



Domestic Violence and Child Safety Planning

Introduction

When intimate partner violence takes place within a family, it is not only the couple but the entire family that suffers harm. Studies consistently underscore a significant correlation between intimate partner violence against women and child abuse and maltreatment. Most research indicates that between 30 and 60 percent of families where there is child abuse or maltreatment, families also experience woman abuse.¹ Even when there is no direct child abuse, a child may be harmed by being exposed to domestic violence.

Domestic violence victims often understand how best to protect their children—by making complicated decisions about whether to stay in or leave an abusive relationship. However, they do not always realize that their children can be harmed even if they don't explicitly witness the abuse. "Although many adults believe that they have protected their children from exposure to domestic violence, 80-90 percent of the children in those homes can give detailed descriptions of the violence experienced in their families."² Fortunately, there are relatively simple steps a non-abusive parent can take to support their child's natural resilience.

Developing Steps for Safety

Because of the potential for intentional or unintentional harm to children, it is important for a non-abusive parent to work with children to develop steps they can take to keep safe. These steps should be based on a child's age, developmental stage, comfort level, and the family dynamics. This planning in no way makes a child responsible for anyone else's safety. Simple steps may help to empower children and to help them to overcome some feelings of helplessness that may result from exposure to abuse of a parent. Additionally, developing a plan should a crisis arise, or should the abuser become particularly violent, may help redirect children's attention from the incident, thus keeping them out of harm's way and minimizing some of the fear they may experience. These steps are often called a safety plan.

Safety Planning with Children

Some simple steps in a child's safety plan might include:

- Use of a code word such as the child's pet's name, another safe word or sentence, and an explanation of what to do if the code word is used.
- Identification of a safe place to go if someone is getting hurt.
- Description of how the child can get to that safe place

¹Jeffrey L. Edleson, "The Overlap between Child Maltreatment and Woman Abuse," *National Electronic Network on Violence against Women: VAWnet Applied Research Forum*; (Revised April 1999); assessed October 30, 2007.

²S. Doyne, J. Bowermaster, R. Meloy, D. Dutton, P. Jaffe, S. Temko, and P. Mones, "Custody disputes involving domestic violence: Making children's needs a priority," *Juvenile & Family Court Journal* 50, no.2 (1999): 1-12; National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, "Children Exposed to Intimate Partner Violence," *National Electronic Network on Violence Against Women: VAWnet Applied Research Forum*; (March 2002); assessed November 19, 2007.

- Determining whether the child can call 911

Regardless of the children's presence or absence during an incident of violence, children know what is taking place in their homes even when parents think that they are otherwise occupied. How children perceive what they are observing is in part dependent on if and how the incident is explained. Without giving children too much information that could overburden them, sharing a limited explanation of what they observed is conducive to their healing.

Helping Children Recover

To nurture children's resilience it is important that in addition to having a safety plan, they have an opportunity to talk about what they saw and how they feel with a trusted adult. Domestic violence service providers often have staff dedicated to working with children on the issue of their exposure to domestic violence. Finding a trustworthy person who will listen and help them to sort out their feelings will be beneficial in both the short and long term. Importantly, experts agree that a child's relationship to and bond with the non-abusive parent is the most important key to developing resiliency for present and future healthy relationships.³

For additional resources on how to help your children, you may want to check the following websites:

- Prevent Child Abuse New York
<http://preventchildabuse.org/parents.shtml>
<http://pca-ny.org/domesticviolence.shtml>
- Centre for families & children in the Justice System
http://www.lfcc.on.ca/little_eyes_little_ears.pdf
- Family Violence Prevention Fund, Children & Domestic Violence Toolbox
<http://www.endabuse.org/programs/children/>
- Lundy Bancroft on Domestic Violence and Parenting
<http://www.lundybancroft.com/>
- National Center for Children Exposed to Violence, Domestic Violence Page
<http://www.ncccev.org/violence/domestic.html>
- Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse/Domestic Violence and Children
<http://www.mincava.umn.edu/>
- Joe Torre Safe at Home Foundation
<http://www.joetorre.org/en/adult/Pages/default.aspx>

³ Dorota Iwaniec, Emma Larkin, and Siobhan Higgins, "Research Review: Risk and resilience in cases of emotional abuse," *Child and Family Social Work*, 11 (2006): 73-82; Ann S. Masten and J. Douglas Coatsworth, "The Development of Competence in Favorable and Unfavorable Environments: Lessons from Research on Successful Children," *American Psychologist* 53, no. 2 (1998): 212.