FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE®

BRIDGES TO BETTER

PRACTICE TIPS ON PATHWAYS TO ACCOUNTABILITY

FOR ADULT AND CHILD SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

JUAN CARLOS AREÁN, PHD

OCTOBER 2023

BRIDGES TO BETTER

OVERVIEW OF RELATIONAL & SYSTEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY

FOR PEOPLE WHO USE VIOLENCE

"How do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?"
- bell hooks

What is accountability and why is it important when working with families impacted by domestic violence?

When a person uses violence and coercion with their intimate partner (domestic violence) it often has negative impacts on other family members too. Holding the person who is using violence and coercion accountable for their behavior is critical to establishing safer and more stable conditions for both child and adult survivors, and to helping families heal from the impact of abuse. In common parlance, accountability refers to holding the abusive person responsible for their behavior and the harm they cause.

Accountability for abusive partners is often equated with retribution and criminal justice system involvement. However, there is growing evidence that limiting the definition of accountability to punishment is often ineffective and may be counterproductive, especially when working in underserved communities.

What is relational and systemic accountability for abusive partners?

Bridges to Better expands the traditional definition of accountability to achieve two parallel objectives:

1. Reduce or eliminate the abuse and coercion
2. Promote a trajectory of positive change and healing in persons who use violence.

To achieve these objectives, child welfare staff, domestic violence (DV) practitioners, courts, faith leaders, treatment providers, community residents and family members can use two types of accountability strategies:

Relational strategies, which use the power of relationships, connections, and human interactions to work with people who use violence.

Systemic strategies, which focus on accountability within and across systems.

Practitioners should strive to use both relational and systemic strategies in their work with people who use violence. **People are more likely to change when an authentic, respectful, and caring relationship has been established.** Family members, friends and community residents can also be a part of establishing accountability for abusive behavior, primarily through relational strategies.

EXAMPLES OF RELATIONAL STRATEGIES	EXAMPLES OF SYSTEMIC STRATEGIES
Talking with the person who uses violence about their parenting and their love for their child as a reason and motivation for positive change.	Documenting a pattern of violent and coercive behaviors, and their impact on family members (in case records, court affidavits, etc.)
Helping the person using violence and coercion to understand how their behaviors negatively affect their own life and harm their family, and encouraging them to develop a vision of a better future for themselves	Creating child welfare case plans or issuing court orders that set expectations about ending the use of violence, and that describe what the person who has used violence can/should do instead
Creating a safe space where family members, friends, and other people (clergy, members of a religious congregation, employers, coworkers) can build a community of accountability and support for change for the person who uses violence	Ensuring that all people who use violence are provided meaningful access to certified battering intervention programs (BIPs) and/ or responsible fatherhood programs
Inviting the person who uses violence to identify community members who are positive cultural models that embody non-violence and, if possible, supporting connections to those people	Removing barriers to change (e.g., facilitating access to mental health services; educational, housing, and employment supports)

BRIDGES TO BETTER

BUILDING RELATIONAL & SYSTEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY

ACROSS MULTIPLE DOMAINS

Relational accountability *strategies use the power of relationships, connections, and human interactions to work with people who use violence.*

Systemic accountability *strategies focus on accountability within and across systems.*

Promoting accountability for people who use violence and coercion with an intimate partner is key to the safety and well-being of both child and adult survivors. Accountability combined with supports for positive change can also lead to the enhanced well-being of the person who has used violence or coercion. These positive outcomes are more likely to be achieved when practitioners promote accountability using mechanisms in all human domains: at the individual, interpersonal, community and societal levels.

EXAMPLES OF BUILDING ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE SOCIETAL DOMAIN

- Create social norms around healing from trauma, including intergenerational, as a strategy for reducing or ending violence within families.
- Advocate for expanded funding for effective relevant programming for people of different backgrounds who have used violence.

EXAMPLES OF BUILDING ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE COMMUNITY DOMAIN

- Engage a broad range of community partners to identify and intentionally apply relational and systemic accountability strategies for use of violence.
- Where battering intervention and responsible fatherhood programs do not exist, collaborate to identify sources of funding to create new programming. Engage and train behavioral health treatment providers, community-based organizations, faith leaders and others who can help to create a network of accountability and support for people who have used violence

EXAMPLES OF BUILDING ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE INTERPERSONAL DOMAIN

- Engage the adult survivor to understand their experiences of being harmed, and tailor accountability strategies to their needs, perspectives, and level of risk and danger.
- Facilitate access to battering intervention and responsible fatherhood programs, housing, medical care and other resources and supports that address the unique needs of the person who has used violence.
- Engage family members and friends of people who use violence to build a natural network of support for change.

EXAMPLES OF BUILDING ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE INDIVIDUAL DOMAIN

- Establish a respectful and authentic working relationship that helps the person using violence to understand how their behavior negatively affects their own life.
- Understand the ways that trauma can manifest in people who use violence, and adopt a trauma-informed approach for working with them.

ENSURING SAFETY

WHILE WORKING WITH PEOPLE WHO USE VIOLENCE

Relational accountability *strategies use the power of relationships, connections, and human interactions to work with people who use violence.*

Systemic accountability *strategies focus on accountability within and across systems.*

Importance for the Family Impacted by DV: Creating safer and more stable conditions for adult and child survivors of domestic violence is a primary goal when planning how to work with and create accountability for people who use violence and coercion

Role of Practitioners: In order to create safer and more stable conditions for survivors, practitioners must plan with the adult survivor before engaging the person who has harmed them and their children, building accountability, and developing strategies for maintaining accountability in the long term.

Safety always comes first! Where this symbol appears, pay particular attention to safety!

HOW PRACTITIONERS CAN HELP

1. **Plan for active and ongoing communication about levels of danger and risk.**
    - Plan ahead and communicate frequently with survivors about their safety, your efforts to work with their partner, and whether change is occurring (either positive or negative change).
    - Gather information from as many collateral sources as possible to reduce the risk of revealing what the survivor is reporting.
    - Communicate regularly among all partners involved in establishing accountability and helping survivors to stay safe, including family members and friends.
    - Adjust plans based on what is occurring in real-time (e.g., modifying the frequency of contact with each family member, including or excluding specific people from safety and accountability plans, etc.).
2. **Listen to survivors before talking with the person who is harming them.** Before engaging the person who uses violence and coercion, actively listen to survivors to understand their lived experience. With each adult survivor, make a plan for how to engage their partner safely, and keep the survivor informed about plans throughout the life of the family's involvement.
3. **Identify and deal with personal fears of points of view.** Be aware and work with personal fears and biases so you can build authentic relationships with people who have used violence. Practitioner fears and biases increase risk for survivors because they get in the way of developing an accurate assessment of the situation.

- Check assumptions that underlie thoughts or statements about men of specific backgrounds being dangerous.
- Ask your supervisor to help you strengthen your critical thinking skills and to get training on reducing biases.
- Intentionally consider alternative explanations for what you think you understand about a person's behaviors.

4. **Get support to build your practice, and consult with specialists as needed.** Engaging and working safely with people who use violence is no easy task, but you don't have to do it alone!
   - Ask a supervisor or a DV consultant/ specialist to help you prepare for a conversation with the person using violence.
   - Ask for training on how to work with abusive partners.
   - Consult with your local battering intervention providers.
   - Reflect with your supervisor about how conversations with abusive partners are going and think together about how enhance engagement.
   - Be patient but persistent in building skills and knowledge – practice skills grow incrementally.

EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS TO ASK THE ADULT SURVIVOR

- Is it safe for me to talk to your partner, why or why not?
- What is your partner's understanding of why we're involved with your family? Are there things I need to avoid talking about?
- What can I talk to your partner about to get started on developing a good relationship with them? What are their strengths? What are their hopes and dreams about themselves, you, and your children?
- What's been happening recently? Has your partner made any changes that are helping you to feel safer, or making you feel less safe?

Never share survivors' disclosures with people use use violence unless the survivor has given explicit permission to do so, as this can escalate risk.

Actively plan for survivor safety. To avoid doing harm, be flexible – this might look like postponing a conversation with their partner, making an exception to a policy or helping survivors to flee. When in doubt, or when risk is high, talk to a supervisor and/ or a domestic violence specialist to figure out how to proceed safely.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- What is informing how I think about this situation? What has the adult survivor said?
- What am I really dealing with here – danger, risk, my own feelings or opinion, something else?
- What if I'm wrong? And if I am, what are the implications for the family?

Remember that not all people who use violence are equally dangerous, and not all survivors experience harm in the same ways. As you think about your personal safety, remember that the vast majority of people who use violence within intimate relationships do not use violence with people outside of the family.

BRIDGES TO BETTER

RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

WITH PEOPLE WHO USE VIOLENCE

Relational accountability *strategies use the power of relationships, connections, and human interactions to work with people who use violence.*

Systemic accountability *strategies focus on accountability within and across systems.*

Importance for the Family Impacted by DV: The ongoing, difficult work of making permanent changes in one's behavior requires a person to believe that change is possible, to repeatedly choose non-violence, and to have support and encouragement to adopt healthier behaviors. Supportive and accountable relationships with family and friends, and with practitioners while they are involved, are critical for a person to change abusive behaviors in the long term and repair their relationships.

Role of Practitioners: After planning with survivors, practitioners should model respect in interactions with a person who has used violence and have difficult but supportive conversations to hold them accountable for changing their behavior. Practitioners can also modify strategies over time as warranted by evolving circumstances. Finally, engaging family members to help build a support and accountability network will last beyond the family's involvement with systems and providers.

Safety always comes first! Where this symbol appears, pay particular attention to safety!

HOW PRACTITIONERS CAN HELP

1. **Develop rapport over time.** Establishing a connection with a person who has been abusive is central to relational accountability. It is much easier for practitioners to successfully engage a person who has harmed their family when the practitioner demonstrates genuine care for the person's well-being.

   Ask or say:

   - I care about the safety and well-being of all members of your family, including you.
   - How is everyone's health?
   - Does your family have enough food? (If they don't, connect them with a local food pantry).
   - I want to hear your side of the story. What is your understanding of why your family is involved with child welfare?
   - We heard many good things about you from your partner, your children, and others (give specific examples of who and what). It sounds like you work really hard to be a good (parent, provider, spouse, etc.)
   - What are your dreams in life?
   - What makes you feel hopeful about the future?
   - Would you be willing to change your behavior if you knew that it hurt your children? (Explain how family abuse and even conflict is detrimental for children.)
   - I can help you change your behavior so that your children are safe and thriving.

- What have you tried to change about your behavior before?

2. **Use parenthood as a motivator for positive change.** Most people want to be good parents, including people who use violence. Research has shown that for some people, their desire to be good parents can motivate them to change their abusive behavior.

   Ask or say:

   - What do you love about being a parent?
   - What do you love about your children?
   - What do you do with your children to have fun together?
   - What dreams do you have for your children?
   - In my experience, most people really want to be good parents. What do you think it means to be a good parent?
   - Are you worried about anything in particular with your children? Is there anything you think your children might be worried about?
   - Our goal is to figure out what needs to happen to keep your children safe. What are your ideas about how to accomplish this?

3. **Find relatives, friends and others who can provide meaningful support to change the abusive partner's behaviors and attitudes.** Work to build or strengthen a natural network that provides consequences for continued use of violence and support for change. Help identify individuals who can support the person who has used violence to stay the course of positive change.
   - Ask permission to establish communication with these individuals.
   - Talk to these friends and family about supporting the abusive partner when they are struggling and helping when they need to de-escalate.
   - Include them in team meetings.
   - Enlist family and friends to help keep everyone in the family safe.

   Ask or say:

   - Who are the people whose opinions you value most?
   - Do you have family members, friends, co-workers, or faith leaders who are supportive of you and play a key role in helping you?
   - Can we ask these people to support you in your process of change? What are your ideas for how to involve them?

4. **Explore role models as a potential motivator of change.** In domestic violence cases, a person's background is often seen as an obstacle to achieve safety and well-being for the family because many abusive partners use it as an excuse (e.g., "In my community, all men hit their wives"). But the fact is that abusive partners use everything that they can to justify their behavior.

   A person's background can also be an asset. All communities and countries have values, people who endorse violence, and people who oppose violence. It is important to work with the abusive partner to help them identify the values and people that are non-violent from their perspective, so that your intervention is not discounted.

   Ask or say:

   - If you could pass on to your children a value about intimate/romantic relationships, what would it be?
   - What does that value look like in your relationship?
   - Are there times in which you fall short of that value? [If yes] What can you do to change that?
   - When you were growing up, who were the people in your community you admired and respected? What did they do, or how did they behave, that made you admire and respect them?

- How do you want your children to remember you? What kind of legacy do you want to leave for them?
- What do you want your children to learn about what it means to be an honorable person in your community?

5. **Be persistent and respectful.** Engaging people who use violence is a process, not an event, and it can feel frustrating or futile at times. When it's safe to do so, try multiple times and in multiple ways to contact and engage the person using violence, who might try to avoid responsibility, anticipate being judged, or find it difficult to talk about how they harmed their family.

Do not continue to try to contact the abusive partner if the survivor has told you it is not safe for them. Never ask survivors to relay messages to their partner from you.

- Maintain a calm and respectful manner in all interactions with the person who uses violence.
- Stay in control of emotions by breathing deeply, counting slowly, or using some other personal strategy – this helps to make a conversation productive and provides an example of what self-control looks like.

6. **Set clear limits.** Establishing rapport and accountability for people who use violence requires skills in limit-setting and de-escalation.

- Remain calm and grounded
- Affirm your interest in the conversation (e.g. "I am very interested in what you have to say" or "It is very important for me to hear your side of the story")
- Name the behavior (e.g., "When you raise your voice, I can't hear what you are saying" or, "When you stand up and pace, I'm having trouble following your story")
- Address the behavior (e.g., "Please sit down so that we can continue talking" or, "Would you like to take a few minutes to calm yourself down so that we can have a productive conversation?")
- Name possible consequences (e.g., "I'm worried that anger might get in the way of understanding your point of view" or, "If these behaviors continue, we will need to focus on helping you calm down and I will not get to hear your side of the story").

When the person uses violence is very upset, try to stay with them until they start calming down in order to minimize the risk of them retaliating against their partner or children. If they leave the meeting still very upset, contact the adult survivor to let them know, and ask how you can promote their immediate safety needs.

BRIDGES TO BETTER

SYSTEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY

WITH PEOPLE WHO USE VIOLENCE

Relational accountability *strategies use the power of relationships, connections, and human interactions to work with people who use violence. (Also in this series: practice tips on relational accountability people who use violence).*

Systemic accountability *strategies focus on accountability within and across systems.*

Importance for the Family Impacted by DV: The ongoing, difficult work of making permanent changes in one's behavior requires a person to believe that change is possible, to repeatedly choose non-violence, and to have support and encouragement to adopt healthier behaviors. Supportive and accountable relationships with family and friends, and with practitioners while they are involved, are critical for a person to change abusive behaviors in the long term and repair their relationships.

Role of Practitioners: After planning with survivors, practitioners should model respect in interactions with a person who has used violence and have difficult but supportive conversations to hold them accountable for changing their behavior. Practitioners can also modify strategies over time as warranted by evolving circumstances. Finally, engaging family members to help build a support and accountability network will last beyond the family's involvement with systems and providers.

Safety always comes first! Where this symbol appears, pay particular attention to safety!

HOW PRACTITIONERS CAN HELP

1. **Make appropriate and meaningful referrals and case plans.** Refer people who use violence to providers who will help you create a network of accountability strategies that will support positive change, such as battering intervention (BI) or responsible fatherhood (RF) programs. Providing a phone number may not be sufficient – go the extra mile to help a person get connected to helpful services.

    - Develop a brief "elevator speech" to describe battering intervention and responsible fatherhood programming to a person who uses violence. (e.g., "There are programs in the community that can help you be a better father and partner. They've helped a lot of people to change their behaviors that were harming their families.")
    - Make referrals to other needed services and resources, such as employment counseling or support, legal or housing assistance, healthcare, education services, and mental health treatment.
    - Reduce barriers that may get in the way of the goals of creating safety and well-being in the family.
        - Provide financial assistance to help low-income people access and pay for services, such as battering intervention and responsible fatherhood programs.
        - Provide transportation vouchers so that a person using violence can get to their weekly group consistently.

- Facilitate access to legal assistance if needed.
- Secure resources for interpreters when programs have limited language capabilities.

- Create child welfare case plans and court orders that establish expectations for the person using violence to participate in keeping children safe, and for routine parenting tasks such as making sure that kids get to school and medical appointments

Do not refer abusive partners to couples counseling or anger management. They are generally not designed to address domestic violence and can put survivors at greater risk. For more information, see Domestic Violence Referral Guide for Fatherhood Programs.

2. **Address the violence.** When it is safe to do so (which is determined in planning with the adult survivor), openly identify and address the violence and spell out potential legal and non-legal consequences. People who use violence are invested in keeping their behavior a secret; just naming the abuse can be a powerful intervention strategy.

Reference third-party sources of information about violence. When working with a person using violence, never name the abusive behaviors that you have learned about through their partner, as this can put the survivor in danger. not refer abusive partners to couples counseling or anger management.

- If the abusive person denies their behavior, avoid getting into a power struggle – just move on. It is enough for the abusive partner to know that you know about the abuse.
- Describe violent or abusive behaviors and their impact objectively, without using a shaming tone or language.

Ask or say:

- The police report says that you slapped your partner. Tell me more about that.
- That seems to me like an insult. How often do you call your partner disrespectful names?
- You say you put your hands around your partner's neck. This is actually called strangulation and it can be very dangerous.

- Directly address the violence and send a message that a person using violence is more than the sum of their worst behavior.
  - I hear that you feel bad about pushing your partner and there's always the risk that things can get worse. I also can see that you want to be a good father and husband. People who use violence can change with the right supports. You can change, if that's what you want.
  - I know you want to be a good father, but your behavior is not safe for your kids right now. We're going to need you to find another place to stay until you start changing your behavior. I know you can do it and I can help you in the process.

3. **Avoid getting into power struggles, and clearly identify possible consequences.** People who use violence are very good at using power to their advantage. Avoid getting into a power struggle with them. Instead, use authority skillfully. For instance, tell them:

- I don't agree with your point, and we don't have to agree. I would like to discuss the possible consequences of not changing your behavior. There are potential legal consequences, such as having to leave your home and even losing custody of your children, and also possible non-legal consequences, like losing the love and respect of your children.
- What do you think needs to happen for everyone, including my supervisor and manager, to believe you're serious about your children's safety? What do you think you need to do?

4. **Explain the effects of violence on children.** Some abusive partners might develop empathy towards their children more readily than towards their partners. Realizing the impact of their behavior on children or remembering their own childhoods can open a door to the process of change.

   Ask or say:

   - Children are often aware that one parent is threatening or hitting the other, breaking things, etc. even when parents try to protect them. What do you think your children have seen and/or heard?
   - Children exposed to violence might have nightmares, trouble in school, or become withdrawn or aggressive. Older kids might use drugs or alcohol, be violent themselves, struggle academically, and so on. How do you think your children have been affected by what's been happening in your home?
   - Have your children been exposed to other stressful events—are they bullied in school, have they seen fights or violence in the neighborhood, or are they afraid of anyone? When kids have multiple kinds of exposure to violence or stress, they tend to have more problems in relationships, in school, and in their behavior.
   - When you were a child, did you ever see someone in your family hit or threaten another relative? Do you remember how that felt to you? I imagine you want your children to have better memories than that. Am I right?

5. **Document a full picture of the person using violence, efforts to establish accountability and support, and any changes in behaviors or level of risk.**

   - Assign responsibility for domestic violence to the person who is using a pattern of tactics to establish power and control in the relationship. (This is not defined by who hit who in a specific incident.)
   - Document coercive control tactics as well as incidents of violence, and describe the harm it causes to survivors.
   - Use behaviorally specific language, and reflect changes in behaviors over time.
   - Document the person's strengths, attempts to change, and barriers to change.
   - Describe the relationship the person has with their children.
   - Document how you will establish accountability (relational and systemic efforts), support positive change, and meet the needs of the person using violence.

FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE®

Promising Futures

BRIDGES TO BETTER

Futures Without Violence is a 501(c)(3) organization with EIN/tax ID: 94-3110973.

Bridges to Better is a project of Futures Without Violence. The development of this resource was supported by Grant Number 90EV0401, 90EV0532, and 90EV0524 from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and by the Children's Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, under grant #90CA1850. Points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.