is intended to guide FAV work with those fathers who are in the position to start healing their relationships with their children in a safe and constructive way. This framework was conceptualized by research with men who had stopped their violence and started to heal their relationships with their children and, in many ways, parallels the “stages of change” model discussed earlier. A key emphasis is on identifying the readiness of an abusive father to accept responsibility for the violence and repair his relationship with his children, letting the children set the “pace.”

#### The Reparative Framework:

*Changing abusive behavior* – It is imperative that fathers stop all kinds of abuse immediately. This is one of the fundamental goals of batterer intervention and, of course, a prerequisite to starting any reparation.





Modeling constructive behavior – Children learn by example. Fathers need to know that, as they stop modeling destructive behaviors, they have to make a concerted effort to model positive ones. A key teaching concept in this project is that a father cannot be a good model for their children if he is abusive, disrespectful, or hateful to their mother.

Stopping denial, blaming and justification – Most batterer intervention works toward having men take full responsibility for their abusive behavior. In the context of this framework, programs need to teach fathers about the negative effects denial, blaming, and justification can have on children.

Accepting all consequences for one's behavior – Violence prevention activists often think of consequences primarily from the criminal justice system perspective. Fathers involved in a reparation process need to understand that facing the consequences of their behavior may also include accepting rejection and the loss of trust, love, and even contact with their children.

Acknowledging damage – It is important that fathers realize the amount of damage they have inflicted and that they let their children know that they understand specifically how they have hurt them.

Supporting and respecting the mother's parenting – Men who are abusive often continue to undermine the authority of the other parent. Fathers need to restore the sense of respect for the mother's authority and decision making and fully support her parenting, especially if the father finds himself in a secondary parenting role.

Listening and validating – Fathers need to prepare and be willing to receive anger, hurt, sadness, fear, and rejection from their children. It is essential that they understand that this is part of the healing process and not a way for the children to manipulate the situation.

Not forcing the process nor trying to "turn the page" – Except for the actions that involve personal change work, every action in this framework has to take place on the children's own terms and timing. Fathers have to learn how to be patient, not try to push healing or contact with their children, and be open to talking about the past as many times as their children need to do this.

The Fathering After Violence initiative is an important first step in identifying ways to engage fathers in restorative parenting. They have found that many men are able to develop empathy toward their children more easily than toward their partners. Understanding the effects that domestic violence has had on their children can be a strong motivator for some men to change their behavior. Finally, recent research suggests that some mothers who have suffered abuse want their children to have safer and healthier contact with their fathers and that positive involvement with a father figure can be very beneficial to children's development. There is good reason for doing this work.

For more information on the Fathering After Violence initiative, please contact Juan Carlos Areán at 617-262-5900 or [juancarlos@endabuse.org](mailto:juancarlos@endabuse.org).

### **Restorative Parenting**

Now that the framework for maximizing the safety of children and their other parent (the victim of domestic violence) has been established, the process of engaging abusers in restorative parenting will be addressed. All of the material presented in Chapter 4, "Working

with Parents” applies to abusers as well. However, this section offers specific guidelines and ways to engage abusers. This section draws heavily on the curricula by Crager and Anderson (1997) and Fleck-Henderson and Areán (2004) mentioned previously.

### What Children Need To Hear From The Abuser

Abusers need to be prepared to talk with their children *about* the violence. This is a difficult conversation to have, but in the same way that children need to hear certain messages from their non-abusing parent, they need to hear from the abusing parent that violence is not okay, and that the children are not responsible for the violence. Specific messages could include:

- My behavior was not okay, violence is not okay
- I am responsible.
- It’s not your fault.
- It’s not your mother’s fault.
- I am sorry you had to see/hear that.
- You must have been scared.
- I will listen to you.
- It is okay if you are mad at me, scared of me. I would be too.
- You should not have to have this happen in your family.
- Your feelings are important.
- I am getting help so you can feel safer.

### Supporting Accountability

Abusers need to learn to be accountable for their behavior, and that means being accountable to their children. If an abuser maintains an attitude of treating his children as possessions and/or an unwillingness to relinquish an authoritarian parenting style, he will not be able to accept that a part of the healing process for the children includes having conversations with the children that reflect his “owning” his behavior.

Such a conversation, or series of conversations, with children needs preparation and forethought. Abusers should be encouraged to spend time reflecting on what they need to say to their children. They need to be conscious about choosing a peaceful time to talk to the children. Abusers should be as specific as possible in acknowledging the wrongness of their violent, abusive, and controlling behavior – without rationalizing or blaming anyone else. Finally, such a conversation is not a true conversation unless the abuser commits to *listening* to the children’s reactions. Children may or not be ready to respond. They may still feel very fearful. They may also have denial about the domestic violence, blame their mother (taking a page from the abuser’s book), and/or be too angry at the abuser to be able to respond. Abusers should be directed that, just because they are ready for this conversation, does not mean that the children are ready. They cannot demand a response from their children. And they certainly should not demand, or expect, “forgiveness.”

What an abuser *does* will always “speak much louder” than what he says. Therefore, part of being accountable to the children is behaving in a nonviolent way in all future interactions with the children’s mother and demonstrating to the children that he is safe to be around. The abuser needs to make a commitment to speak positively to others about the children’s mother. (Talking badly about their other parent is a form of abusiveness to the children.) It is important for the children to observe that the abuser can get angry without being frightening. If applicable, the abuser demonstrates accountability by paying child support regularly. An abuser needs to be prepared for the kind of response that his children may have towards him when he initiates a conversation about the domestic violence.

### Respectful Parenting with the Other Parent

A commitment to nonviolence includes communicating and interacting with the other parent in a respectful manner. This is extremely important for the children as it is a way to demonstrate changed behavior and model for the children how to respect their parent. This can go a long way in correcting the disrespect victims are often shown by their children after there has been violence and abusiveness directed at them by the children’s other parent.

Respectful parenting includes:

- Showing respect to the other as a parent
- Valuing and honoring the other parent’s needs
- Sharing decision-making about raising the children
- Supporting the other parent in front of the children, even if you disagree with her decision
- Discussing disagreements about parenting in a respectful way, and only when the children are not present
- Agreeing on shared goals for children
- Agreeing or compromising/negotiating about the care and discipline of children
- Resolving problems in respectful, non-violent ways

Respect of the other parent continues when the other parent is not around. Any discussions about the other parent need to be confined to saying positive things, with no triangulation with the children or interrogation of the children about their mother’s activities. Some issues that abusers should not discuss with the children include:

- Arrangements for child support
- Anger, resentment, frustration with their mother
- Questions about who their mother is seeing, where she lives, where she works, her phone number or address, anything she is doing that is NOT related to the child’s regular activities
- Any feelings for their mother outside of the parenting relationship
- Any feelings about her new partner

### Guidelines for Visitation

Crager and Anderson (1997) provide some very specific recommendations for visitation that are important for providers to understand and discuss with abusers. First, they suggest that if the abuser is very angry at the other parent, or feel that they are at risk for being abusive to her, it is very important to plan ahead so that the children are not hurt or scared by their feelings or behavior. Some suggestions are:

- Arrange for supervised visitation, or ask a friend or family member who knows the children to take them from one parent to the other.
- Prepare for the visit by discussing your angry feelings with someone other than your children, for example, a counselor, a sponsor, or a close friend.
- Make a rule for yourself that you will NOT use your children as a way to hurt or control their mother. Using them in this way will not help the children or your relationship with them.

Crager and Anderson also provide specific suggestions for fathers who are separated or divorced from their children's mother. The suggestions frame ways that fathers can best support the children and their needs, which should always take priority over their own needs. In particular, the authors suggest that, to help the children, fathers need to commit to not speaking badly about their mother, finding one or two positive things about her to say to the children regularly, and to make visitation as safe and predictable as possible for them.

### Discipline

It is helpful to review with perpetrators of domestic violence the harmful affects of physical punishment. Parenting in a non-violent way must include a commitment to non-physical forms of discipline. Abusers need to understand that, while harsh physical punishment is never acceptable, when children have witnessed domestic violence, they are particularly vulnerable to being emotionally scarred when physical punishment is used against them. Physical punishment may make them (more) afraid of their father, may trigger intense fear related to witnessing violent episodes against their mother, and may make them afraid that their mother will get hurt if she tries to protect them (this is not uncommon). Abusers need help in learning how to set limits in positive ways, establish consequences for behavior and be consistent with them, listen to children, and learn how to problem-solve.

Below is a handout (also found in **Appendix J**) that may assist abusers in assessing the impact of their behavior on their children and guide them in improving their relationships with them.

### *Could your children say...?*

Could your children say the following about you as their father, stepfather, or mother's boyfriend?

- ❖ My dad respects my mother.
- ❖ My dad listens to my mom when she has something to say.
- ❖ My dad is nice to my mom.
- ❖ My dad likes it when my mom visits with her friends and family because mom comes home happier.
- ❖ Sometimes my mom makes the big decisions and sometimes my dad makes the big decisions in the house and sometimes they make those decisions together.
- ❖ My dad knows how to handle being angry without hurting other people.
- ❖ My dad isn't afraid of being gentle and kind to my mother, my brothers or sisters, or me.
- ❖ Even when my dad is stressed out from work or something else, he still treats us well.
- ❖ I'm not afraid to ask my dad questions or tell him about things I've done wrong.
- ❖ My dad gets mad at me sometimes but I'm never scared he's going to hurt me.
- ❖ My dad knows how to stand up for himself or speak his mind without getting violent physically or verbally.
- ❖ My dad knows and cares when I'm feeling bad or upset.
- ❖ My dad doesn't criticize me when I make mistakes.
- ❖ My dad knows a lot but isn't afraid to say when he doesn't know and ask for help.
- ❖ When I grow up I want to be treated the way my dad treats my mom.  
(Or I want to treat my partner the way my dad treats my mom.)

What else would you like your children to say about their dad?




# Appendices




## Appendix A:

### **Readiness for Change When Working With Domestic Violence Survivors/Victims**



## Readiness for Change When Working With Domestic Violence Survivors/Victims

STAGE	Client Presentation	Provider strategy	She says:	Response:
<p><b><u>Pre-Contemplation</u></b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The stage of denial</li> <li>▪ Individual is (relatively) unaware of the problem, or defines the problem differently than you do.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Educate.</li> <li>▪ Point out discrepancies.</li> <li>▪ Use leverage.</li> <li>▪ DON'T PUSH</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I love my husband.</li> <li>▪ I don't want my kids to come from a broken home.</li> <li>▪ He said he'll never do it again. Things are better now.</li> <li>▪ My husband only hits me when he's drunk.</li> <li>▪ I shouldn't have been nagging him.</li> <li>▪ It was my fault; I hit him first.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Can you tell me what happened last time?</li> <li>▪ I'm glad you told me about this.</li> <li>▪ May I give you information about ways you and your children can be safe?</li> <li>▪ May I give you resource information?</li> <li>▪ Do you want to talk to someone about this?</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Contemplation</u></b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ May be more aware of the problem.</li> <li>▪ Also likely to be highly ambivalent.</li> <li>▪ May begin to think about the idea of change, but has not fully decided if she wants to take action.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Explore ambivalence.</li> <li>▪ Provide a neutral stance.</li> <li>▪ Create a decisional balance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I know it's not fair that he treats me this way.</li> <li>▪ I feel like I'm always walking on eggshells.</li> <li>▪ The kids get really scared when we fight.</li> <li>▪ If he hits me one more time, that's it.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ It sounds like this is very hard on you.</li> <li>▪ What will you do if this happens again?</li> <li>▪ Have you thought about how that would affect you and your kids?</li> <li>▪ Can I help you evaluate the pros and cons?</li> <li>▪ Can I give you resource information?</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Preparation</u></b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ She is ready to accept that there is a problem and intends to make a change.</li> <li>▪ She needs to establish her own personal criteria for change.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Make change a priority.</li> <li>▪ Encourage movement.</li> <li>▪ Realistic plans.</li> <li>▪ "Consultant role"</li> <li>▪ She needs to be aware that going into the action stage is a dangerous time.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I'm going to leave him, and I've started my own bank account so that the kids and I can start over.</li> <li>▪ I've found a safe place to live and I'm moving next week when he's away.</li> <li>▪ I'm going to join a support group.</li> <li>▪ I've reconnected with people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Do you have a safety plan and exit strategy?</li> <li>▪ Do you need resource information or a referral?</li> <li>▪ The most dangerous time for you and your children is at the time you leave or afterwards.</li> <li>▪ Sometimes people change their minds. If now isn't the right time, that's OK.</li> </ul>

STAGE	Client Presentation	Provider strategy	She says:	Response:
<p><b><u>Action</u></b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Commit time and effort to implement the planned changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Right-sized” steps.</li> <li>▪ Plan for high-risk situations.</li> <li>▪ Remind her that if she does go back, she is not a failure.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The kids and I moved out last week. We’re at a shelter now.</li> <li>▪ I’ve joined Al-Anon.</li> <li>▪ When he comes home drunk, the kids and I go to my sister’s for the night.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ You have taken a great step, but you and your children are not necessarily out of danger.</li> <li>▪ Do you need resource info/a referral?</li> <li>▪ Sometimes women decide to go back. If you do, you are not a failure.</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Relapse</u></b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The rule rather than exception.</li> <li>▪ Individual will revert back to earlier stage.</li> <li>▪ But wiser.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Learning opportunity.</li> <li>▪ Identification of stage-appropriate role.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I don’t need your help anymore; he’s changed. (denial revisited?)</li> <li>▪ Please don’t ask me about this anymore. (embarrassment?)</li> <li>▪ I’m sorry I wasted your time with this... I think I was blowing things out of proportion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I really hope that he has changed, that would be wonderful for you and the children.</li> <li>▪ Many women change their minds; that’s part of the process. It’s OK.</li> <li>▪ It could be that you weren’t blowing things out of proportion, but that your feelings have changed for now.</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Maintenance</u></b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ An extended “stage”.</li> <li>▪ Will develop new behaviors and coping skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Important that her support system is personally/culturally relevant.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ He still calls me and tells me how much he loves me. When he cries, I feel worse for him than myself, but I know it will just be the same if I go back.</li> <li>▪ The kids feel bad that their dad and I can’t be together, but I know that this is the best thing for them, not just me.</li> <li>▪ I go to a support group with other women who’ve gone through the same thing as I have.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ This is great that you have started your life over.</li> <li>▪ Do you need resource information and/or a referral?</li> <li>▪ Sometimes, people decide to go back. That doesn’t mean they are failures.</li> </ul>

## **Appendix B**

*“There’s A Hole In My Sidewalk: An Autobiography In Five Short Chapters”*

***“There’s A Hole In My Sidewalk: An Autobiography In Five Short Chapters”***

By Portia Nelson

**Chapter One**

I walk down the street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I fall in.  
I am lost... I am helpless.  
It isn't my fault.  
It takes forever to find a way out.

**Chapter Two**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend I don't see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can't believe I am in this same place.  
But it isn't my fault.  
It still takes a long time to get out.

**Chapter Three**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I see it is there.  
I still fall in... it's a habit... but,  
My eyes are open,  
I know where I am.  
It *is* my fault.  
I get out immediately.

**Chapter Four**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I walk around it.

**Chapter Five**

I walk down another street.

## **Appendix C**

### **Readiness for Change: Accepting Impact of Domestic Violence on Children and Talking to Them**

## Readiness For Change: Accepting Impact of Domestic Violence on Children and Talking to Them

STAGE	She says:	Response:
<b><u>Pre-Contemplation</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ My children are fine.</li> <li>▪ They don't know what went on.</li> <li>▪ They were sleeping.</li> <li>▪ It's in the past. They just want to forget about it.</li> <li>▪ They're just mad I can't give them all the stuff their Dad gives them.</li> <li>▪ I don't need to talk to them about what happened.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ You've done a great job taking care of your children in the midst of the violence.</li> <li>▪ It's amazing, children always seem to know more than we think they do.</li> <li>▪ I bet they (and you) do want to forget about it. But that's not the best way to heal from the kind of hurt you and your children have lived through.</li> <li>▪ May I give you information about ways your children may have been affected by DV?</li> </ul>
<b><u>Contemplation</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I've been thinking that maybe (the DV) is why the kids are [having a hard time in school, not listening to me, don't have any friends, have trouble sleeping, etc.] – but it's probably more about having to move than anything.</li> <li>▪ I have noticed that I don't seem to have as much patience with them as I'd like. But I'm under so much stress!</li> <li>▪ I'm afraid to talk to them about what happened. I don't know what to say.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ It sounds like this is very hard on you</li> <li>▪ Any kind of change is difficult for children. Though it does sound like they are also reacting to the violence.</li> <li>▪ You are under a lot of stress. And living with the stress of DV and keeping your kids safe takes a toll.</li> <li>▪ If your kids have been affected by DV, what would that mean about you as a parent?</li> <li>▪ May I share some resources that might be helpful?</li> </ul>
<b><u>Preparation</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I need to get some help for my kids.</li> <li>▪ I would like to get some help for me so I can handle the kids better.</li> <li>▪ I need to be able to talk to my kids about what happened and how they feel.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What kind of help are you thinking about (assessment and referral)?</li> <li>▪ Let's talk about how to start that conversation with your children about the violence. How will that be for you?</li> <li>▪ Your children may respond to</li> </ul>



		your starting this conversation in a number of different ways...
<b>STAGE</b>	<b>She says:</b>	<b>Response:</b>
<b><u>Action</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The kids are getting special help at school.</li> <li>▪ I've made an appointment...</li> <li>▪ I joined a support group.</li> <li>▪ I started a conversation with my kids about the violence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ You have taken a great step – that's wonderful!</li> <li>▪ Sometimes things “get worse” before they get better – even when you have gotten help.</li> <li>▪ Do you need resource information/a referral?</li> <li>▪ Let's talk about how to keep the lines of communication open for an on-going conversation.</li> </ul>
<b><u>Relapse</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Everything is fine – I don't think we need to go to _____ anymore.</li> <li>▪ I just need to focus on today; I've got to let go of the past.</li> <li>▪ My kids need to learn to adjust and let go of the past.</li> <li>▪ I'm tired of talking about/listening to the past and the violence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I hope that everything is fine, but change really takes time.</li> <li>▪ I know you have a lot to focus on in the day-to-day and it must be hard to juggle it all. Healing from the past is more than letting it go. I hope you give yourself a chance to really heal.</li> <li>▪ What's going on with your kids that you think they aren't adjusting? What's hard for you that they need to talk about the past?</li> </ul>
<b><u>Maintenance</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ We're doing well, though everyone is at their own place as far as their healing from the violence.</li> <li>▪ I know that I may need and/or my children may need to deal with these issues at different points in the future.</li> <li>▪ Anytime my kids want/need to talk about the violence, I'm ready.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ You've got a great perspective on this.</li> <li>▪ It's hard to listen to your children's thoughts and feelings about the violence when you thought it was “over” but it really is the best way to support them.</li> </ul>

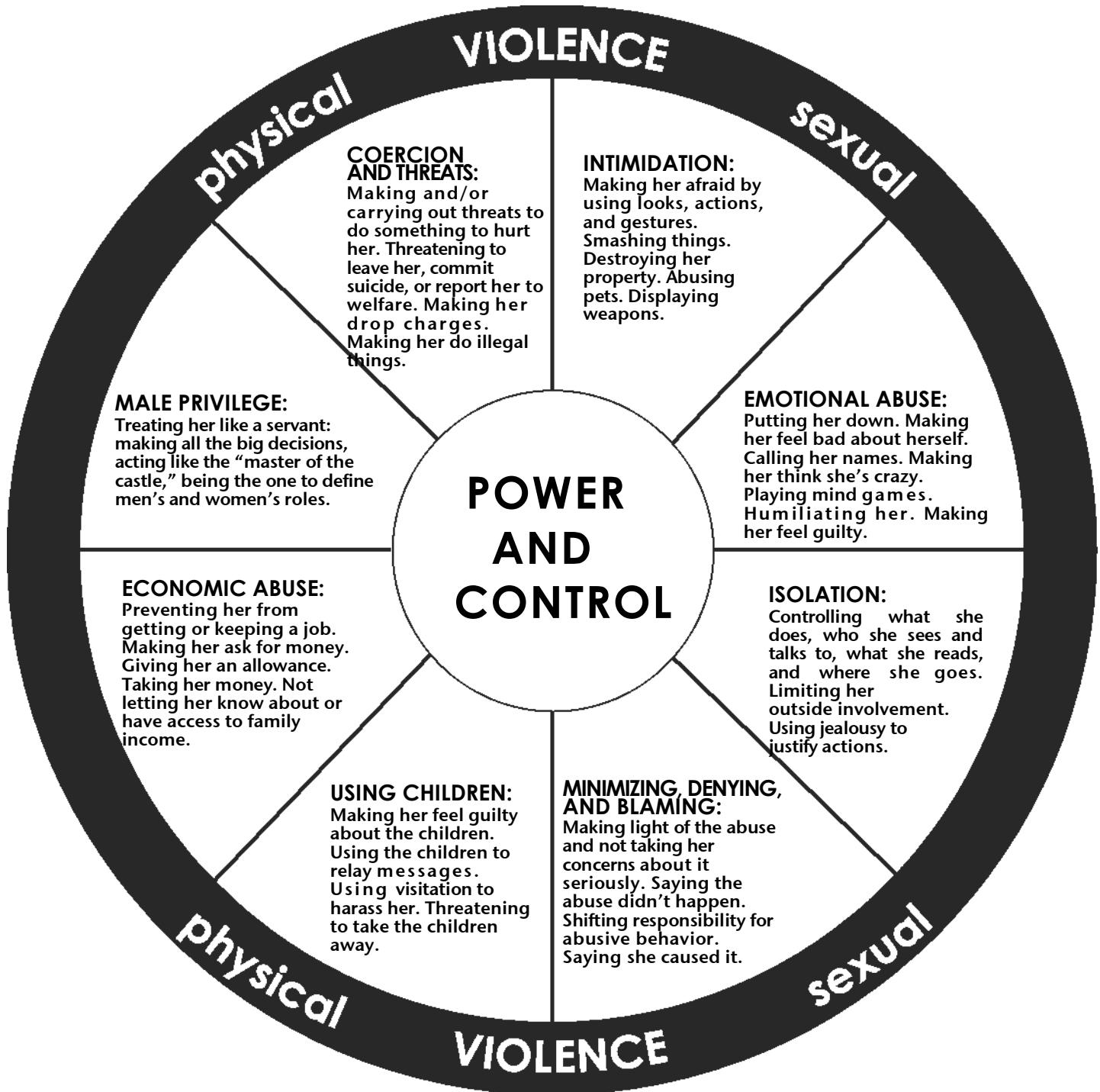
## **Appendix D**

### **Power and Control Wheel**

# POWER AND CONTROL WHEEL

Physical and sexual assaults, or threats to commit them, are the most apparent forms of domestic violence and are usually the actions that allow others to become aware of the problem. However, regular use of other abusive behaviors by the batterer, when reinforced by one or more acts of physical violence, make up a larger system of abuse. Although physical assaults may occur only once or occasionally, they instill threat of future violent attacks and allow the abuser to take control of the woman's life and circumstances.

The Power & Control diagram is a particularly helpful tool in understanding the overall pattern of abusive and violent behaviors, which are used by a batterer to establish and maintain control over his partner. Very often, one or more violent incidents are accompanied by an array of these other types of abuse. They are less easily identified, yet firmly establish a pattern of intimidation and control in the relationship.



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## **Appendix E**

### **Second Hand Abuse**

## **Second Hand Abuse**

### **The Painful Legacy of Witnessing Domestic Violence**

By Barbara Corry, M.A.

Battering causes damage and distress to the fetus.

Battering adversely affects infants and toddlers.

Older children see and hear violence.

Battering means emotional abandonment.

A Battering Home means living in constant fear.

Violence creates constant anxiety.

A violent home means feeling powerless.

Battering creates low self-esteem.

Family violence results in behavioral problems.

Battering creates isolation.

Battered children take on adult roles prematurely.

Violence results in stress, depression, and flashbacks.

Battered children learn to harm themselves.

Abused children learn extreme behavior.

Children of violence do not learn boundaries.

Children of abuse learn how to abuse others.

Corry, Barbara (1994)

## **Appendix F**

### **Impact of Domestic Violence on Children**



# Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

## Infants and toddlers may:

- Be distressed by loud noises or vivid visual images associated with violence.
- Not receive consistent parenting.
- Be inhibited in their exploration and play by fear and instability; imitating in play may be related to aggression witnessed.

## Preschoolers may:

- Express anger and aggression in unhealthy ways; and may be confused by conflicting messages.
- Attribute violence to something they have done.
- Learn gender roles associated with violence and victimization (boys externalize, girls internalize).
- Be inhibited in gaining independence by instability; may exhibit regressive behaviors.

## School-aged children may:

- Acquire rationalizations heard to justify violence.
- Have a decreased ability to learn.
- Miss positive statements, selectively attend to negatives, or evoke negative feedback.
- Learn gender roles associated with violence and victimization.

## Problems that children may face due to domestic violence

- Sleep troubles, nightmares, fear of falling asleep.
- Restless/anxious behavior at naptime.
- Headaches, stomach aches, aches and pains (somatic symptoms), complaints of being overly tired.
- Severe separation anxiety or separation anxiety that lasts an extended period of time.
- Increased aggressive behavior and angry feelings.
- Very high activity levels, constant fidgeting.
- Constant worry about possible danger.
- Loss of skills learned earlier.
- Withdrawing from friends and activities.
- Not showing feelings about anything.
- Worrying a lot about the safety of loved ones.
- Difficulty completing an activity or task.
- Repetitive play about the violence events.
- Using bullying or aggression to control others.

Adapted from Baker, LL, Jaffe, PJ, & Ashbourne, L. (2003)

## **Appendix G**

### **Impact of Domestic Violence on Children by Developmental Stages**

# Impact of Domestic Violence on Children by Developmental Stages

## Children under two years old may:

- Be easily frightened and/or nervous.
- Be frightened of the abusive partner and possibly of men in general.
- Be very demanding.
- Cry a lot.
- Have broken sleep or nightmares.
- Be very clingy towards the primary parent and not cope well with being separated.
- Be very clingy towards the abusive partner.
- Have an unusual number of temper tantrums.
- Not eat well and be underweight.
- Have slow speech development and/or coordination skills.
- Be slow to learn to crawl and/or walk.
- Stop doing things they have already learned and return to more babyish behavior (e.g., stop walking).
- Be aggressive towards the primary parent and/or other children.

## Children two to five years old may:

- Be easily frightened and/or nervous.
- Be frightened of the abusive partner and possibly of men in general.
- Be very demanding.
- Cry a lot.
- Not show much emotion (either happy or sad) and may seem detached.
- Be aggressive towards the primary parent and/or other children.
- Try to stop the violence and may feel guilty when they cannot succeed.
- Try to hurt themselves.
- Have slow development or regress.

## Children five to eleven years old may:

- Be easily frightened, nervous, or worried.
- Be very demanding.
- Actively try to stop the violence (possibly getting hurt in the process).
- Behave well at home but be very aggressive and/or rude to others at school.
- Bully other children at school and/or brothers and sisters.

## **Impact of Domestic Violence on Children by Developmental Stages (Cont.)**

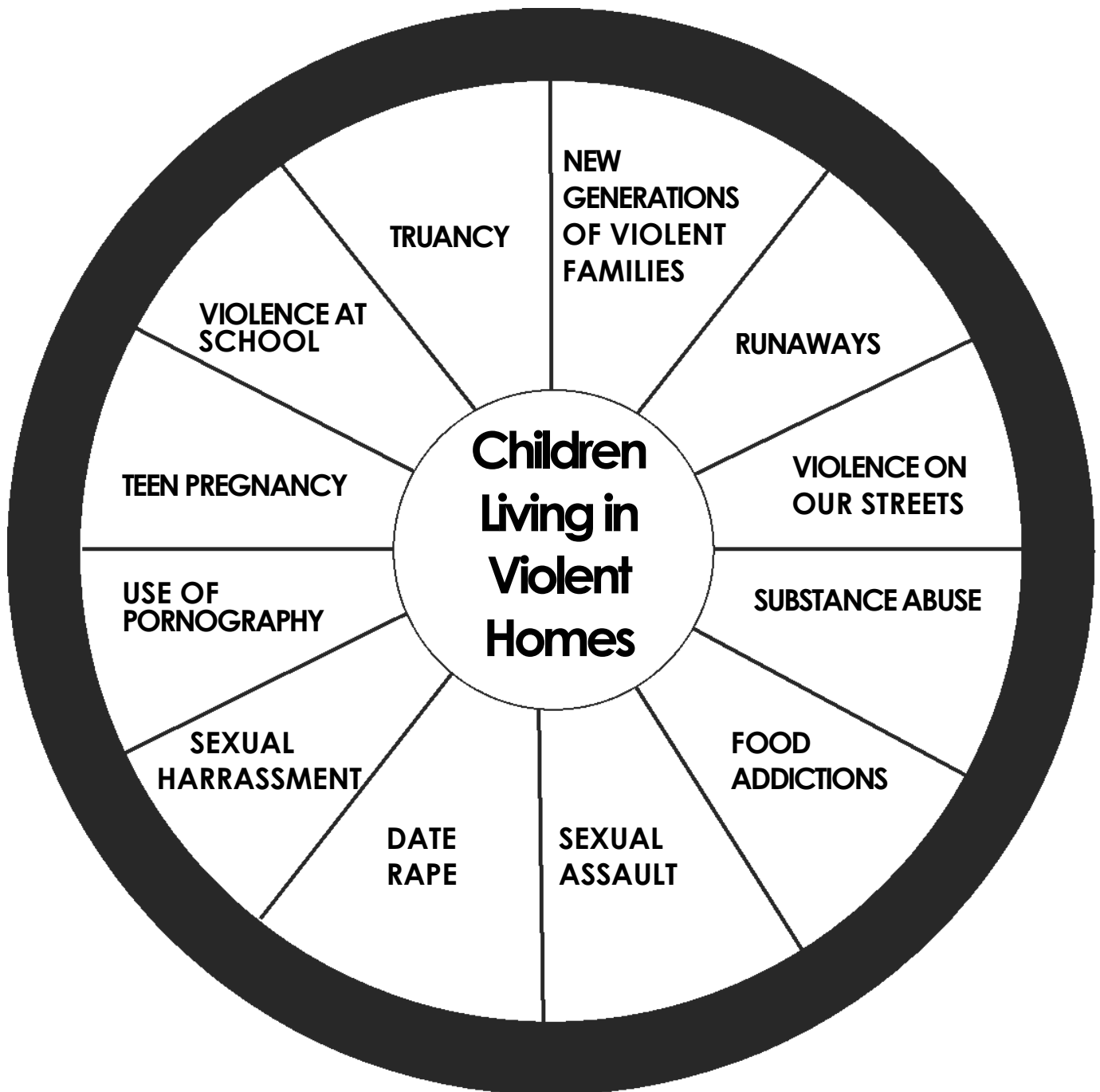
- Not like themselves as they think that the violence is their fault.
- Be angry with the abusive partner.
- Be angry with the primary parent and may blame the primary parent for the violence. Sometimes it feels safer for children to express their anger towards the non-violent parent than the violent parent.
- May try to please the violent partner and/or copy some of his behavior.
- Do badly or very well at school. Some children find it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork because they are worrying about what is happening at home. Others try to block out their home life by only focusing on their schoolwork. Many people wrongly assume that children doing very well at school have not been affected.
- Constantly complain of feeling ill to avoid going to school when the doctor cannot find anything wrong (child may be worried about what will happen to the primary parent while they are at school).
- Find it difficult to make friends at school (sometimes because the child feels too “different” from others and cannot relate to them, and sometimes because they miss out on having friends come home due to their fear of what might happen there).

[www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk), (2005)

## **Appendix H**

### **Long-Term Results Of Children Living In Violent Homes**

# Long-Term Results Of Children Living In Violent Homes



## **Appendix I**

# **A Nurturing Environment for Children**



# A Nurturing Environment for Children

DOMESTIC ABUSE INTERVENTION PROJECT

202 East Superior Street Duluth, Minnesota 55802



## **Appendix J**

*Could your children say...?*

## Could Your Children Say...?

Could your children say the following about you as their father, stepfather, or mother's boyfriend?

- ❖ My dad respects my mother.
- ❖ My dad listens to my mom when she has something to say.
- ❖ My dad is nice to my mom.
- ❖ My dad likes it when my mom visits with her friends and family because mom comes home happier.
- ❖ Sometimes my mom makes the big decisions and sometimes my dad makes the big decisions in the house and sometimes they make those decisions together.
- ❖ My dad knows how to handle being angry without hurting other people.
- ❖ My dad isn't afraid of being gentle and kind to my mother, my brothers or sisters, or me.
- ❖ Even when my dad is stressed out from work or something else, he still treats us well.
- ❖ I'm not afraid to ask my dad questions or tell him about things I've done wrong.
- ❖ My dad gets mad at me sometimes but I'm never scared he's going to hurt me.
- ❖ My dad knows how to stand up for himself or speak his mind without getting violent physically or verbally.
- ❖ My dad knows and cares when I'm feeling bad or upset.
- ❖ My dad doesn't criticize me when I make mistakes.
- ❖ My dad knows a lot but isn't afraid to say when he doesn't know and ask for help.
- ❖ When I grow up I want to be treated the way my dad treats my mom.  
(Or I want to treat my partner the way my dad treats my mom.)

What else would you like your children to say about their dad?

# Appendix K

## Resources

## Resources

This Guide was developed to be used by practitioners in parenting groups, in services for domestic violence victims/survivors, and in programs serving abusers. It can be integrated with most parenting curricula. Choosing a parenting curriculum is an important decision and needs to be based on the interests, needs, and preferences of the parents who will be receiving services. A parenting curriculum should specify the purpose of the curriculum and the goals for the parents. The Guide has referenced and borrowed liberally from the following curricula, and the reader is encouraged to obtain these resources if interested in implementing the full curriculum. They are extremely thorough and beneficial resources.

- I. Crager, M. Anderson, L. (1997). Helping Children Who Witness Domestic Violence: A Guide for Parents. Seattle, WA: Kings County Women's Program.

An Instructor's Manual for this curriculum provides information about:

- Domestic violence
- The impact of domestic violence on children and how to help children
- Safety planning for victims of domestic violence
- For batterers: accountability to children
- Parenting when the person has been a victim of domestic violence
- Respectful parenting
- Anger management
- Conflict prevention
- Understanding children's Development
- Improving relationships with children

For a copy of this curriculum, access [www.minicava.umn.edu/documents/materials/instructor.html](http://www.minicava.umn.edu/documents/materials/instructor.html).

- II. Family Violence Prevention Fund. Breaking the Cycle: Fathering After Violence: Curriculum Guidelines and Tools for Batterer Intervention Programs (2004). San Francisco, CA. (<http://endabuse.org/programs/display.php3?DocID=197>).

Fathering After Violence (FAV) is a national program developed by the Family Violence Prevention Fund that provides the following bi-lingual (Spanish and English) tools: a CD, Exercises on Empathy, Modeling and the Reparative Framework; and Children's drawings.

For further information: Family Violence Prevention Fund  
383 Rhode Island Street, Suite 304  
San Francisco, CA 94103-5133  
[www.endabuse.org](http://www.endabuse.org)

- III. Baker, L. L., Jaffe, G. P., Moore, J. K. (2001). Understanding the Effects of Domestic Violence on Children: A Trainer's Manual for Early Childhood Educators. London, Ontario, Canada: Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System. ([www.lfcc.on.ca/understanding\\_ECE\\_handbook.html](http://www.lfcc.on.ca/understanding_ECE_handbook.html)).

This Manual contains three training modules for Early Childhood Educators about the effects of domestic violence on children.

## **Appendix L**

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