



Guiding Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children, Youth, and Parents Impacted by Family Violence

Guiding principles inform and guide decisions and choices. They are needed to provide clear guideposts, allow for different—but not conflicting interpretations—and distill collective insights from years of experience. The *Guiding Principles to Improve Services to Children, Youth, and Parents Impacted by Family Violence (Guiding Principles)* build on previous discussion papers¹ to improve outcomes for children exposed to domestic violence. The *Guiding Principles* are designed to inform program development, intervention, and evaluation in programs that serve children, youth, and parents overcoming domestic violence as well as those who use violence. They include key considerations on ***Partnership, Equity, Storytelling, Healing, Centering Lived Experience, Accountability, and Safety***. The principles are not listed in order of priority; each are of equal importance and work together to promote positive outcomes. The *Guiding Principles* should shape culture, dictate behaviors, and drive decisions in organizations, regardless of changes to program strategies, approaches, programming, activities, and goals.

Partnership: Establish transformational partnerships that shift power to communities.

Domestic violence cannot be effectively addressed by a single person, system, or community. Improving outcomes for children, youth, and families exposed to domestic violence requires a comprehensive approach by collaborative partners across communities. Transformational partnerships can happen among systems and organizations when they occur in and with communities. A transformational collaboration that shifts power will:

- Acknowledge damaging dominant ideologies (e.g., we'll take advice, but it's ultimately up to us, they don't get it, we know how to do this, and our partners do not);

¹ These include 1) *Building Promising Futures: Guidelines for Enhancing Response of Domestic Violence Programs to Children and Youth*, that finds the best outcomes for children, youth, and families are derived from strength-based, integrated approaches that provide safety and well-being supports simultaneously, in partnership with adult survivors and 2) *Developing Outcome Measures for Domestic Violence Programs' Work with Children and Youth* which explores the complexity of measuring domestic violence outcomes, proposes measures, and provides recommendations to expand and refine measures. Both papers were supported by Grant Number 90EV0401 from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Service

- Engage community members that will be impacted in strategy development, design and evaluation; and
- Account for disparities in resources, staffing, and real, unspoken power differentials.

True partnerships recognize that collaboration is not just being in the room together. They move away from efforts that often amount to little more than a referral network, function independently, centralize leadership and control - towards partnerships that engage in collective problem solving and decision-making and challenge unexamined systems of power that create and reproduce inequalities.²

Equity: Implement approaches that are responsive to the connection between family violence and other forms of oppression that impact people's lives.

Fostering equity in anti-violence work requires intentional and strategic approaches that utilize an anti-oppression framework. Individuals often proceed unconsciously to maintain the status quo without a critical understanding of the nature of privilege and each of our roles in maintaining it. Changing this paradigm requires examination and challenging what we think we know. Because domestic violence survivors have intersecting identities and face multiple oppressions simultaneously, responses must include strategies and activities that reflect these complex realities. Approaches that are responsive to the connection between family violence and other forms of oppression will:

- Utilize education and action to mitigate systemic injustice and social inequality;
- Account for the historical and generational trauma within intersectional identities; and
- Develop liberation-focused practice³ where those who have perpetrated oppression, rather than those impacted by it, take responsibility for action and change.

Implementing equitable approaches requires moving beyond responding to immediate needs and instead positively changing conditions, environments and experiences for survivors and repairing harm by people and systems. Reversing inequities begins with examining one's own worldview. It continues through a process that leads to transformation in daily life by changing how we value others, building community, and modifying assumptions, policies and structures that favor the current order over progress that instead offers people what they need, instead of merely what we have.

Storytelling: Capture stories and spread their impact using a wide range of interpersonal, cultural, and research and evaluation approaches.

Storytelling is one of the most fundamental forms of communication. From the first cave paintings were created many thousands of years ago, to the oral traditions of indigenous cultures, to the modern narratives and numbers found in quantitative and qualitative research and evaluation, storytelling has made meaning and shaped thinking. Stories reflect values, ways of viewing the world, and culture. Formal dominant culture narratives have historically shaped the ways that evaluation is conceptualized, data collected, analyzed and interpreted. However, informal storytelling also provides real, rich, and important information. Storytelling requires the use of a wide range of knowledge production approaches that:

² White Starr, Z. *Transformational Collaboration: Considerations to Apply a Racial Equity Lens*. Caminar Latino & National Resource Center for Reaching Victims, 2020. <https://reachingvictims.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/TransformationalCollaboration-100920-Rev6.pdf>

³ Nieto, L., Boyer, M. F., Goodwin, L., Johnson, G. R., Smith, L. C., & Hopkins, J. P. *Beyond Inclusion, Beyond Empowerment: A Developmental Strategy to Liberate Everyone*. Olympia, Wash: Cuetzpalin, 2010.

- Do not elevate formal vs. informal forms of information to capture the breadth and variation of human experiences;
- Ensure different forms (qualitative, quantitative) and methods of collection (experimental, narrative, participatory action) are utilized in research and evaluation; and
- Honor and protect people's stories when they will be used or retold, by engaging them from start to finish in their use.

Storytelling can include, but also moves away from elevating concepts and terms such as, “objectivity,” “scientific,” “valid,” “reliable,” and “rationality.” These concepts change the meaning of ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups and are extremely powerful in academia yet serve as veneer for maintaining inequity grounded in the racism, sexism, and other forms of inequity.⁴ Expanding knowledge production to a larger frame of storytelling honors cultural differences, provides a frame to explore, document, describe, and explain program activities and participant outcomes, and is most relevant when it elevates the voices and experiences of children, youth, and families.

Centering Lived Expertise: Facilitate people's ability to define their experiences and direct the trajectory of their lives.

Adult and child survivors are experts in their own lives and should be allowed to name their experiences and champion their progress in their own way without the expectation of perfection. Survivors know what past responses and services have been helpful and what has been unhelpful or even hurtful. Approaches that help people define and direct their experiences would:

- Avoid positioning service providers and institutions as “experts;”
- Ask about past experiences with helping systems to understand and plan for what will be helpful and not harmful; and
- Center child and youth agency by listening to them and helping them to name their experience.

While many survivors have similar experiences, their perceptions of these experiences and how they impact them is unique. Without self-awareness and cultural humility, service providers can impose their values and experiences in direct and indirect ways such as making statements to influence the perceived “correct” course of action or using non-verbal cues. Moving away from imposing ways to help child and adult survivors to supporting them to facilitate their own safety and healing can produce better outcomes.

Healing: Create a wide array of pathways to healing for all people impacted by violence powered by individual, family, and community relationships.

Healing is a process that happens in the context of relationships. Adult and child survivors are more than the trauma they experience. People who use violence are more than the harm that they cause and may bring complicated histories of their own abuse and oppression.⁵ Service providers may also be survivors or use violence. Equally important is recognizing that “thriving, healing,

⁴ See for example: Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990. See also Thomas, P.L. “White Men of Academia Have an ‘Objectivity’ Problem.” *Huffington Post*. June 14, 2017. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/more-on-white-men-of-academia-student-and-self-evaluation_b_593a8204e4b0b65670e56963.

⁵ White Starr, Z. “Moving from the Mainstream to the Margins: Lessons in Culture and Power.” *Journal of Family Violence* 33, (2018): 551-557.

and hurting can all happen simultaneously.”⁶ Traditional mental health and therapy models used in western cultures are important and may promote healing, however, often, these “treatments” address a part of a person instead of the whole person and fail to consider if the concepts and methods of western psychology and psychiatry are appropriate to different cultures and contexts. Further, many models don’t include collective healing approaches that recognize how healing comes from meaningful connections such as interdependence, collective engagement and service to others. Pathways to heal that are powered by individual, family, and community relationships would:

- Foster the development of meaningful connections and relationships (e.g., promote civic engagement, indigenous ways of healing, opportunities for families to play and connect, clubs and groups);
- Facilitate activities that help those impacted by violence transform systemic and social harms (e.g., offer opportunities for survivors to protest, leverage large family and community networks to support and educate others about the root causes of violence.); and
- Promote collective care strategies to address interpersonal and organizational trauma.

Moving from a treatment approach to multiple pathways to healing acknowledges that one approach does not work for all survivors. This promotes more culturally relevant and meaningful responses and decreases stigma that survivors needlessly endure.

Accountability: Establish practices that hold people who use violence responsible, repair harm caused by people and systems, and change the conditions that perpetuate violence.

Accountability refers to using both the power of systems and the power of relationships to hold people who use violence responsible. Less recognized—yet equally important—it also refers to the responsibility of systems to acknowledge the harm they have done. Most people are familiar with systemic accountability—using the power of systems to reduce the harm from people who use violence through strategies such as legal orders, case plans, or programs to reduce violence. Less recognized and practiced is relational accountability—the power of human connections to reduce violence. Relational accountability harnesses existing relationships to both challenge abusive behaviors and to support a change process. An equally important component of accountability is the system’s ability to hold itself accountable. Practices that promote systemic and relational accountability would:

- Acknowledge people, organizations, and state systems cause harm and work to repair those harms;
- Recognize you can hold people accountable for the harm they have caused and still allow them to heal as a central tenet of accountability; and
- Offer people who use violence holistic services that are culturally relevant and trauma informed.

Moving from a punitive framework toward the multi-dimensional framework of accountability described above opens the door to a more authentic and sustainable process of change.

⁶ Vassell, A. C. *My Life. My Choices. My Story. My Journal*. Self-published, CreateSpace, 2018.

Safety: Build programs and systems that prioritize adult and child survivors’ interests equally to address their physical, spiritual, emotional, social, and environmental safety.

Safety for adult and child survivors should be addressed equally and interdependently, go beyond physical safety, and reflect the complexity of risk caused by the person using violence. To give equal regard to adult and child survivors’ safety, programs would:

- Identify and facilitate the safety aspirations of adult and child survivors through the provision of traditional and nontraditional approaches that recognize limitations, are not punitive, and reduce violent and controlling behavior by the person using violence;
- Provide concrete and meaningful resources such as housing, transportation, child-care, and economic opportunities; and
- Ensure predictable and consistent positive experiences and social environments inside and outside of organizations and systems.

Current concepts of safety often adhere to binary definitions of safe and unsafe instead of reflecting the complexities of people’s lives, what people need to feel safe, and the ways systems interact with them. In some cases, safety can be compromised by risks posed by system interventions and other environmental factors, such as unsafe or unstable housing. Understanding safety in a way that reflects survivors' personal histories, cultural norms, experiences, and environments will help to address the social inequality that interferes with safety.

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Promising Futures is a project of Futures Without Violence. For more information on how to transform your program to effectively meet the needs of parent and child survivors of domestic violence, visit: www.promising.futureswithoutviolence.org or email childrensteam@futureswithoutviolence.org.



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