

CASCW Practice Notes

Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare

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Protecting Children in Families Involved in Domestic Violence

This edition of *Practice Notes* focuses on an issue of growing concern to child welfare professionals around the country: the overlap of child maltreatment and violence against women. Child welfare agencies are seeing a growing number of cases of children witnessing adult domestic violence, or maltreated children whose mothers are also the victim of domestic assault. Recent research indicates that between thirty and sixty percent of families served by child welfare agencies also experience adult domestic violence (Edleson, 1999).

Yet the problems of child maltreatment and violence against women have traditionally been viewed and treated as two distinct issues. Differences in historical roots, philosophy, practice focus, and even professional language have often prevented child welfare professionals and domestic violence advocates from working together successfully toward family safety.

Recently, however, several child welfare programs around the country have developed innovative responses to working successfully with multiple victims of violence within the same families (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 1999). Working together on behalf of the safety of all victims of family violence requires communication, cross-training, and ongoing coordination and integration of services. Successful practice must be based on the principle that the best interests of children in families experiencing domestic violence cannot be separated from the best interests of their mothers. This issue provides practical guidelines for child welfare professionals based on a national curriculum (Ganley & Schechter, 1996) and it provides resources for professionals interested in learning more about national efforts to successfully respond to all victims of family violence.

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Domestic Violence and the Law: Developing Appropriate Statutory Grounds

The case of a child as witness to domestic violence as a consideration in CHIPS (Child in Need of Protection or Services) or TPR (Termination of Parental Rights) is not specifically addressed in Minnesota law. However, under a Family Law statute, one of the factors defining the best interest of the child is "...the effect on the child of the actions of the abuser, if related to domestic abuse..." (257.025[12]).

"A National Curriculum"

Unless otherwise noted, the information presented in this edition of Practice Notes was adapted from the Family Violence Prevention Fund's publication entitled "Domestic Violence: A National Curriculum for Child Protective Services," written by Anne L. Ganley, Ph.D., and Susan Schechter, M.S.W.

When Is It **UNSAFE** for the Child to Remain in the Home?

In determining high risk and need for immediate response, child protection workers should consider the following as additional risk factors where domestic violence is present:

- Nonabusing parent is forced to flee and leave children with perpetrator. Or nonabusing parent and children have fled without a place to go
- Adult victim is unable to care for child due to the trauma of a recent assault or to the trauma from a series of multiple incidents
- Perpetrator has ongoing access to adult victim and/or children
- Display or use of weapons during domestic violence assault
- Perpetrator stalks caretaker and/or children
- Perpetrator threatens to kill or seriously harm himself or others
- Previous domestic violence incidence in which the child was injured



High Risk Circumstances: Protecting the Safety of Children

- Perpetrator's past criminal record which includes use of weapons and use of physical force
- Pattern of threat to murder caretaker and/or children
- Perpetrator's state of mind: depression/desperation
- Perpetrator has reduced constraint or impulse control due to substance abuse, major mental illness, and/or medications

Assessing Protective Factors of the Child

Workers should gather information from multiple sources including the adult victim, the children, and the domestic violence perpetrator to determine those factors that provide a child living in a violent home with conditions that shield the child from harm. Primary protective factors include:

- Child is of an age/developmental stage such that he/she understands and can carry out a safety plan when violence occurs at home
- Positive relationships with a network for help in crisis including adult victim, siblings, other family members, and neighbors
- Self-reliant characteristics that enable the child to seek help
- Caretaker of child is willing to seek help for domestic violence
- Caretaker places safety of the child as a paramount concern
- Adult victim's parenting and coping skills



Physical or emotional assault on a spouse has a well-documented relationship to addictions. In cases of severe assaults against partners, one study showed alcohol had been used by 70% of the abusers.

Pullan Watkins, K., & Durant, L. (1996). *Working with children and families affected by substance abuse*. West Nyack, NY: The Center for Applied Research in Education.

Guidelines for Interviewing Families about Domestic Violence

- Adult victims may be reluctant to talk with workers for fear of losing their children and/or punishment from the batterer. To build an alliance with the adult victim, focus on safety concerns
- Routinely inquire about domestic violence with all families even if no allegations have been made
- When domestic violence is revealed, the worker should immediately make a safety plan for the child and adult victim
- Interview adult victim and perpetrators separately when inquiring about domestic violence
- If an adult victim or child tells the worker about domestic violence, information should be kept confidential and not shared with the perpetrator unless the adult victim so requests.
- Inform clients that information may not be kept confidential in court proceedings.

Assessing for the Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

Injuries or Health

What kinds of health issues does the child have? Injuries or bruises, broken bones, unconsciousness due to hitting or choking? Has child's health changed in recent months?

Psychological and Emotional

Have there been any emotional changes? Withdrawal, depression, increased irritability, anxiety, nightmares? Does child have any suicidal thoughts or acts?

Behavioral

Has the child used or threatened the use of physical force against anyone? Has the child displayed behavior problems in family, school, and peer relationships? Does the child experience problems in eating, sleeping, running away, alcohol or drug abuse, harming self, harming animals, destroying toys?

Social Problems

Has the child suffered social disruption due to domestic violence: moves, changing schools, isolation from friends, etc.? Problems in learning?

Guidelines for Interviewing Children

Following are suggested questions to pose to children during an initial intake interview.

- Assessing the Pattern of Violence: Has anyone in your household ever hit you or someone else so hard or so often that it left marks or made you afraid of that person? What happens when your parents (the adults) fight? Has anyone used a gun or a knife? Tell me about the last big fight between them.
- Assessing the Impact on the Child: How do you feel during the fight? After the fight? Do you talk to any one about the fights? Do you feel safe at home? Have you ever felt like hurting yourself or someone else?
- Assessing the Child's Protective Factors: What do your brothers or sisters do during a fight? Where do you go? Have you tried to stop a fight? In an emergency for your parent or yourself, what would you do?

A Cautionary Note from Ann Alquist, former Director of the Child Abuse Prevention Program, School of Social Work, University of Minnesota: The competency of the child to respond to these questions must be assessed with attention to the following factors: (A) The age and the developmental stage of the child in understanding what can be observed and reported with accuracy; and (B) The context of the interview. It should be understood that children are reluctant to talk negatively about the people they love. Moreover, there is also a fear element involving punishment for exposing "family secrets."

Interviewing children is still an art. The above questions should only be a guideline and used with a good deal of discretion and common sense.

Safety Planning with Adults

Child protection workers should discuss in detail the concerns and options related to ensuring the safety of the adult victim of domestic violence and her children. Initial questions may include...

- In what way can I (and others) help you?
- What do you feel you need to be safe?
- What particular concerns do you have about your child's safety?
- What have you tried in the past to protect yourself and your children?
- Who in your support system will help you?

If the mother has separated from the perpetrator...

- Talk to schools and child care providers about who has permission to pick children up.
- Tell neighbors that her partner is gone and ask them to inform her if he returns to the area.
- Teach children to call police or family/friends if they are snatched.
- Considered changing the locks on doors and windows
- Consider obtaining an order of protection

If the mother is staying with the perpetrator...

- In an emergency, what works best to keep her and her children safe?
- If she needs to flee temporarily, where can she go? Write down the addresses and phone numbers.
- Ask the perpetrator what he intends to do to stop the violent behavior.

Safety Planning with the Child

The worker should explore the issues with the adult victim and the children when appropriate. Safety plans should consider the following points:

- How the children can find a safe adult & ask for help whenever they experience violence at home
- How children can escape from the house if an assault is in progress; if they cannot escape, identify what room in the house is the safest
- Where children can go in an emergency (ask the children what they will do, step by step)
- How children can avoid getting in the middle of an assault
- How to call the police (practice what to say)
- How to call supportive family members, friends, or community agencies for help
- Whether a shelter or protective order is needed and/or wanted



Thank you. This issue of *Practice Notes* was compiled with the assistance of ...

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Notes from Recent Publications

Assumptions Underlying Effective Interventions in Domestic Violence Cases

- Many men who physically abuse or neglect children also abuse the mother. Therefore, routine screening for domestic violence must be part of child protection efforts.
- When a perpetrator abuses an adult intimate partner, he also harms the children. Therefore, to protect the children, a worker's service plan must deal with domestic violence.
- As a consequence of domestic violence or other problems, a battered woman may abuse or neglect her children. Protecting the mother from an assaultive partner should be considered as a way to reduce risk to children.
- Domestic violence perpetrators, not their victims should be held accountable for abusive behavior. Therefore, perpetrators need significant controls placed on them in the context of a child protection intervention.

Source: Ganley, A., & Schechter, S. (1996). *Domestic Violence: A National Curriculum for Child Protective Services*. San Francisco: Family Violence Prevention Fund.



Witnessing Domestic Violence: Effects on Children

Children who witness domestic violence may exhibit problems in the following areas...

- Psychological and emotional: aggression, hostility, anxiety, social withdrawal, and depression
- Cognitive functioning: lower verbal and quantitative skills and supports the use of violence
- Longer-term development problems: depression, trauma-related symptoms and low self-esteem among women and trauma-related symptoms alone among men.

These problems are magnified by the following factors:

- The child has been a witness and has also been abused by the perpetrator
- The child perceives insufficient level of family support, stability, and community connectedness
- Confusion the child feels toward the adult male in the home, that is, the battering father; children may experience both affection for their fathers and resentment, pain, and disappointment over his violent behavior.

Source: *Witnessing Violence: The Problems* (Jeffrey Edleson, www.vaw.umn.edu/Vawnet/witness.htm)

For Further Reading...

- Ganley, A., & Schechter, S. (1996). *Domestic Violence: A National Curriculum for Child Protective Services*. San Francisco: Family Violence Prevention Fund.
- McCurdy, K. (1995). Risk assessment in child abuse prevention programs. *Social Work Research*, 19(2).
- McKay, M. M. (1994). The link between domestic violence and child abuse: Assessment and treatment considerations. *Child Welfare*, V.LXXIII(1)29-39.
- National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (1998). *Family violence: Emerging programs for battered mothers and their children*. Author.
- National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect (1998). *Children Who Witness Violence: 1995-1998*, Publications Abstract. Author.

On the Web...

- <http://www.mincava.umn.edu/link> Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse. Information regarding collaboration between child protection workers and battered women's advocates; full articles on child maltreatment and domestic violence
- <http://www.calib.com/nccanch> National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect: A Service of the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services

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