



RETHINKING PROTECTION

*ALTERNATIVES TO MANDATORY REPORTING
FOR SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
& THEIR CHILDREN*

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FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE



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Survivors of domestic violence (DV) and their children deserve our best efforts, our most compassionate responses, and policies and practices that promote safety and well-being. Recovery and healing from experiences of violence, essential to interrupting intergenerational transmission of trauma, require connection with people who strive to understand, show up with compassion, avoid projecting personal biases, and provide material, spiritual, and emotional support as survivors work to regain control over their lives.

The needs of domestic violence survivors, their children, and their families are diverse and complex. The most effective way to help survivors is to ask them what they need and to follow their lead about how to achieve self-identified goals. Helping does not always involve a service referral or connecting survivors to available resources. Instead, it involves the active practice of humanizing the individuals and families we serve and centering their lived experiences in order to facilitate survivor-led solutions. Survivor-centered work involves a re-wiring of our provider and helper brain.

This brief frames potential new strategies for domestic and sexual violence programs, culturally specific and community-based service providers, first responders, community health workers, treatment providers, Family Resource Centers, and other child- and family-serving agencies and organizations that want to help. Our intention is to explore and build/offer new pathways to safety, security, and healing by creating conditions that buffer the impacts of family violence and empower

survivors. We believe that it is possible to do so in a way that does not involve making a report to the child welfare system or introducing the threat of family separation. Our hope is that readers can visualize, explore, innovate, and expand upon the examples of practical ways they can support families impacted by DV.



IMPACT OF CHILD WELFARE ON SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Mandatory reporting of domestic violence leaves a majority of survivors worse off overall.¹ Reporting DV situations to child welfare can result in multiple kinds of harm to survivors and their children. In some cases, this includes a direct increase in danger or risk from an abusive partner who blames the survivor for system involvement. While many child welfare agencies have DV protocols to promote

safety, the utilization of those protocols can be hit or miss. “Failure to protect” and “neglect” findings misplace responsibility for violence onto survivors and bring a disproportionate number of Black, Indigenous and Latine families and children into the system. Often, current responses allow abusive partners off the hook - they are overlooked, remain unengaged, and are not held accountable for the harm they cause.

Including survivors on a state Central Registry for neglect may result in them losing a job, being barred from certain types of work, being prevented from interacting with children’s school activities, or experiencing heightened stress and further isolation.² Because of the potential impact on employment, inclusion in the Central Registry ranks among several factors that can trap survivors of DV in poverty. Other factors include lack of access to employment that pays a livable wage, lack of access to affordable housing on a single income, or other results of poverty. An abusive partner who controls family finances, ruins a survivor’s credit, or employs other forms of economic abuse can also limit a survivor’s resources and options.



Child welfare responses are organized around the idea that child maltreatment is the result of parental deficiencies and skew professionals’ perceptions of even the most helpful of resources. For example, child care is offered as an additional form of surveillance (“having more eyes on the child and parent”) rather than as fulfillment of a basic need of parents who work, attend school, engage in healing activities, or aspire to those opportunities.³ Child care is a critical resource for a survivor of domestic violence. Lack of access to affordable, flexible, and reliable child care presents a barrier for survivors wanting to leave an abusive relationship and prevents survivors from achieving educational and career goals that would lead to economic stability.⁴

Protective actions or strategies of survivors are frequently misrepresented in child welfare assessments (e.g., framing child discipline methods - practiced to prevent physical punishment by the abusive partner - as harmful parenting). Each action of the survivor must be understood in the larger and unique safety context that they are managing. Our assumptions that all children exposed to violence experience equal risks of danger are erroneous and based on our perceptions of what is protective.

Lived experience and research shows that survivors of domestic violence do not find the child welfare system to be helpful in their efforts to secure safety for themselves or their children. Collectively, survivors impacted by child welfare involved in the Accountability Dialogues and in qualitative interviews⁵ through the Quality Improvement Center on Domestic Violence in Child Welfare reported feeling blamed, judged, demoralized, silenced and disrespected by CW professionals and their practices. Forty-two percent of survivors interviewed who reported some helpful interactions with caseworkers also had negative experiences with those same workers and the system.⁶ In helpful interactions, survivors emphasized the importance of feeling respected by caseworkers while also receiving concrete supports.⁷ Normalizing a mindset and practice of showing respect for parents and providing concrete help is hardly a high bar but it is one that is not afforded to many survivors.

Still, due to mandatory reporting laws, it is not a surprise that making a child abuse or neglect report

when they are actively seeking help, is still common practice. Thirty years of training, practice and policy guidance, and other efforts to shift child welfare to accurately assess impact on children, provide real assistance to survivors, and to focus efforts on the abusive partner has helped. However, these efforts have not had the widespread positive impact that advocates hoped for and anticipated. Survivors today experience many of the same harms of child welfare involvement that survivors experienced three decades ago.

Fortunately, we have evidence to support an alternative approach - one that is compassionate, cost effective, and that reflects current science on recovery from trauma, advances fairness, and engages the wisdom and creativity of affected communities.

Perhaps most importantly, a new way of thinking about protection provides the field with an opportunity to lift up the lived expertise of survivors themselves. For decades, survivors have implored us to see them as individuals and as parents; and to provide them the resources and support they, their children, and their partners need.



BUILD PROTECTIVE FACTORS THAT HELP BOTH ADULT AND CHILD SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Five evidence-based protective factors provide a roadmap for this new journey to help survivors. These five factors both mitigate for this new way negative impacts of DV and promote healing and well-being for survivors of DV **AND** their children.

The five protective factors are:

- Safer and more stable conditions⁸
- Social connections
- Resilience and a growth mindset
- Nurturing parent - child interactions
- Social and emotional abilities

Protective factors are universal, although they may be experienced very differently based on survivors' circumstances, identities, and histories. They are also interrelated, in that building one protective factor can result in growth in others. Finally, protective factors can be promoted at all levels of the social ecology: individual, interpersonal, community or institutional, and societal. For example, safer and more stable conditions can be achieved by investing in affordable housing in a community; through legislation that requires transportation assistance, to and from their original school, for children in foster care; or by helping a survivor to complete a housing application. For more information on protective factors for survivors, see our [Pathways to Healing brief](#).

Many of the strategies listed below would be helpful to any family experiencing challenges to their well-being; and will be particularly helpful for DV survivors (e.g., offering programs and services in a person's or family's first language). Other strategies listed are more specific to the dynamics of DV relationships, and to mitigating the negative effects of domestic violence and promoting a trajectory of growth, health, and healing. Individuals and organizations can begin building protective factors by making small changes in what they do and say, while some strategies require more effort, time,

and resources. For this reason, the strategies below are organized roughly by level of effort and time required.

ESTABLISH SAFER AND MORE STABLE CONDITIONS

Immediate Strategies

- Send supportive messages to the survivor, such as “This isn’t your fault,” “I see real strength in how you’re handling things,” and “Everyone needs help sometimes.”
- Help a survivor to make a safety or exit plan if desired or connect them to an advocate who can. When appropriate and consented to by the parent, involve children as well.
- Ask survivors what resources they need to be safer and less dependent on an abusive partner, and provide those resources. Avoid just giving phone numbers.
- Provide survivors flexible funds to meet needs (e.g., getting a car repaired so a survivor can get to work, paying off a phone bill, helping them flee to supportive family members or friends in other states).
- Use widely available interpretation services to speak to the survivor in their primary language. Do not use family members to interpret.
- Assist in making arrangements for safe, short-term alternate housing for survivors and children together (e.g., shelter, transitional living program, hotels, friends or family).
- Use safe and regular check-in procedures with survivors and children (perhaps using a code word), and make a plan for what to do if they indicate immediate help is needed.
- Practice using emergency contact information with children.
- Change locks and assess for other tech-related means of surveillance (e.g., airtags, apps, etc.).
- Ask survivors what they want regarding their

partners who cause harm. If they want you to reach out to their partner, follow the survivor’s lead about what is safe to discuss and what isn’t. Reflect on whether you can do this in a way that acknowledges the partner’s humanity and avoids colluding with their behavior or victim blaming abusive behavior. Helpful things to say include things that:

- Build connection (e.g., “I care about you and your family”).
- Address behaviors when the survivor says it is safe to do so (e.g., “Your behavior is hurting your children and partner”).
- Inspire hope (“People can change; help is available”).

Short-term Strategies

- Inform survivors and those who support them about housing protections related to domestic violence implemented by the [U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development \(HUD\)](#).
- Provide free safety planning workshops for family members of survivors. Provide specific training for families on U- and T-visas and provide family safety plans.
- Partner with legal services to offer community-based legal clinics on topics such as housing, U- and T-visas, protective orders, custody, visitation, child support, and divorce.
- Provide free child care for all services and programs. Train volunteers and staff on effective responses to children who have been traumatized by DV.
- Ensure that survivors and children have access to health care.
- Develop and utilize peer advocate or parent partner models to assist/support survivors and abusive partners through services and systems.
- Expand access to employment services and supports.
- Facilitate access to reputable credit repair programs.

- Address obstacles that impede the ability of the abusive partner to access and complete appropriate services (e.g., intimate partner abuse program, responsible fatherhood). Obstacles may include the program costs, substance use, language access, transportation, lack of alternative housing, or other barriers.

Long-term Strategies

- Train local or regional language interpreters on DV and trauma to enhance program capacity to converse with survivors in their primary language.
- Train judges, CASAs, GALs, attorneys, and child support professionals on DV and offer them consultation from DV experts.
- Develop procedures with courts to limit the ability of abusive partners to file repeated motions that require the presence of survivors in court proceedings.
- Utilize multiple pathways of accountability, informed by the survivor's knowledge, including abusive partner intervention programs, supervised visitation, fatherhood programs that address DV, therapists with DV experience, restorative and transformative justice approaches, community accountability, and so on. Recruit and rely on people who can help the person who causes harm in their transformation process, including family, friends, faith leaders, etc.
- Fund (or advocate for others to fund) direct income support for survivors - because poverty keeps survivors trapped and direct income support reduces reports to child welfare.
- Start a campaign for flexible, affordable child care in the community.
- Implement priority access to public housing and housing subsidies (e.g., project-based subsidies, Family Unification Program vouchers) for survivors.
- Expand transportation options to schools and daycares to promote educational and community stability for children. Enforce the [McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#) to promote educational access for children living in shelter or temporary housing.
- Advocate for and seek funding for a continuum of services and supports for fathers, including those who have used violence.
- Design trauma-informed residential substance abuse programs for survivors and children together.
- Provide [workplace policy and protections](#) for survivors who are on staff.
- Partner with law schools to establish or utilize family law clinics for representation of child welfare involved families.
- Develop procedures to maintain confidentiality for survivors in accessing services through employer-provided health and mental health care.



BUILD SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Immediate Strategies

- When a person discloses domestic violence, provide immediate, non-judgmental support in the form of listening and being present; not jumping to solutions.
- Expand opportunities for volunteerism to build community. This will allow survivors who need help to easily give back - increasing their willingness to ask for help.
- Design safe and welcoming spaces for all survivors, including LGBTQ+, disabled and elder survivors.
- Connect survivors to a culturally specific organization or group in the community.
- Design a welcoming play area or room in your facility for when children will be present.
- Provide transportation or accompany a survivor to an appointment for support. Give a survivor a ride to the grocery store.
- Implement “wellness checks” by phone or text for people who are using your services or programs.
- Invite a survivor and their children to take a walk with you or come to your organization for dinner and a movie night.
- Provide easy access to information, resources and DV services for parents at existing drop-in centers, play groups, and community spaces (hairdressers, nail salons, libraries, small businesses, and elsewhere).
- Support children’s participation in extracurricular activities.

Short-term Strategies

- Build capacity of staff in community based and culturally specific agencies and organizations to ask people using services basic questions, like, “Are you safe?” or “What help do you need right now?” when appropriate. Develop internal procedures to respond to survivors’ needs.

- Utilize a universal education campaign (e.g., [CUES: Evidence-based Intervention](#)) to reach survivors.
- Engage faith communities and leaders to support survivors materially and spiritually, and help them connect to local DV and culturally specific programs and resources.
- Host a community event for families.
- Provide drop-in space where parents can connect and find support.
- Create a mentorship program for survivors and/or children.

Long-term Strategies

- Establish and build an organizational culture that prioritizes authentic relationships, compassion, and giving and receiving help.
- Hire bilingual, multilingual, and multicultural professionals to connect with families.
- Create annual or on-going fundraisers that engage the community, build programmatic financial flexibility, and help survivors see/feel community support.
- Engage barbers, coaches, faith leaders, and others to talk to men in culturally relevant ways about non-violence and parenting in culturally relevant ways.
- Get involved in or start local efforts to fund community resource/mental health responders as an alternative to law enforcement.





FOSTER RESILIENCE AND A GROWTH MINDSET

Immediate Strategies

- Ask survivors about their professional and educational goals, their hopes and dreams, and support them in achieving those things.
- Ask youth what their goals, hopes and dreams are and support them as well.
- Develop a practice of reflecting on and learning from mistakes and do so transparently to normalize the practice.
- Identify your agency's natural "system navigators" who can help families access resources and services. Have those navigators train other staff and community partners.
- Learn about and provide [trauma-informed practices](#) in all programs.
- Utilize mindfulness and relaxation techniques in meetings and programs.

Short-term Strategies

- Post resources on your website, including resources on families' rights in various systems (e.g., education, housing, immigration, law enforcement, child welfare).
- Co-design a learning process with survivors to generate self-advocacy skills within the context

of systems (e.g., child welfare). Ideally, this learning process is survivor-led with agency support.

- Compensate survivors as the experts they are on any and all work they complete on the agency's behalf.
- Adopt [Coaching Boys into Men](#) in middle and high school athletics.
- Support survivors to participate in local community organizing efforts (to expand child care, address an issue at a school, challenge a city policy, etc.).
- Expand access to GED and literacy programs.

Long-term Strategies

- Create youth empowerment projects as part of middle and high school curricula.
- Provide school sports, theater, arts, and music programs for free.
- Enlist survivors to run for a local office, participate on boards, testify in public hearings, etc.
- Create new programming based on what survivors say they want to learn.
- Offer opportunities for non-academic track learning in schools.

CREATE CONDITIONS FOR NURTURING PARENT-CHILD INTERACTIONS

Immediate Strategies

- *See Immediate Strategies under Establish Safer and More Stable Conditions above. Safer and more stable conditions reduce stress and burden on survivors, and make parenting a little easier.*
- Establish a practice of noticing all the positive ways in which parents engage with their children and periodically make a point of letting them know you see them.

- Share [information](#) and support survivors to talk to their children about domestic violence.
- Share resources with parents of neuro-diverse children. (e.g. [Neurodiversity and Neurodivergence: A Guide for Families](#)).
- Encourage parents to search online for parenting tips and videos specific to what they are experiencing with their child or do the search with them.
- Post materials in public spaces on the importance of spending unstructured time with children (e.g., watching movies, cooking together, hanging out, taking walks).

Short-term Strategies

- With staff and people who use your services/ programs, watch the [Changing Minds](#) video and have a conversation about how to use and share [Everyday Gestures](#) with children and youth in your lives.
- Offer parent/child fun nights and field trips.
- Solicit free or discounted passes to events and facilities where a parent can go with their child to have fun together (e.g., amusement parks, music events, movies, etc.)
- Host an outing/cook-out/games day with parents and children at a local park.
- Provide respite care for parents.

Long-term Strategies

- *See Strategies under Establish Safer and More Stable Conditions above. Policy changes, increased funding, and enhanced access to help and resources can all create conditions that help parents have the time and space to focus more time and energy on their children.*
- Hire navigators in schools to help youth and families access what they need.



PROMOTE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ABILITIES

Immediate Strategies

- Establish simple, consistent, somatic practices to help children self-regulate and get grounded, starting in early childhood programs, elementary schools, and any child- or youth-serving agency, including domestic and sexual violence programs.
- Model empathy and compassion.
- Promote healthy sleep and exercise.
- Teach internet safety to children and youth.
- Promote self-expression through the arts.
- Encourage journaling about feelings and responses to experiences.

Short-term Strategies

- Teach problem-solving skills and conflict resolution to children and youth.
- Provide access for children to a mentor or coach.
- Ensure access to educational and community supports for children and youth.

Long-term Strategies

- Integrate restorative and transformative conflict resolution practices in schools.
- Train lawyers to ask about DV and provide appropriate legal representation.
- Improve mental health services and supports in schools.
- Embed healing for children and their parents into [programming](#).

HIGH RISK/DANGER SITUATIONS

Children and youth are differentially impacted by exposure to DV depending on a variety of factors, including whether DV is co-occurring with direct child abuse or child sexual abuse. Child and family serving agencies who adopt or invest in building protective factors at multiple levels may still have questions about what to do when it becomes clear that a domestic violence situation presents a high level of danger to children. This section is intended to provide guidance about how to handle those situations if and when they arise. Please note that some of these suggestions repeat examples above but are organized here to highlight the possibilities of helping even when the situation is particularly concerning.

- 1. First, talk with the survivor parent privately to convey your worries directly, compassionately, and without judgment. Be specific about what you are seeing or hearing that heightens your concern.**
 - Ask how you can help with immediate safety needs. Follow the survivor's lead.
 - Assist in developing plans for immediate and short-term safety needs and resources.
 - For example, if the survivor has expressed a desire to leave the home, advise them to store important documents, such as all needed birth certificates, social security cards, passports, outside of their home with a trusted relative or friend.
- 2. Provide immediate resources.** For example, hire a locksmith to change locks at the home, provide cash, arrange legal representation, fix windows and doors, assess the survivor's phone and computer for other tech related means of surveillance (e.g., airtags, apps, etc.).
- 3. Provide immediate advocacy when desired by the survivor.** For example, explore and arrange access to safer temporary housing or living options. Offer your office space so that the survivor feels supported while considering these options.
- 4. Ensure that teachers, daycare providers, and home visitors understand that risk is higher than usual, and involve them in check ins and safety practices as desired by the survivor.** Provide mental and behavioral health support to children and youth through a trusted adult.
- 5. Assist the survivor in contacting the police or the domestic violence officers or advocates at the police department to facilitate an arrest, a violation of probation, or another response.** (If local police are trained to conduct lethality assessments of the abusive partner, survivors are typically prioritized for shelter or other emergency short-term housing alternatives)
- 6. When the survivor is ready, ask how they envision long-term safety being achieved and begin planning.**
 - Provide financial support to help them reach safety as soon as possible. (E.g., if the survivor is saving money for a train ticket to their sister's home, you can provide the money to help the survivor and their children leave sooner).
 - Encourage the survivor to think through who else in their natural support system could help and how. Offer to help with that connection (e.g., offer your office as a safe space for a family member to connect and plan with the survivor).

While the intent of this brief is to offer many alternatives to build protective factors to avoid contacting child welfare, we also acknowledge that there may be occasions, hopefully rare occasions, when the law demands or when a decision will be made to file a report of suspected abuse or neglect. In these instances, make a plan with the survivor to call child welfare together and ask if there is a domestic violence specialist or consultant who can be brought into the situation to help or to meet with the survivor. Advocate for the survivor throughout the process and ensure the system utilizes all resources to avoid removing children from their survivor parent and to hold the abusive partner accountable to prevent further harm.



END NOTES

- 1 Lippy, C., Burk., C., Hobart, M. (Nov 2020) There's No One I Can Trust: The Impact of Mandatory Reporting on the Help-Seeking and Well-Being of Domestic Violence Survivors. National LGBTQ DV Capacity Building Learning Center.
- 2 "How to Remedy Harm Caused by State Child Abuse Registries" (Nov 10, 2023 blog) Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- 3 Child care is unaffordable for low income families in many states, according to the Economic Policy Institute. See <https://www.epi.org/child-care-costs-in-the-united-states/>.
- 4 Hess, C., & Del Rosario, A. (2018). Dreams Deferred: A Survey of the Impact of Intimate Partner Violence on Survivors' Education, Careers, and Economic Security. Institute for Women's Policy Research
- 5 Quality Improvement Center on Domestic Violence in Child Welfare (Apr 2023). Bridges to Better: Groundwork for Building Survivor-Centered Systems. Futures Without Violence (p 4).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 For more information on accountability for abusive partners, which is a critical component of advancing safer and more stable conditions for survivors, see Pathways to Accountability for People Who Use Violence.



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