

**Fatherhood Engagement and Domestic Violence in Child Welfare: Core Concepts**  
**Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF)**  
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In recent years many child welfare agencies have made more consistent and focused efforts to engage and work with fathers of children at risk. Research clearly demonstrates that consistent and healthy father involvement results in better outcomes for children. Men who batter<sup>i</sup> however, are often seen solely as a source of danger by both child welfare (CW) workers and domestic violence (DV) advocates working in community-based organizations. Child welfare efforts to keep children from being exposed to DV have historically focused exclusively on mothers. This practice not only increases risk to women and children by failing to hold fathers and father-figures responsible for *their* behaviors and parenting, but fails to acknowledge and support the human potential that men have to change their behavior and make healthier choices for themselves, their children and their families. DV and responsible fatherhood advocates working within the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF), have partnered over many years to develop approaches that both hold men responsible for abusive behavior and support those who want to change to adopt healthier ways of behaving and interacting with their children.

Use of common definitions and language is fundamental to moving forward together:

***Domestic violence, as defined by DCF***, is a pattern of coercive, controlling and/or violent behaviors by one person against an intimate partner that stems from or results in an imbalance of power in the relationship.

***Responsible Fatherhood*** is the process of a male parent, biological or non-biological, consciously guiding and supporting one or more children into mature adulthood.

Between December 2010 and July 2011, DCF, in partnership with Casey Family Programs, convened three facilitated dialogues among thought leaders in Massachusetts in the domestic violence, responsible fatherhood and child welfare fields. The purpose of the dialogues, entitled *Fatherhood Engagement, Domestic Violence and Child Welfare: Moving Forward Together with Understanding and Collaboration*, was to:

- Develop shared understanding of the perspectives of the fatherhood engagement, child welfare and domestic violence communities on engaging and working with fathers and other men who batter;
- Identify commonalities between the fatherhood engagement, child welfare and domestic violence communities;
- Describe existing effective approaches and practices; and
- Identify underlying issues and barriers to engaging father when domestic violence is present in the family.

More than 30 leaders representing DCF staff and management, community-based domestic violence advocates, responsible fatherhood groups, families and other public and private agencies participated in the dialogues and committed to continue their work together and within their respective organizations and communities.

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One key outcome of the Dialogues was the development of a set of *Core Concepts* to help guide DCF child welfare practice as well as DV and Fatherhood advocates. These *Concepts* are designed to 1) inform development of policy and services to support safe and effective work with families; 2) establish suggested standards for child welfare efforts so families in which domestic violence is occurring (or has occurred) understand what they have a right to expect; and 3) help bridge gaps among agencies and practitioners by providing a foundation for on-going dialogue and action among stakeholders at the state and local level.

***In our work with children, families, mothers and fathers, when there is or has been a history of domestic violence, we have a responsibility to:***

1. Create an environment in which people can talk about their fears and anxieties in working with men who batter.
2. Hold fathers *and* mothers responsible for safety, protection and nurturing of children, and build on past and current efforts to keep children safe.
3. Include the perspective of fathers, mothers and children in decision-making that affects their lives.
4. Recognize the influence culture, race, class, gender and history plays in our understanding of domestic violence and our work with individuals and families.
5. Practice in ways that promote safety and well-being of children and their non-offending parent, and honor, whenever possible, their right to self-determination.
6. Support and address the unique physical and social/emotional needs of children exposed to domestic violence.
7. Work to understand the context and impact of violence/abuse on parenting and support/promote healthier parenting behaviors.
8. Provide parents--regardless of race or ethnicity, gender, or class--with an earnest and respectful process to promote safe and healthy parenting of or involvement with their children by building on what they have done well in the past.
9. Provide fathers, mothers and other caregivers -- in a respectful and non-judgmental manner -- with information and education about child development and the impact of exposure to domestic violence on children.
10. Ensure that fathers who have used violence/abuse have opportunities for relationships with respectful child welfare professionals and service providers.
11. Support fathers to have a relationship with their children commensurate with their strengths, risk factors and impact of their violence/abuse on the children/family.
12. Provide fathers who have used violence/abuse the resources, interventions and services that promote healthy functioning, well-being and healthy parenting behaviors; and support their participation in them.
13. Draw upon and enhance a family's own resources and informal/natural networks of support that can support safety and sustain children into adulthood.
14. Support fathers, mothers and children in their decision to repair, heal and strengthen parent/child and other family relationships that have been damaged by domestic violence.
15. Ground our work -- with each other and with families -- in the belief that change is possible.
16. Invite partners to adopt and help us to translate these aspirations into daily practice with families.

## DCF History or How We Got Here

The *Core Concepts* both reflect and inform current efforts at DCF to implement a new approach to child welfare practice that focuses on understanding the family's perspectives and strengths, looks as deeply and rigorously for behaviors that have kept children safe as for behaviors that have caused harm; and builds future safety and well-being based on what families are already doing well.

These Core Concepts build on existing and past, successful efforts within DCF to promote best practices including:

- The Domestic Violence Unit (DVU), formed in the early 1990s as a result of efforts of the late Dr. Susan Schechter and the late DCF Assistant Commissioner Pam Whitney, provides consultation to DCF staff in situations where mothers and children are at risk of violence and abuse in the same family. An early and consistent focus of the DVU's work has been on articulating and considering the impact of exposure to DV on children, and on holding men, not their partners, accountable for the impact of their violence/abuse on the family.

In the mid-1990s DVU Manager Lonna Davis hired a consultant from the Batterer Intervention (BI) world to develop child protection practice approaches to working with men who batter, and to work with the unit to enhance its consultations to DCF staff. After several years of developing practice with the unit, Dr. Fernando Mederos wrote *Accountability and Connection with Abusive Men: A New Child Protection Response to Increasing Family Safety* (Family Violence Prevention Fund, now Futures Without Violence, 2004, available from <http://www.thegreenbook.info/documents/Accountability.pdf>).

- Also starting in the mid-1990s, *Community Connections Coalitions* were formed and funded in communities around the state, many of which explored and continue to explore the needs of fathers, including fathers who have used violence.
- In 2004 a Family Advisory Committee (FAC) to the DCF Commissioner began taking an active role in practice and policy development, coordinated and supported by Family Representative (and Senior Staff member) Manuela Dacosta.
- In 2006, DCF hired Dr. Mederos as the Director of Fatherhood Engagement to promote and institutionalize statewide practices and policies to meet the needs of *all* fathers. Another key element of Dr. Mederos' work has been to focus at the local/DCF Area Office level to create services and Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Teams (FELT Teams) to support fathers and promote fatherhood work at every level of the organization.<sup>ii</sup>
- In 2007, John Laing, a father of a family formerly involved in DCF, joined the DCF Senior Staff to bring a *family and community* voice into discussions at the highest levels of the agency.

These various efforts within DCF have converged in this conversation—as a commitment to developing a consistent, inclusive, family-centered approach to child welfare that incorporates best practice approaches to both domestic violence and father engagement. Bringing community partners and fathers into the development of these *Core Concepts*, and committing to expanding this conversation with more partners, reflects a belief by DCF that in working collaboratively and learning from each other, we can help children and families to thrive.

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<sup>i</sup> Gendered pronouns are used to reflect the reality that most victims of domestic violence are female, and most domestic violence offenders are male. However, domestic violence can and does occur in gay and lesbian relationships, and may, in a small percentage of cases, involve a woman battering a male partner.

<sup>ii</sup> 14 DCF Area Offices currently have onsite or closely affiliated Responsible Fatherhood groups: Arlington, Dimock, Fall River, Holyoke, Hyde Park, Lynn, Malden, New Bedford, Park St., Plymouth, South Central, Salem, and both Worcester offices. Ten DCF Offices currently have Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Teams (FELTs).