

Engage to Protect: Foundations for Supervised Visitation and Exchange

Engaging with Men Who Batter in Supervised Visitation Centers

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through the volatile period of separation and help weaken his opportunity and inclination to abuse. Whether by legal decree and/or the reality of having children in common, most battered women end up having to navigate parenting around their former partner until children reach adulthood, regardless of the severity of abuse they experienced. A visitation center can help support safety over this time period by the relationships it builds, regardless of whether it is part of a family's life for six months or several years. In addition, beyond its role with any one family, a visitation center contributes to ending battering and domestic violence by its ongoing participation in a wider community response and its links with domestic violence advocacy programs, the courts, and other collaborating partners.

Defining “engaged”

To be “engaged” means to be involved and connected in an intentional, thoughtful way.

We can all think of a time that we have used a service that had a big influence on our well-being. It could be access to health care or a certain kind of medical treatment. It could be making an insurance claim after a traffic accident or securing day care tuition assistance or unemployment compensation or financial aid. What did you have to do to receive that service? What was most important to that agency about your experience? How were you welcomed and introduced to that service and what was required of you? What was positive and helpful? What was negative and discouraging? Were you connected with someone who clearly explained the expectations and consequences of different actions and decisions? Were you treated ‘like a name’ or ‘like a number’? Was the agency engaged with you or were you processed in and out as though you were interchangeable with the next body in line?

A visitation center that encourages an engaged practice is one that is active in building meaningful relationships with people. **To engage with men who batter is a process that is different in approach and skills than that used to engage with women who have experienced battering, although both practices share a core definition.**

In the domestic violence field, it has long been recognized that protecting battered women and their children requires active engagement with women around their specific circumstances and needs. Visitation centers are in the unique position of working with the whole family, whereas most agencies and organizations responding to domestic violence intervene with one parent or the other. Centers have a valuable opportunity to go beyond the important mission of guarding women and children. They can engage with women around safety and they also have an opportunity to engage with men around safety and change.

Engaging with men who are using supervised visitation and exchange is both a means of fostering safety for women and children and counteracting his use of battering tactics. To be involved and connected in an intentional, thoughtful way with men who batter, however, poses a distinct set of challenges. The actions and beliefs that characterize battering mean that a batterer is often very good at using service agencies to reinforce his coercion and intimidation. It is easy to unintentionally collude – to discount, condone, or ignore the tactics of battering – particularly when visitation center workers are ill-prepared and have not developed skills to support engaged non-colluding relationships with men who batter.

There is a continuum of engagement with men who batter for visitation programs to consider.⁷ A visitation center must create an environment that is respectful and fair while not being naive about how it might collude with an abuser's ongoing control of a victim. Engagement requires a level of communication and dialogue with a man that goes beyond a simple enforcement of rules. As centers develop experience working with men who batter they will be able to expand how and when they talk with a man about the needs of his children and how he can solve problems related to visitation or exchange. Within months of first walking through the center's doors, most men will be making visitation arrangements directly with their children's mother and they will be discussing everything about their children with her, from school issues to health issues. Helping prepare him to do this in non-abusive ways is a level of engagement that can greatly benefit battered women and their children.

The Framework

This discussion presents a framework for safely and skillfully engaging with fathers who have been or are currently battering their children's mother. The framework is summarized in Appendix 1. Meeting the goals rests on the approach, as made possible by workers' knowledge and skills in key areas.

Goals

1. Foster safety for mothers and their children.

The primary goal is safety: her safety and her children's safety. A visitation center can create an environment that does not allow the battering to continue and that makes it possible to de-escalate or diffuse risk to her or the children. This attention to safety is both immediate, during the specific time period of a visit or exchange, and over the period of separation. It requires preparing staff to recognize and evaluate behavior in the context of battering. What does this father's action mean in the context of battering? How might this father's actions further his intent to erode her relationship with her children, harm her physically or emotionally, coerce her into returning to him, convince others that she is "crazy" or unstable, intimidate her, or gain custody of their children?

2. Counteract the tactics of battering.

To counteract the tactics of battering requires that a visitation center anchor its programs and services in recognition and understanding of those tactics. From this essential foundation it can develop the approaches and necessary skills in workers to safely respond. Supervised visitation is not a batterer intervention program, but it is intervening in the battering by providing a father with access to his children or, increasingly, by responding to battered women who have lost custody of their children.

⁷ FY2008 Solicitation: OVW Supervised Visitation Program funds cannot be used for therapeutic visitation; parent education or batterer intervention programs; or individual, group, or family counseling.

Battering is characterized by dominance and a sense of entitlement to a certain status as a husband and father. A battered woman's actions to separate and leave the relationship threaten that position of dominance and sense of entitlement. Because such actions mean that a batterer is losing much of his ability to control her, the post-separation period can be the most dangerous. It is often where efforts to harm a woman and/or her children increase substantially. It is often where attempts to control her increase substantially, through the children, the courts, and intervening services such as a visitation center.

To engage to protect means that a visitation center creates an environment that counters the tactics of battering. This is not to suggest that its role is to "hold him accountable" in the same way that criminal legal intervention holds batterers accountable. It means providing an environment that does not reinforce a batterer's expectation of dominance and entitlement. It means an environment that does not support his efforts to continue the control and abuse, deny the violence, or blame her.

One element in counteracting the tactics of battering is to recognize and acknowledge the violence, which is frequently kept private or secret or dismissed as insignificant ("just an argument" or "I lost my temper"). A visitation center can relay consistent messages to a father who batters, regardless of whether he has admitted his use of violence toward his family members, by creating an environment that counteracts the tactics of battering. This environment can support a battering father to shift his focus to his own actions and their impact on his children and away from his obsession with their mother and her efforts to leave. It seeks to increase his awareness of his children's experience: e.g., "part of the children not wanting to see you is because you hurt their mother. You've scared them and they're afraid." An environment that counteracts the battering is one that lets him know about the center's collaboration with batterer intervention programs and other resources in the community that have helped men to change.

Approach

- **Continually gauge and account for the risk of harm to a mother and her children.**

Circumstances, risks, and safety needs change over time. A static plan based on information gathered at a family's first appointments will not support safety over the time. A safety "plan" cannot be words that get written down on a form and put in a file. It must be a living plan that shifts and changes over time as needs and risks change.

Continually gauging risk requires paying attention in an intentional, thoughtful way. It requires building a relationship with each father that maximizes communication. It requires frequent check-ins about how the visits or exchanges are going and about how things are going in general in his life. Has his wife filed for divorce after a period of separation? Is a final divorce action scheduled? Has he lost his job? Has he been arrested? Is he talking about moving away or leaving the country? Has he been trying to contact his children's mother in between scheduled visitations? Is he refusing to discuss adjusting the visitation or exchange schedule to a day or time that works better for his children and their mother? Is he saying things such as, "she'll never get the kids" or "she'll pay for this"?



Continually gauging risk also requires an understanding and awareness of the tactics of battering, along with factors that can signal increased danger for a battered woman and her children. Research into intimate partner homicides suggests several factors that should receive particularly close attention, both when a family first comes to the visitation center and throughout their relationship with the center: controlling behavior, extreme jealousy, severe attacks (particularly with a weapon or strangulation/choking), increasing frequency of violence, forced sex, and gun possession.⁸ Having knowledge of the frequency and severity of these and other coercive, intimidating behaviors speaks to the importance of a visitation center's relationships with its community partners and referral sources. Ideally, the referral source should be able to provide the visitation center with information about who is at risk and in what ways.

- **Develop a positive, problem-solving partnership with him.**

The notion of a partnership with a battering father carries a **caution**. The ability to manipulate is one of the key characteristics of battering and those attempting to or asked to intervene, such as a visitation center, are in no way immune. A problem-solving partnership in the setting of visitation services is one that is directed toward making visitation and exchange services work safely. The primary goal of fostering safety has to be kept clearly in view. It is problem-solving to help a batterer get through the volatile period of separation and help weaken his opportunity and inclination to abuse. It is a partnership around such problems as talking with his children about what has happened, learning to be with and care for his children in new ways, or connecting with batterer intervention and other community services that have helped men change.

- **Help him focus on his children's well-being and not on their mother.**

Battering causes harm to children, harm to a father's relationship with his children, and harm to a mother's relationship with her children. A visitation center can help a father repair the harm his actions have caused and contribute to a process of change if he is open to it. A visitation center can be one of the points of intervention that helps increase the possibility that he will be open to change. When a visitation center develops a respectful relationship with a father it sets the stage for conversations over time that can help him shift his attention to his children's well-being, instead of being preoccupied with their mother. From the beginning, center staff can encourage a father to build a different relationship with his children. They can encourage him to do what is good for his children, including reinforcing the importance of visitation and exchange that feels safe to his children, talking with him about letting go of their mother and letting her have a different life, and reinforcing the notion that the children need their mother in their life.

Batterers generally do not feel guilty or ashamed about how they have treated women. While they blame their partners and have little or no empathy for them, they often do feel guilty about what their children have experienced.⁹ A visitation center can keep bringing the conversation

⁸ For a summary of research into intimate partner homicide, see *NIJ Journal*, National Institute of Justice, Issue 250, November 2003, available at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij.

⁹ One of the most thorough examinations of battering tactics and parenting is *The Batterer as Parent: Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Family Dynamics*, Lundy Bancroft and Jay G. Silverman, Sage Publications, 2002. Bancroft and Silverman describe the following attitudinal and behavioral qualities as characteristic of men who batter: control;

back to what his children need: to his children's need for visitation or exchange to go smoothly and to his children's need for a relationship with their mother. For example, when a father complains that his children will not talk to him during a visit, the center can reflect on how his actions against the children and their mother have harmed them and made them feel unsafe. This helps encourage his own efforts to examine his actions and recognize the harm that he has caused to his children by harming their mother.

Helping a father to shift his focus to his children's well-being and away from controlling and hanging onto their mother helps set a foundation for the possibility of safe, ongoing parenting without outside intervention over the long period of time until children reach adulthood.

- **Account for his social position and life experiences.**

Each father using a visitation center – and each worker in that center – comes from a neighborhood, a community within the larger community, a family, and, a set of values, customs, and beliefs about parenting, child rearing, marriage, and divorce. Melting everyone into one pot of universal experience or one universal person with a one-size-fits-all response serves no one well.

While everyone who comes through the doors of a visitation center – mothers, fathers, children, workers – lives in one world, they do not have the same experience of that world. In order to work with and help a father who has battered his children's mother, a center needs to understand what shapes his experience of the world. People's lives are complex and influenced by many facets of culture and identity.¹⁰ Flexibility is essential in accounting for an individual's social position and life experience.

When a father has seven children, how will a center adapt to make supervised visitation work? When he speaks a language other than English? When he is unemployed or a low-wage worker and cannot pay the center's fees? When he has never changed a diaper? When he has never spent time with his children on his own, apart from their mother or another person? When the visit coincides with a cultural holiday or celebration?

Accounting for a father's social position and life experiences does not mean that a visitation center accept his every concern without question. Because aspects of culture and identity can be used to reinforce battering, the primary goal of safety requires a thoughtful response. Is this a concern that impacts safety? A concern that reflects a cultural practice? A matter of parenting style? Or, is it 'all of the above'? In order to answer such questions, visitation center staff needs the knowledge and skills to engage with people who have cultural beliefs, values, customs, and practices that differ from their own.

entitlement; selfishness and self-centeredness; superiority; possessiveness; confusion of love and abuse; manipulateness; contradictory statements and behaviors; externalization of responsibility; denial, minimization, and victim-blaming; and, serial battering.

¹⁰ *Culture* is the complex, dynamic frame of reference shared by a group of people and reflected in customs, art, beliefs, spirituality, language and institutions. *Identity* includes aspects of how we see ourselves in the world (and how others may see us) that are intertwined with culture: i.e., as we define our identity by such characteristics as rural, urban, gay, straight, farmer, factory worker, teacher, believer, skeptic, working class, middle class, wealthy, poor, documented, undocumented.

