



# National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

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## SUPPORTING PARENTING OF CHILDREN RESIDING IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHELTERS

### Technical Assistance Guidance

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*Each year, thousands of children accompany their mothers into domestic violence shelters after witnessing and experiencing abuse in their homes. In just one day in 2013, domestic violence programs across the country and US Territories served 66,581 victims. Of that number, 19,431 were children who found refuge in an emergency shelter or transitional housing program. Children are impacted by domestic violence at home in a variety of ways and are therefore particularly vulnerable upon entering shelter with their mothers. Recognizing that sensitive and complicated dynamics related to child discipline arise in domestic violence shelters, this Technical Assistance Guidance focuses on challenges regarding parenting and discipline of children who reside in these shelters, proposing a variety of recommendations regarding this topic. Resources for further education, training and staff development are included.*

### Parenting and Domestic Violence

The practice of teaching positive behavior is known as *discipline*. The purpose of discipline within the context of parenting is to encourage healthy development and foster a sense of responsibility in children. With effective discipline, children can learn to make good choices because they have internalized standards of behaving with respect and kindness, rather than making these choices out of fear of external reprisal. This ultimately builds self-confidence and positive self-image in children, two important factors in promoting resilience. The role of shelter advocates using an empowerment model of survivor-centered advocacy is to support victim parents in expanding their knowledge and ability to utilize multiple forms of reinforcement in rearing their children and maintaining positive, loving familial relationships. This type of support builds healthy families and healthy communities.

For parents who are currently experiencing domestic violence and those who have recently escaped abuse, rebuilding or strengthening the parent-child bond, including employing effective approaches to discipline and behavior management without causing further harm, can be a delicate, complex matter. Domestic violence is inherently destructive to maternal authority because abusers intentionally undermine, devalue, and interfere with their victims' parenting as a tactic of abuse. Further, their behavior can provide a model for children of contemptuous and aggressive behavior toward their mother. One predictable result, confirmed by many studies, is that children of battered women oftentimes have increased rates of violence and disobedience toward their mothers (Bancroft, 2002). Additionally, children who have been exposed to domestic violence often suffer symptoms of trauma, including trouble sleeping, difficulty paying attention, nervousness and startling

easily, and depression. Some children who have been exposed to domestic violence develop posttraumatic stress disorder, including nightmares, flashbacks, avoidance, and hyperarousal (Bergthold, 2010). These reactions can, in turn, present new types of challenges for abused parents.

*“Children need to move from unpredictable danger to reliable safety. We can help children realize that they are safe by using a nonviolent and nonaggressive approach to parenting. By not using corporal punishment and refraining from yelling, name-calling, making threats of physical violence, and other forms of verbal aggression, the child will be repeatedly reassured that your home is a safe place to be. We can let a child know that while all families have arguments, there is no danger of anyone being harmed. A good basic rule is ‘No one gets hurt, and nothing gets damaged.’”*

(Futures Without Violence, 2009)

Compounding this experience of trauma and exposure to abuse prior to entry into shelter, children are now in a new environment, away from home – their beds, their friends, their school, their entire lives. Further, there may have been many stops along the way as victims fleeing abuse sometimes stay with family, friends, even in their cars, on the street, or in a homeless shelter before reaching out to a domestic violence program. Some children may view the move to shelter as frightening or as a punishment of sorts as they have been separated from their home, their loved ones, and all familiar surroundings. Given these combined traumatic circumstances, behavioral problems often surface. Studies reveal that some children who have been exposed to adult domestic violence display greater behavioral, emotional, attitudinal, and cognitive difficulties when compared to those who have not been exposed (Edleson et al., 2003).

Many survivors of domestic violence engage in protective strategies to help diminish the impact of their partner’s abuse on their children, and ultimately seek shelter in great part to secure their children’s safety and wellbeing. In a small study of 17 battered women with children, 65% described removing the children from the scene of the violence by moving away from them or putting them in their bedrooms (Haight et al., 2007). Abused mothers often provide explicit guidance to their children about the importance of not repeating the violence, as well as increased empathy and caring, reflecting their active efforts to prevent or buffer the impact of the violence on their children (Levendosky et al., 2000). Research exploring the experiences of mothers in shelter reveals that concerns related to children remain among the most frequently cited and highest ranked of all indicated needs. A multi-state domestic violence shelter study found that one of the three most common child-related services requested by mothers was help responding to children who are upset and causing trouble. Other significant child-related needs identified by mothers in shelter include information about healthy or normal child development, referrals to local children’s counseling resources, and support for parenting a difficult or worrisome child and better understanding their behavior (Lyon et al., 2008; Baker & Cunningham, 2004).

Beyond understanding the many complexities facing survivors of domestic violence upon entering the congregate living situation inherent to shelter, staff must also recognize the

added challenges that shelter living poses to parents and children. These challenges can include conflicts with other residents over use of shared space, becoming acclimated to living with strangers and, for some parents, assuming or reclaiming their role as an authority figure in their children's lives. Children may need to adapt to viewing the survivor parent as someone who is capable of making decisions, leading and taking care of them, which may be particularly challenging for children in caretaking roles.

**Given this complex array of issues and concerns, how can survivor parents residing in domestic violence shelters regain, strengthen or maintain their children's trust and respect? How can shelter staff support them in doing so?**

One of the best ways to keep children safe is to help ensure the safety of their non-abusive mothers (Masten, 2006). As discussed above, mothers who have been abused at home oftentimes face additional challenges as parents. In many instances, abusive partners intentionally manipulate and damage the relationship between their victim and her children, and undermine her authority as a parent. It is imperative that staff members respect and validate non-abusive parents' decisions and parenting styles, while encouraging them to positively counteract the negative behaviors modeled by the abuser at home.

In this vein, all staff and volunteers working with survivors and their children in the shelter environment should contact their domestic violence state coalition to learn about training opportunities on the impact of domestic violence on children and youth, including effects on neurological and social development, and the provision of trauma-informed care. According to the National Center for Trauma-Informed Care, trauma-informed care is an approach to engaging people with histories of trauma that recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role that trauma has played in their lives. For more information and resources on trauma-informed care, visit [VAWnet.org](http://VAWnet.org), the NRCDDV's online resource library, to view the [Special Collection on this topic \(vawnet.org/special-collections/DVTraumaInformed-Overview.php\)](http://vawnet.org/special-collections/DVTraumaInformed-Overview.php).

The following recommendations are designed to offer guidance to advocates as they support survivors in the parenting of their children. While all shelters will not have the capacity to implement all of the suggestions discussed below, programs are encouraged to adopt as many practices as are realistic within specific environments. Moreover, as staff may not have the financial means to receive comprehensive training in all recommended areas, there are numerous online education resources included below, and [state coalitions](#) can provide information on free or low-cost trainings for advocates. Finally, it is important to remember that supporting healthy, positive relationships between parents and children is vital to ending violence against women.

- 1. Introduce parents to the non-violence policy at shelter.** Non-violence policies in domestic violence programs are designed to protect victims and children residing in shelter from threats, physical harm and dangers, and trauma echoes (also referred to as triggers). Any altercations between residents at the shelter, whether verbal or physical, have the potential to trigger memories of abuse at home. Non-violence

policy statements should be clear and brief, such as: “Any act of physical violence between residents, including hitting, pushing, punching, smacking, biting, spitting, strangling, or grabbing forcefully, is prohibited.” A statement regarding shelter staff’s willingness and availability to discuss this policy should immediately follow.

In keeping with the recommended practice of encouraging and supporting positive and healthy parenting and discipline techniques in shelter, staff should include non-judgmental, supportive language in their shelter policies and in their discussions with shelter residents. Examples include introductory phrases such as:

- “We recognize parenting can be challenging, particularly in a new and unfamiliar environment.”
- “We are here to support you and your children, including help with parenting, educational development and other child-related concerns you may have.”
- “We care about both you and your children’s wellbeing and respect your parenting decisions, including those relating to discipline. We’re here to offer support and can explore a variety of child discipline and behavior management techniques with you.”

*“My children know now that we don't have to live in fear.”*  
(*Meeting Survivors’ Needs through Non-Residential Domestic Violence Services & Supports: Results of a Multi-State Study, 2011*)

**2. Ask about survivors’ parenting experience and how you can provide support.**

The following recommendations and statements have been adapted from the resource *Supporting Parenting in Shelter Checklist for DV Advocacy Programs*, by the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Within the first 24 hours after entering the shelter:

- Tell the parent that you want to support their parenting.
- Ask: “Is there anything in particular you want me to know about any of your children that will help us make this a good place for them? Do they have a birthday coming up, special learning needs or behavior challenges? Are there games or activities that the child really enjoys?”
- Tell the parent you know it can be hard to parent in shelter and you want to help.
- Ask: “How will we know if you are having a hard time?”

**3. Talk about parenting in the shelter and validate that it is challenging.** Once a parent is settled in, talk with them about reclaiming parenting in shelter.

- Tell the parent how important their parenting is to help their children thrive in light of the domestic violence.

- Talk about the good parts and challenges of parenting in shelter:
  - Benefits:
    - Lots of playmates
    - Caring staff
    - More resources
  - Challenges:
    - Lots of distractions for kids who need to do homework
    - Minimal private space with mom and siblings (How can you help?)
    - Kids have had a variety of experiences and we can't always predict how they may act out their distresses and traumas; need to be vigilant about safety and appropriate play, and compassionate with children who are struggling with displacement, disruption and trauma
    - Varying parenting styles within the shelter
    - Feeling that everyone is observing your parenting
- Ask what the parent is most concerned about with regard to parenting in shelter (What can you do to alleviate this concern or provide support?)

*“The counselor gave me great advice on how to help my son with his emotions.”*  
*(Meeting survivors' needs: A multi-state study of domestic violence shelter experiences, 2008)*

**4. Provide examples of nonviolent disciplinary options.** There are various ways to discipline children effectively, including the use of time-outs, withholding privileges, and helping them understand the connection between actions and consequences. There exists a wealth of resources exploring behavior management for children exposed to domestic violence. Listed below are three resources that may be of particular assistance to shelter staff in their support of survivors' parenting:

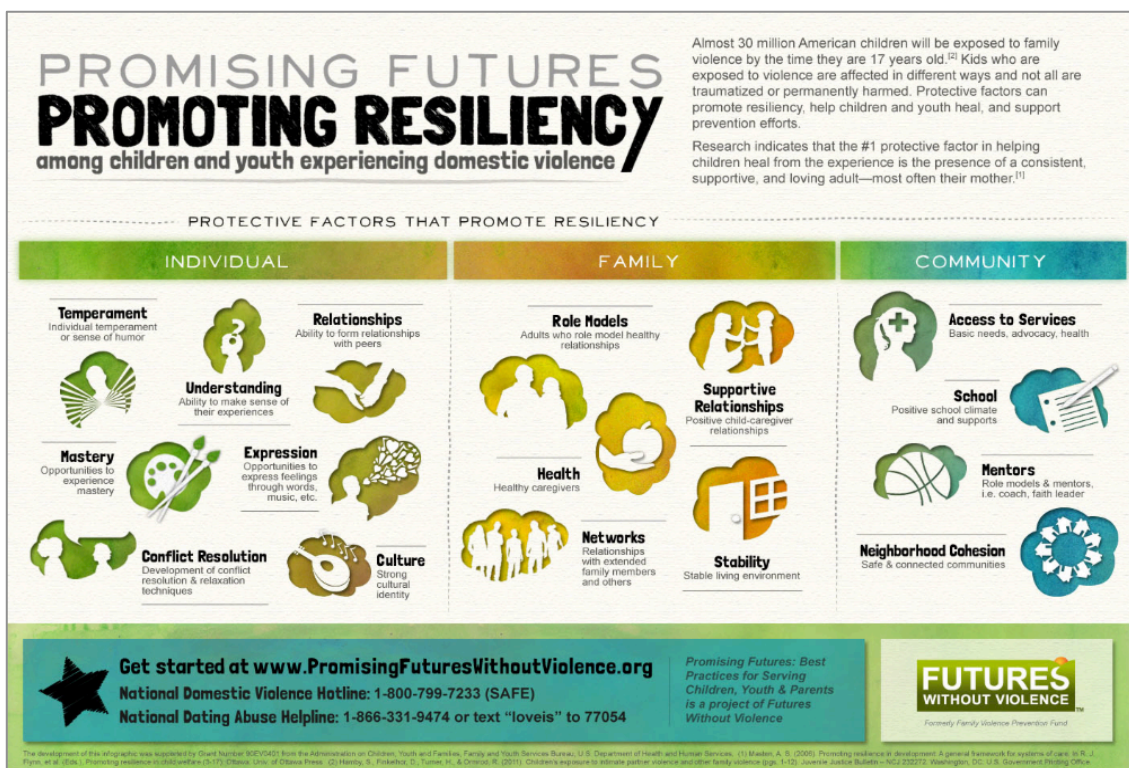
- *Children and Domestic Violence: Questions and Answers for Domestic Violence Project Advocates*  
 Developed in collaboration with domestic violence project advocates from across the country, this fact sheet reviews the ways in which domestic violence affects children and recommends strategies for advocates to contribute to family recovery.  
[nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/DomViolenceFactSheet\\_final.pdf](http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/DomViolenceFactSheet_final.pdf)
- *Healing the Invisible Wounds: Children's Exposure to Violence: A Guide for Families*  
 This resource provides practical suggestions for supporting the healing process. Recommended strategies are tailored to children based on age (birth to 6, 7 to 11, and 12 to 18) and are easily integrated into every day interactions.  
[safestartcenter.org/pdf/Healing%20Inv%20Wounds\\_English\\_aug09.pdf](http://safestartcenter.org/pdf/Healing%20Inv%20Wounds_English_aug09.pdf)

- *Helping Children Thrive: Supporting Women Abuse Survivors as Mothers: A Resource to Support Parenting*

This resource was written for service providers who work in various settings including children's mental health centers, child protection settings, or any other place where women seek assistance for their children. Material addresses the needs of abused women as mothers, how abusive men parent, how abusive men affect family dynamics, effects of power and control tactics on mothers, the potential impact of woman abuse on children of different ages, and strategies used by young people to cope with violence in their homes. Guidance on parenting children exposed to violence is also offered. [lfcc.on.ca/mothers.html](http://lfcc.on.ca/mothers.html)

**5. Help mothers develop strategies to strengthen the mother-child relationship.**

As mentioned previously, abusive partners often manipulate and damage the relationship between the victim and her children. Through counseling or support group, advocates can help survivor parents develop strategies to regain their authority and strengthen the bond with her children while taking great care to not undermine her efforts. To help domestic violence programs enhance their services, Futures Without Violence developed the *Promising Futures* website: [promisingfutureswithoutviolence.org](http://promisingfutureswithoutviolence.org). This resource offers capacity-building tools to support programs in effectively meeting the needs of women, children, and youth experiencing domestic violence. Whether your program is just starting to explore how its policies could better reflect a commitment to mothers and children, or you have been delivering holistic services for all family members for years, this website has information and tools that can advance your practice. The site includes an [infographic](#) (below) depicting protective factors that support resiliency and healing for children and youth.



- 6. Schedule informal orientations for children and parents in shelter.** Orienting children to shelter life can provide an opportunity for staff to interact with children, pay particular attention to their needs, and describe (in age-appropriate terms) the expectations of shelter staff regarding behavior and conduct while residing in shelter. Staff can schedule a child-focused activity during or after this process in order to get to know them on a more personal level and to begin to build trust between the children and the staff members. For example, after all pertinent information has been shared with both parents and children, staff could lead them on a tour of the space, giving special attention to areas that are specifically built and organized with children in mind. Children should have a chance to explore playrooms, study areas, outdoor playgrounds, reading or quiet play areas, and other such spaces that are intended to make shelter more comfortable for them.

Following a tour of the facility, advocates might discuss simple techniques for fostering child wellbeing in shelter with survivor parents in private.<sup>1</sup> Some techniques to note include:

- Arranging the living space so that it's age-appropriate, based on the child's developmental stage. Remove objects that can be unintentionally dangerous to young children (such as cleaning products or medication that children should not access) or tempting for them to play with (such as warm/hot hair curlers or electronic devices that can be damaged).
- Proactively engaging children in activities in which they can excel will reduce opportunities for them to act out negatively or get into trouble, while building confidence and fostering talents and strengths.
- Modeling appropriate behaviors and teaching children developmentally appropriate skills rather than having expectations that they are able to behave in ways or do things that are beyond their developmental stage.
- Establishing a daily, after school, and nighttime routine and maintaining structure so that children understand order and know what to expect of their day. Consistency and predictability are basic needs for children that can help promote resiliency and overall wellbeing.
- Discussing individual responsibility and natural consequences of choices – both positive and negative. Reward systems, removal of privileges, and use of time-outs can be valid options to explore during these discussions.
- Using frequent praise towards children and making them feel loved, capable, valued, and respected. Point out ways in which they have or are contributing to their family's health, positive functioning, and safety.
- Explaining in age-appropriate terms, expectations regarding children's behavior while in shelter – towards other children and residents, towards the parent, and towards staff, and disciplinary measures or actions that will be taken if children purposefully and knowingly misbehave.

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<sup>1</sup> Additional behavior management ideas are available from the Behavioral Institute for Children and Adolescents: [behavioralinstitute.org/uploads/Behavior\\_Management\\_Ideas\\_tips\\_for\\_parents.pdf](https://behavioralinstitute.org/uploads/Behavior_Management_Ideas_tips_for_parents.pdf)

- Providing opportunities for children to be responsible and contribute to the positive culture or daily functioning of the shelter. This may include responsibility for food selection or preparation, organizing the playroom or library, decorating public spaces, or taking care of a garden. Older teens could be responsible for planning or carrying out activities for the younger children. Children who have been exposed to domestic violence often feel powerless and thrive when given opportunities to regain control.

*“Because of separation from my abuser as well as my experience with [advocate], I can already see a change in my daughter’s concepts of her personal power and women’s empowerment & her pride in me has grown greatly.”*

*(Meeting Survivors’ Needs through Non-Residential Domestic Violence Services & Supports: Results of a Multi-State Study, 2011)*

- 7. Offer programming for children that include activities with their survivor parent.** Shelter programs can play a crucial role in helping support and encourage healthy relationships between parents and their children. This type of positive intervention can build or nurture relationships that may have been sabotaged by abuser behaviors (Baker et al., 2004). In the safe environment of the shelter, and with the guidance of shelter staff, time should be set aside for mothers and children to engage in partner activities. These activities should include deliberate messages about the strength of protective parents and help reinforce and build children’s trust in them. Physical activities such as taking long walks and observing nature, creative arts and craft projects, and confidence-building games are great examples of simple and easy partner activities that can be organized by staff or volunteers, with appropriate safety precautions. Shelter staff are encouraged to seek input from both parents and children with respect to the types of activities that they would most enjoy and in which they could safely participate. To learn more about model projects and strategies for domestic violence programming, visit VAWnet’s Special Collection: [Enhanced Services to Children and Youth Exposed to Domestic Violence: Promising Practices & Lessons Learned](http://vawnet.org/special-collections/ChildrenExposed.php) ([vawnet.org/special-collections/ChildrenExposed.php](http://vawnet.org/special-collections/ChildrenExposed.php)).
- 8. Make counseling for children exposed to domestic violence accessible.** In shelter programs where child advocates or child-specific services are not available, shelter staff could consider developing partnerships with local child therapists who may come into the shelter and meet with children one-on-one (with parental consent). Also, while shelter staff should inform parents of the availability of counseling, this should be done in a sensitive manner and without pressure or judgment.
- 9. Invite survivors to serve as guest speakers during group sessions with the children residing at the shelter.** Creating opportunities for adults exposed to domestic violence in childhood (AEDVC) to visit the shelter and share their experiences and stories of resilience can be a source of hope for the children as well as for their mothers. These chats can focus on the importance of building and



sustaining healthy relationships with their siblings and protective parent, emphasizing the importance of trust and togetherness for the healing process. For more information and support, visit the [AEDVC Leadership Forum \(nrcdv.org/AEDVC/\)](https://nrcdv.org/AEDVC/).

## **In Conclusion**

Survivors of domestic violence and their children enter shelters under highly traumatic circumstances. Many times, relationship dynamics between survivor parents and children have been compromised as a direct result of victimization by an abuser at home. These parents and children are in need of various types of support and therapeutic services from shelter staff during this time. Whether a particular shelter has the resources to offer individual psychotherapy, or is equipped only to provide basic play activities for children, well-informed attention to the relationship between parent and child is necessary so that these families can thrive well beyond their stay in shelter.

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