BRIDGES TO BETTER

PATHWAYS TO ACCOUNTABILITY

FOR PEOPLE WHO USE VIOLENCE

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Bridges to Better is a collaborative approach to designing child welfare systems, dependency courts, and community-based programs to be responsive to the needs and experiences of survivors of domestic violence (DV) and co-occurring child maltreatment. It represents the work of a five-year federally funded project led by Futures Without Violence[1] to implement an adult and child survivor-centered approach to improving child welfare practice in cases involving DV.

Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive control[2] — a pattern of strategies a person uses to gain or maintain power and domination over their intimate partner.[3] Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. It includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone."[4]

Bridges to Better is grounded in six principles and includes two policy and practice frameworks:

1. **Pathways to Healing:** A framework that delineates five protective factors for adult and child survivors of domestic violence.[5]
2. **Pathways to Accountability:** An approach to working with people who use violence against their intimate partner.

This brief provides guidance for child welfare, dependency courts, programs for survivors of DV, battering intervention programs, responsible fatherhood programs, supervised visitation centers, and other collaborative partners about establishing diverse mechanisms of accountability to help reduce or eliminate abuse and to promote positive change among persons who use violence and other forms of coercive control. The first step to establishing accountability is designing policy and practice guidance with clear instructions for holding the person who is using violence,[6] and not the survivor of that violence, responsible for causing harm.

***Pathways to Accountability* grows from the understanding that working with abusive partners can increase the safety and well-being of adult and child survivors.** This work can also lead to healthier outcomes for persons who use violence[7] when it is integral to a holistic, coordinated response to domestic violence.

Accountability for abusive partners is often equated with punishment and criminal justice system involvement. However, there is growing evidence that limiting the concept of accountability to punitive consequences is often ineffective[8] and may be counterproductive, especially when working in underserved communities.[9] It is essential to hold abusive partners accountable in ways that protect and support their partners and children, including criminal legal system involvement when necessary. In isolation, legal-based criminal responses are insufficient to eliminate the violence and other forms of coercive control that impact adult and child survivors or to effect behavioral change in persons who use violence. Thus, within *Pathways to Accountability*, accountability is conceived as strategies that:

- protect and support adults and children harmed by domestic violence by reducing or eliminating the abuse, and
- promote positive behavioral and attitudinal change in persons who use violence.

Recent research supports this definition of accountability. [10]

***Pathways to Accountability* includes two fundamental dimensions of accountability - relational and systemic.** Relational accountability uses the power of human interactions to facilitate change in abusive partners, and systemic accountability utilizes the authority of systems to achieve the same goal. Usually, both kinds of accountability are combined, depending on who is utilizing them.

Bridges to Better holds that there are multiple pathways for operationalizing this expanded definition of accountability. Formal systems, such as courts and child welfare agencies, often rely more on systemic approaches in policy and practice. Still, there are ample opportunities for applying the power of relationships. Battering intervention programs and supervised visitation centers have sought to balance the two types of accountability, especially within the last decade. Accountability can also be used outside formal systems in families, communities, organizations, houses of worship, and workplaces. In the last few years, there have been increasing attempts to make accountability part of the healing process for survivors and people who use violence. These approaches include Restorative Justice, which generally works with systems, and Transformative Justice and Community Accountability, which operates outside formal institutions.

An effective response to domestic violence must also include holding systems accountable for the harm they inflict on families, especially from underserved but oversurveilled communities.

RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Relational accountability refers to the power of relationships, connections, and human interactions to help reduce domestic violence and support positive change. It focuses on the abusive partner's accountability to adult and child survivors, other key personal relationships (e.g., family, friends, clergy, etc.), and acquired relationships resulting from the context of domestic violence (e.g., judges, child welfare practitioners, community members, participants in battering intervention programs), as well as accountability to themselves. Working successfully with persons who use violence requires practitioners to maintain a healthy skepticism and enduring optimism that change is possible.

Abusive partners often report they are unaware of what it's like to have an authentic, healthy relationship. Thus, relational accountability highlights the importance that those in key relationships with abusive partners demonstrate the nature of healthy relationships. This includes mutual respect, understanding, patience, communication, trust, honesty, compromise, safety, and conflict resolution based on negotiation and fairness rather than coercion and threats.

SYSTEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Systemic accountability focuses on accountability within and across systems to support abusive partners in reducing or eliminating their use of violence and other forms of coercive control and making healthier choices for themselves and their families. Systemic accountability is grounded in research that shows that the effectiveness of intervention programs for people who use violence depends on their connectedness to a broader intervention system.[11] Working with abusive partners requires an integrated, coordinated systems response in which multiple partners work collaboratively to promote accountability for abusive behavior. This response includes but is not limited to child welfare, criminal justice, and domestic violence service systems (e.g., mental health, health care, faith organizations, and informal supports).

Systemic accountability also underscores how practitioners' perceptions, treatment and decision-making affect people from different cultural backgrounds. Systemic accountability calls for the fair treatment of all people by the services and systems they turn to for help. The systemic dimension of accountability emphasizes the need for child welfare agencies, battering intervention programs, courts, and other partners to actively work toward the elimination of disparities in policies and practices and better outcomes for all.

KEY ELEMENTS OF RELATIONAL & SYSTEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Both relational and systemic accountability require that practitioners employ strategies that:

- engage persons who use violence to reduce or eliminate their abusive and coercive behaviors in ways that are safe for adult and child survivors, *and*
- promote and help to sustain positive change in abusive partners' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

Engage persons who use violence in ways that are safe for adult and child survivors.

The ongoing safety needs of families involved with child welfare impacted by domestic violence are of primary importance when implementing relational and systemic accountability strategies. To respond successfully to the needs of adult and child survivors, practitioners must engage effectively with the person who uses violence and support them to reduce or eliminate their abusive and coercive behaviors.[12] Engagement includes interacting, setting goals, developing case plans, and working with the person using violence to ensure their children's safety, permanency, and well-being. Thus, both relational and systemic accountability strategies can be considered aspects of engagement to reduce or eliminate a person's abusive and coercive behaviors.

Too frequently, however, abusive partners who are also parents or caregivers of children are not meaningfully engaged in child welfare system interventions[13] despite legal and policy requirements that they are contacted and offered services through a case plan. Studies show that the lack of engagement of fathers with a history of DV can increase the risks to their children.[14] Conversely, meaningful engagement of fathers by child welfare workers can result in fathers reporting improvements in their parenting.[15] In addition, actively including adult survivors — and child survivors, as appropriate — in decision-making[16] is vital because practitioners' and survivors' views and motivations may differ. For example, some mothers who are survivors want the father or father figure who perpetrated violence to remain involved in their children's lives for various reasons. However, practitioners may prefer that no contact occurs.

When child welfare staff work with abusive partners as members of active cases involving DV, some systemic accountability strategies should always be used. For example, documenting the person's responsibility for causing harm and developing plans to address their violence are systemic strategies that are both necessary and appropriate and should be required by policy. Beyond this, the combination of relational and systemic strategies to engage abusive partners should be informed by the

level of risk they pose to the survivors, their specific patterns and tactics of abuse and coercion, their parental capacity, and their level of commitment to changing their behavior. In addition, it may be prudent to carve out exceptions to policies requiring staff to engage a parent or caregiver around their use of violence if that violence occurred in the distant past or if the person has been uninvolved with the family and may see attempts at engagement as an opportunity to resume their use of abusive tactics.

In situations where abusive partners pose a low or moderate risk to their families and demonstrate some motivation or investment in positive change, strategies for engagement related to the power of relationships may be effective. In contrast, when risk is high, or the person who uses violence cannot be safely engaged despite sustained efforts, it is important to rely more on the authority of systems. In these situations, it may be necessary to require additional services for the people who use violence, limit their access to child and adult survivors, or involve law enforcement or courts to impose more severe consequences for continued use of violence. While it may not be safe for someone using violence to interact with survivors, practitioners can still meet with them and connect them to services that could eventually lead to positive change.

Promote positive change in beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

Promoting healthier and non-violent behaviors among abusive partners requires practitioners to perceive them as human beings who have complexity, flaws, and strengths, and who are more than the sum of their worst behaviors. It is also necessary to believe that people who use violence can change.

Employing relational and systemic accountability strategies can enhance the well-being of all family members, including the adult and child survivors and the abusive partner, and support a trajectory of positive change for the person who uses violence. Positive change includes:

- Accepting responsibility for one's use of violence and the resulting consequences.
- Addressing one's use of violence and other forms of coercive control.
- Developing empathy toward child and adult survivors' experiences and understanding the consequences of the violence.
- Showing motivation to change and understanding one's expectations for change.
- Learning more adaptive beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.
- Actively demonstrating a commitment to safer, healthier beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.
- Reducing or, ideally, ceasing the use of violence, power, and control that harm one's partner and children.

RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY STRATEGIES

Examples of relational accountability strategies for engaging persons who use violence and increasing their motivation for positive change that can be established in policy and practice guidance include:

1. Discussing and thinking critically with the person who uses violence about their abusive and coercive behaviors without shaming them.
2. Delineating the legal and natural consequences resulting from the persons.[17]

3. Focusing on the well-being of the whole family by sensitizing the person to the negative impact that their violent and coercive behaviors can have on their children and other family members.
4. Helping the person develop cognitive and emotional empathy by promoting an understanding of the perspectives and emotions of adult and child survivors.
5. Using parenthood as a reason and motivation for positive change.
6. Helping the person understand how engaging in violent and coercive behaviors negatively affects their own life and well-being and encouraging them to imagine and articulate a vision of a better future for themselves.
7. Identifying and addressing possible barriers to change.
8. Guiding the person in reflecting on their childhood experiences of violence in childhood both directly or exposure to violence and other forms of family violence and addressing their trauma history.
9. Considering cultural factors and the lived experiences of the person who uses violence, including the challenges they face.
10. Recruiting family members, friends, and other key relationships (e.g., clergy, members of a religious congregation, employers, coworkers) to create a community of accountability and support for change.
11. Discussing and thinking critically with the person about social norms that create environments that tolerate interpersonal violence, power, and control (e.g., patriarchal power relations, male privilege, and the historical oppression of women) and refusing to accept these norms as an excuse for violence.
12. Encouraging the person to identify positive cultural models that elevate non-violence and responsible, healthy parenting.
13. Creating a plan for ongoing "check-ins" with the person who uses violence.

SYSTEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY STRATEGIES

Examples of systemic accountability policy and practice strategies for engaging persons who use violence and increasing their motivation to achieve positive change include:

1. Intentional focus and organizational support to work effectively with persons who use violence.
2. Creating child welfare case plans that promote the safety and well-being of adult and child survivors and clearly articulate expectations that the person adopts non-coercive ways of interacting with their family (in other words, creating plans that describe what the person should do, rather than only what they should stop doing).
3. Creating child welfare case plans that hold both parents to the same standards of parenting within the family's cultural norms (i.e., parents may have different caretaking roles with children, but both should be expected to ensure children's safety and well-being).
4. Ensuring that battering intervention, supervised visitation, and responsible fatherhood programs are available and accessible in the community (e.g., funding programming, paying for an indigent individual's participation in services).

5. Removing possible barriers to positive change by providing connections and referrals to services and resources based on individual needs (e.g., emergency shelters and housing services, medical and mental health services, legal, economic, educational, and employment supports).

6. Participating in or establishing coordinated community responses, high-risk teams, roundtables, and work groups that promote coordinated strategies and communication about risk and behavioral progress.

7. Creating mechanisms to monitor behavior when warranted (e.g., supervised visitation) and using legal remedies to keep adult and child survivors safe from the abusive partner (e.g., child welfare securing a restraining order on behalf of a child and after planning with the adult survivor).

8. Documenting in case records and court affidavits the occurrence of violent and coercive behaviors and their impact on family members.

9. Petitioning the court to mandate that the person who uses violence attend a certified BIP when available.

10. Opening child welfare cases in the name of the person who uses violence rather than in the name of the survivor parent.

Both relational and systemic accountability can result in persons who use violence and other forms of coercive control feeling personally challenged or motivated to take responsibility, to stop or reduce their abusive behavior, and to acknowledge the harm they have caused and accept the onsequences of their actions. Both dimensions of accountability require that those who use violence be actively encouraged to adopt healthier behaviors, improve parenting, practice selfcare, and embark on a process of self-examination with an emphasis on changing destructive attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Finally, both types of accountability can be healthy and positive forces for people who use violence, their families, and their communities.

END NOTES

1 To guide the Quality Improvement Center on Domestic Violence in Child Welfare, Futures Without Violence partnered with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, Caminar Latino, Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University, and the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare who conducted the evaluation.

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4 Ibid.

5 Taggart, S. (2019, February). Protective Factors for Survivors of Domestic Violence. dvchildwelfare.org.

6 Bridges to Better advocates for using person-first language to describe people who use domestic violence/coercive control to gain or maintain power and domination over their intimate partner. Most often the phrases, "persons who use violence or other forms of coercive control" or "persons who use violence" are used in this document. However, the term "abusive partners" is also used for readability purposes.

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