

Strengthening Mother-Child Bonds

AN ADVOCATE'S GUIDE

LEARNING TOGETHER

GROWING TOGETHER

BEING TOGETHER

PLAYING TOGETHER

UNDERSTANDING TOGETHER

**A Kid Is
So Special
(KISS)**

Strengthening The Mother-Child Bonds

Children form their earliest attachments to their mothers and the relationship between child and mother is of crucial importance to everything that follows in the child's life.

The quality of the relationship between a child and the child's parents, particularly the mother, is one of the most telling predictors of the healthy development of a child. In order to succeed in life, children need to feel good about who they are, have positive relationships with others and know how to regulate their emotions. When children have a good foundation for self-image, they are able to learn, do well in group situations and develop confidence in their abilities to communicate and form relationships. Securing and maintaining a strong bond with one's children is the primary work of parents. Parents are the "safety bumper" for their children in the world as they grow physically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially. In a home in which there is a batterer, that safety bumper may not be as strong as needed for healthy development.

Parenting is one tough job! For victims of domestic violence, it is even more difficult. Batterers, by their very nature, not only do not parent well, they may also interfere with the parenting of victims.

Both boys and girls have been observed to accept various aspects of the batterer's belief system, including the view that victims of violence are to blame for the violence and one parent is superior to the other, most often males to females.

The batterer's verbal abuse and violence towards the other parent or caregiver gives a message of contempt and disrespect. As a result, confirmed by many studies, children who witness domestic violence often have increased rates of violence and disobedience toward their non-abusive parent.

Some victims of domestic violence are prevented from picking up their crying infant or helping a frightened child. The batterer may interfere with her ability to provide the children with the most basic of physical and emotional care, even medical attention. Children may begin to feel that the non-abusive parent doesn't care about them or won't meet their needs immediately or regularly. The batterer may reinforce those feelings by saying such things as, "Your mother doesn't love you," or, "Mommy only cares about herself."

Victims may find that they are assaulted or intimidated if they attempt to prevent the batterer from mistreating the children, or may find that the children are more seriously harmed. The batterer may punish them for standing up for the victim. Over time, victims may stop intervening on the children's behalf.

Victims of domestic violence face enormous challenges in striving to be the best parent they can be. Yet recent research suggests that mothers of pre-school aged children exposed to domestic violence may be more sensitive and responsive to their children than other parents. Other studies, which compare groups of battered mothers to non-victimized mothers, found in both groups a wide continuum of parenting abilities.



A child who lives with violence is forever changed, but not forever damaged. There is wide agreement that children’s recovery from exposure to domestic violence depends largely on the quality of their relationship with the non-battering parent and with their siblings. Helping a mother is the most effective strategy in helping children build resiliency and heal from exposure to domestic violence.

Bonding means:

- ❁ **The child feels safe, secure, and cared for by adults.** Trust is built when adults consistently respond to the child’s needs. If children cry for long periods of time without response, they learn that their needs are not valued and they feel unworthy of love and nurturing.
- ❁ **The mother learns to respond to her child’s cries, to tell the difference between different types of cries, and to know when she has met the child’s needs.** Sometimes mothers interpret crying as a deliberate attempt by a child to manipulate them, show anger, or communicate something other than a need, but crying is often the only way a child has of communicating with his mother.
- ❁ **As children grow, bonding continues.** It is a lifelong process, not a single event!
- ❁ **While most bonding takes place in infancy, it is never too late for a child to develop or strengthen a bond with his mother.** Both mother and child can learn new ways to trust, interact, and bond together.
- ❁ **When bonding is not occurring, the mother/child needs to be given three things: deep connection to each other, confidence in the mother’s ability to be a parent, and parenting tools to deal with effects of the lack of bonding (behavior issues).**

Some parents don’t understand the importance of creating and maintaining a bond with their children, and the positive effects of working on this bond. As professionals working with families, we can have a big impact on family functioning by teaching mothers the importance of bonding.

About The Author

Beth Bitler has been the Director of Program Services at Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance, a parent education and support program in Harrisburg since 1999. Previously, she worked as a parent educator and agency director in Berks County, and as an education specialist for Berks Women in Crisis. She holds a Master’s degree in Nonprofit Administration and a Bachelor’s Degree in Communications. She has authored several publications for parents, including “Building Your Family,” a parent education curriculum. The mother of two college-aged children, she is a survivor of domestic violence and currently lives in Harrisburg.

PCADV Contributing Staff

Nancy Durborow, Health Projects Manager
Barbara Nissley, Children’s Program Specialist/Trainer
Jo Sterner, Training Specialist

About This Program

In October 2005, PCADV commenced a three-year project to expand the capacity of domestic violence staff to address the needs of children and adolescents and to support the abused parent's care-giving capacity to build resiliency in her children. Historically, domestic violence programs have focused their services, advocacy, and system change efforts on adult victims of domestic violence, believing that if the abused parent is safe, then the children are safe. And though safety is a priority, research findings demonstrate that intervention services focused on strengthening the abused parent-child relationship are beneficial in addressing the trauma associated with a child's exposure to violence.

The goal of the KISS program is to assist victims of domestic violence in helping their children heal from exposure to domestic violence, thus strengthening the mother-child relationship. The objectives are to help the victim of domestic violence:

- ❁ Realize the impact of exposure to domestic violence on her children.
- ❁ Understand "normal" behaviors for a specific aged child and behaviors that may be the result of this exposure.
- ❁ Learn strategies for helping her children.
- ❁ Build resiliency so her children heal.

As an advocate, remember:

- ❁ This is not a comprehensive "parenting" program. It is a beginning step in strengthening a mother-child relationship that has been impacted by the violence and abuse of the batterer. Every victim has her own personal beliefs and experiences about parenting, based on cultural, religious, and familial factors.
- ❁ The victim has done the best parenting she could given the circumstances of the domestic violence as well as other life circumstances.
- ❁ Corporal punishment reinforces the lesson the children learned from the batterer – violence is an acceptable way to solve problems and a part of relationships. BUT she may have no other or limited ways to discipline her children and teach them appropriate behavior, right from wrong, and behaviors to be safe in the world.
- ❁ Each of you as an advocate has your own personal beliefs and experiences with parenting – not better or worse than those of the victim – just different.
- ❁ You are a mandated reporter of child abuse. Understand the definitions of child abuse and be careful not to make reports based on your own definitions of parenting, her perceived parenting deficits, or the use of corporal punishment that does not rise to the level of child abuse.



Thus, this curriculum and training – for conducting educational groups for adult victims, with strategies to help their children – was developed, accompanied by written materials for the non-abusive parent.

The five booklets for the non-abusive parent are:

- ✿ **“Playing Together”** – Social development of children and how parents can nurture children through play.
- ✿ **“Learning Together”** – Intellectual development and school success, including ways to help children learn through everyday experiences.
- ✿ **“Growing Together”** – How children develop physically and emotionally, and important ways parents can support healthy growth.
- ✿ **“Being Together”** – Family dynamics and how parents, especially single parents, can help children have a positive view of family.
- ✿ **“Understanding Together”** – Encouraging parents, especially victims of domestic violence, to reclaim their role as the disciplinarian of their children.

Sessions with mothers should be offered in one- to two-hour time slots, either in a group or individually. There is more information in each session than you will have time for – choose what is most relevant for your group or mom or plan additional sessions if you wish to cover all of the material as a group. You can use the booklets in any order; they are related, but independent of one another.

Each booklet includes:

- ✿ General information on the theme, presented in short articles written at a fifth grade level.
- ✿ A thought-provoking poem or inspirational article on mother-child relationships.
- ✿ An activity for you to use during group discussion time.
- ✿ Information on domestic violence and its effects on children.
- ✿ Activities for “Mommy And Me” to do together, geared to the age of the child and reinforcing the theme of the booklet; family time activities that are low or no cost and available to almost any family.
- ✿ The booklet “Understanding Together” does not include activities for “Mommy And Me.” In its place there is a brief section for moms handling their own feelings that arise when managing children’s behaviors.

General instructions about how to use the materials are included in this booklet and in training sessions sponsored by PCADV.



Preparation And Beginning The Work

Preparation

Before this curriculum is offered to any non-abusive parent, it is important that advocates are familiar not only with the content of the curriculum, the booklets and the advocate's guide, but also with the following:

- * Child development: physical, emotional, social, intellectual.
- * The impact of exposure to domestic violence on children's development.
- * Concrete effects of exposure on children.
- * What child witnesses need to heal.
- * Guidelines for talking to children at different ages.

You don't need to be or have been a parent in order to present this curriculum, but you must expect that a mother may question you as the leader of the group or the individual advocate. You must have a thorough grounding in domestic violence and the areas listed above. Enthusiasm, a clear commitment to helping the non-abusive parent help her children, and a non-judgmental attitude about a victim's parenting are critical to building a trusting relationship.

Check your own beliefs and experiences about "what is a good parent." Are you aware of your own beliefs and attitudes and feelings about non-abusive parents who remain or return to their abusers, even when there is child abuse? Being as objective as possible is critical to helping non-abusive parents without their feeling shamed or blamed about their parenting or the impact of living with the batterer on the children.

Before beginning to utilize the booklets either individually or in a group, it is important to do some preparation with each mother. Explain the KISS program, including the goals and objectives. Let her know that parenting is a tough job and batterers make it even more difficult. Remind victims that all children are impacted in some way by the domestic violence. Do this in a matter-of-fact manner so non-abusive parents are not made to feel at fault for the impact on the children and/or not being the kind of parent they wanted to be. Support her if she does believe she has not been the best parent and/or should have left the abuser sooner. Let her know that children can be very resilient and can heal. Be nonjudgmental.

Talk to the victim about the relationship of the batterer with each child, what they saw, heard, and experienced. Ask about discussions that took place with the children about the batterer's behaviors. Talk about any changes in her children that cause concern or questions.

If the mother gives permission and the children are verbal and willing, talk with them about what has been happening between their parents or caretakers, the meaning of it, and their feelings. Remember children who are exposed to a batterer have learned to keep the secret of what is going on in their homes and may not trust any adult. Think developmentally in terms of the child's cognitive understanding of what has occurred, the degree of impact, and their ability and willingness to talk about it and/or express feelings.

This discussion with the mother and the child will give you and the mother a context in which to do the work and the activities in the five booklets. It can help the mother realize and understand the impact of exposure to domestic violence on her children and on her as a mom.

- * Focus on the materials and activities in the booklets but also allow time for participants to express feelings and ask questions.
- * Explain that the booklets are the participants to keep for their own use.
- * Give homework, if it is appropriate.
- * You can supplement this curriculum with information, activities, or additional written handouts.

Before beginning with the first booklet, take time to provide information about and discuss the impact of the batterer on parenting, the impact on children, children's resiliency, and child development.

Some Tips For Leading Mother-Child Bonding Groups

Working with parent groups can be both challenging and rewarding. Here are some tips for doing your best work when discussing mother-child bonding and parenting:

- ✿ **Acknowledge that parenting is very personal, very subjective, and very difficult.** There is no right or wrong way to be a mother, and no one is perfect at it. Many mothers – especially where there are special challenges, such as domestic violence – feel unsure of their abilities to parent, and need extra support and positive comments.
- ✿ **Use your own experiences whenever relevant.** As mothers, we may not have good role models to follow. If you are comfortable sharing your own parenting experiences, and it is relevant to what you are discussing, share it. Just be careful about seeming like an “expert” and make sure you don’t spend too much time on your own experiences.
- ✿ **Be clear about what you expect.** Let participants know how the group will be structured and what you expect from them.
- ✿ **Allow time for conversation.** It can be hard to jump right into a personal conversation, so allow time for participants to get to know each other and you, before you tackle the material in depth. The informal support is just as valuable as the information you are presenting.
- ✿ **Expect resistance.** Few parents acknowledge a need for help in something that many view as “natural” or “an instinct.” They may see discussions of mother-child bonding as another class they “must” attend or as something that’s not necessary or helpful. That’s okay – your example of respectful help and encouragement goes a long way in overcoming resistance and hostility.
- ✿ **Be flexible.** You will most likely have a group of women with diverse educational backgrounds and reading abilities. You may have to adapt the information in the booklets to meet their needs. There also may be times when the group needs to talk about something other than what you have planned; model how to change plans when situations change.
- ✿ **Have some fun.** When mothers are overwhelmed with the violence in their lives, it’s hard for them to think about playing with their children and having some fun. Use the time in your sessions as a respite and show them that parenting isn’t all hard work and challenges.
- ✿ **Believe in the mothers’ love for their children.** Sometimes we, as staff, have a hard time seeing positive parenting and bonding and forget that, often, mothers who seem uncaring or neglectful of their children just don’t know how to parent another way. If we believe that they love their children, and we believe they can change parenting attitudes and behavior, they will believe it, too.



Playing Together

This booklet is about how children develop socially, how they make friends with other children, how parents can play with their children, and how to praise kids for good behavior. This booklet contains a great deal of information and activities. It cannot and should not be completed in one meeting, whether individually or in a group.

Here's how to use this booklet:

The two articles, "Family Rituals And Routines" and "Helping Your Child Switch Gears," can be read as part of class time or given to participants to read later on their own. An important point to make from these articles is that establishing family routines and helping children change gears can be valuable tools in managing children's behavior. Help mom see these as ways to make her life easier, not more difficult.

The poem, "The Many Kinds Of Mothers," can be used to spark discussion, particularly at the beginning of the session. The article on children's friendships needs little discussion; just reinforce that making friends is a skill that children need, like walking or caring for themselves.

On the "Mommy And Me" page, the "Who Am I?" collage is a good activity to do with moms and kids together, or you can provide a supply of magazines, paper, scissors, and glue for moms to use in their free time. Be sure to model how to talk to children about their collage; there is sometimes a tendency for mothers to get so involved in making their collage that they forget to interact with their children! The list of things to do with kids and "Family Time: Squiggles" game are self-explanatory; just be sure to point them out to moms in your program and help them think of other ideas in your community.

"How To Play With Your Child" is a step-by-step outline of ways to interact with children. It can be surprising how many parents don't know how to play and had little opportunity to play when they were children. If you have time with parents and children together, review this outline as they interact. Likewise, discuss the ways to praise their child (at the bottom of the page), especially if children are present during the session time.

When discussing "When There's Hurting At Home" on the bottom of the page, point out that for many of the experiences children have when living with violence, there are things that mom can do to help her children develop an understanding of domestic violence.

The activity for this session is "The Ripples Of My Life." The purpose of this is to help participants see connections between one decision they make and every part of their lives (not just regarding their children). Try this activity for yourself before you conduct the session. Spend 20-30 minutes of your session time discussing this activity and what participants have come up with on their worksheet.

The "How Do You Feel?" activity on emotions can be done by mothers and kids on their own, but follow up with mom to see if her child discussed any emotions that are troubling or surprising to her or the child.



Learning Together

This session focuses on how children learn, how they succeed in school, safety on the Internet, and stress reduction for mothers. It emphasizes getting to know each other as part of a family and valuing what mothers learn about themselves.

Here's how to use this booklet:

Many parents don't see themselves as teachers. Use the article "Helping Your Child Learn At Home" to stress the importance of parents as children's first teachers, and their continuing role as their children are in school. The second article "Are Your Children Ready To Be Home Alone?" gives mothers a starting place for making this important decision. Point out safety issues with your group as part of this discussion.

The section "A Child's Safety Plan" is meant to remind parents that batterers often use the children as a way to control the victim. This is true whether the victim has left the abuser or not. Have a discussion and add such helpful tips as:

- ✿ Plan and practice an escape route.
- ✿ Plan a safe place to hide, if escape from the home is not possible.
- ✿ Teach a code word and what to do when the code word is used.
- ✿ Children should know what to do if an emergency arises and understand the difference between an argument and an emergency.
- ✿ Children should be taught not to intervene.
- ✿ Children should know what information is okay or not to share with abusers during visitation.
- ✿ Teach children what to do if approached by the abuser or a friend/family of abuser.
- ✿ Let schools/day care know those individuals who can pick up your child and tell children who is okay to leave with from school or day care.
- ✿ Help children come up with answers for "What if..."

Internet safety is big on many parents' minds. The article "Safety On The Information Highway" gives some tips for monitoring children's use of computers. Have parents read this on their own but be available to answer questions or help them handle concerns. After reading "What I've Learned In Life," ask mothers in the session what they have learned in life, and use that as a place to start the discussion.

The "A Mother Tree" activity helps mom see herself as positive in her parenting role. As they work on this activity, help participants think of what they have learned and how this has improved their child's life. When discussing "When There's Hurting At Home," point out that for many of the experiences children have when living with violence, there are things that mom can do to help her children develop an understanding of domestic violence.

The "Take The Pledge!" article can be read on their own, but it's always a good idea to follow up with "What did you think of that?" questions. Practice some of the "Stress Reduction Strategies" during class time – they make a great ending activity. Encourage moms to use them at other times.

If you have an opportunity to have moms and kids together, the "Love Rocks" activity on the "Mommy And Me" page is a good one to try. It takes very little preparation or supplies, and moms can repeat it at home later on.

Growing Together

In this session, we focus on how children grow and change between 3 and 12 years old, suggestions for ways to talk about sex with a child, and some tips for enjoying the role of mother. A few things that might be helpful as you use this booklet:

The charts on pages 2 and 3 give a “snapshot” of child development. Help participants identify things their child is doing that may not be on the chart, or expand on some of the items presented here.

“Somebody Said” can open a discussion of “What does being a mother mean to you?” and can be combined with a discussion of “Ten Things To Remember About Being A Parent.”

“When There’s Hurting At Home” stresses the ways children, by witnessing domestic violence, pick up clues about how to treat their mothers, and offers some ways to help children view their mothers as positive and strong.

“Talking With Your Child About Sex” may be difficult for some mothers. This article gives you a starting place to discuss the topic. It helps to have information available from family planning agencies, pediatricians, or other professionals, so your group can have access to it right away.

How comfortable are you talking about sex with your own children, in general, or answering questions from a victim about talking about sex with her children? Know your own comfort level so when a mother asks you “How do I answer my child’s questions about where do babies come from?” you can provide a factual answer, based on the child’s age, without stammering, giggling, blushing, or looking uncomfortable. Realize that how you handle the questions asked of you can be a model for how the parent may answer children’s questions or initiate a conversation.

The following may be a conversation to have with victims about this topic:

- ✿ Help parents to think about “teachable moments.”
- ✿ Talking about sex should be an on-going conversation, not one all or nothing conversation. It is best to be prepared rather than suddenly having to come up with an answer on the spur of the moment or waiting until a certain age to have the “big talk about sex.”
- ✿ Think developmentally. Understand what “sex” means for various ages of children. Information should be age appropriate and in language they would understand.
- ✿ Don’t give too much information.

Answers to questions or teachable moments about sexuality issues should reflect:

- ✿ Facts – accurate information, using correct terms, direct, matter of fact.
- ✿ Family values – personal beliefs.
- ✿ Responsibility – as children get older, the responsibilities of mature decision-making and consequences of behaviors and choices.
- ✿ Child’s self esteem – a respectful dialogue can help kids and teens feel good about themselves, their sexuality, their feelings.

Ask participants for their own tips on “How To Survive Shopping With Your Children,” as well as any additions to the list of “Ten Things To Remember About Being A Parent.”

The “Mommy And Me” page gives several easy things that mothers can do with their children, focusing on changes taking place with the children and sharing time as a family. Whenever possible, have some class time with both parents and children, so you can model positive behavior.

The “A Family Museum” exercise can be completed with children or by mothers alone. Help participants identify unique things about their family and how they might symbolize the family to someone looking at them from the outside.

Being Together

This booklet is about how children and parents interact, and suggestions for how parents who are no longer a couple can communicate regarding the children, and how to include new partners in the children's lives. It's important that mothers put their safety and the safety of their children first in all discussions with an ex-partner, and that both parents must be willing to communicate with respect for co-parenting to be successful.

"When There Is Hurting At Home" talks about how domestic violence has had an impact on the victim, including the impact on parenting. You may want to encourage victims to journal more about the impact on themselves and to feel free to share their thoughts and feelings with an advocate or with the KISS group.

Handling sibling fighting is a challenge for many parents. After reading the article "Parents as Referees: When Siblings Fight," ask group members to share their own ideas about how to deal with this situation. Mothers sometimes are unsure how to interact with a son, but feel comfortable with a daughter. Some suggestions for "Parenting Sons And Daughters" are given.

"Co-parenting With Your Ex-partner" concerns parenting when the other parent is no longer in the child's life on a daily basis. These can be stressful times for mothers, and the support of the other group members can be very important. Let victims know that co-parenting is perhaps even more stressful for victims of domestic violence. Batterers often threaten to abduct the child or harm the child. They often fight longer and harder for custody and visitation, and may get unsupervised visitation and some type of custody arrangement. Discuss safety planning for visitations with the abusive parents and talk about how stressful it is for her and the children before and after visits. If anyone has concerns about existing custody and visitation arrangements, refer her to your program's attorney or another legal resource. Most mothers really enjoy "I Loved You Enough" – Erma Bombeck's classic – and can add some other times when they loved a child enough to do something difficult.

The "Who Is Part Of Your Web?" activity helps mothers under stress identify people with whom they share interests. Those who provide support can create an informal network for them. Try to encourage mothers to make these "webs" as detailed as possible. The "When There Is Hurting At Home" section lists some ways that domestic violence impacts parenting. This can be used to begin a discussion of how mother-child bonding can be improved, even when domestic violence is present.

The activities on the "Mommy And Me" page are free, fun, and stress the importance of exercise in the growing child's life. Encourage mom to complete the drawing of "Mirror, Mirror" with her children, and discuss what the kids have to say with you or another staff member.



Understanding Together

This session focuses on the role of a parent as a disciplinarian, a role that may have been interfered with or made more difficult by the actions of the batterer. Here's how to use this booklet:

The first section "It's Not Easy Raising Children Today" is a reminder that for any parent raising children can be one tough job. For a victim of domestic violence, her job was made even more difficult. For the children, they may have trouble with rules and boundaries. So setting boundaries becomes very important.

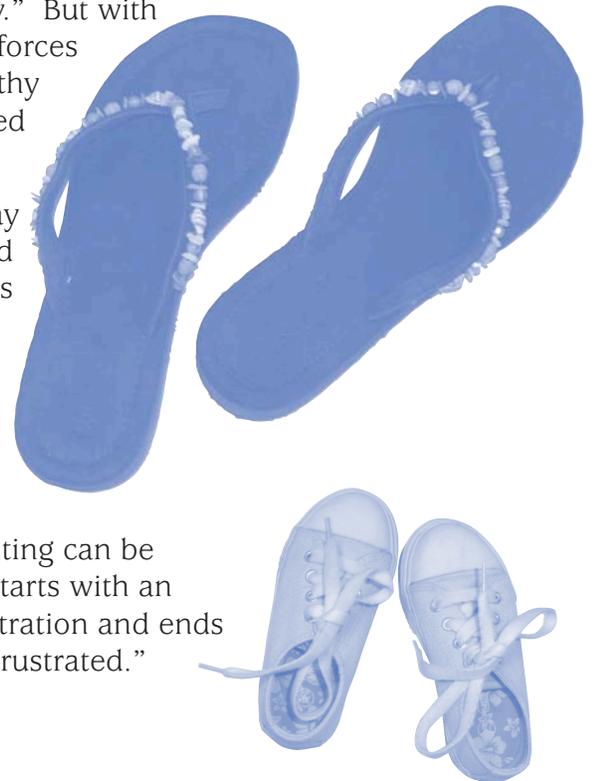
"Ways Violence May have Affected Your Role As A Parent" is a thought-provoking series of questions for a mom to think about the ways the batterer interfered with her job as a parent and the impact on her as a parent. This could be used as a group discussion. Or if you are doing one-on-one with a mom, it could be a discussion, or she could journal her responses and share if she wants.

"Learning The Difference" clarifies the difference between discipline and punishment. It shows the connection between the lessons children learn from witnessing domestic violence and how those lessons may be reinforced by punishment. "How To Begin" and "Do's And Don't Of Discipline" set the groundwork for disciplining rather than punishing children. Acknowledge with the moms that many of us were raised with physical punishment and we "came out okay." But with children who have witnessed violence, physical punishment reinforces lessons the children learned that will not help them grow in healthy ways. Also acknowledge that we often parent as we were parented and don't have other ways to discipline at our disposal!

The next section is a review of behaviors that child witnesses may exhibit. Sometimes the impact on children is severe and the child may need professional help. Next there is a short list of behaviors that may indicate the need for such help.

"How Many Ways To Tell Children I Love You" can be used as a discussion to expand the list!!! Those ways can be creative and fun for both mom and children. An inspirational poem wraps up this section.

The last section helps moms to remember and accept that parenting can be frustrating, but even in frustration they are doing things well. It starts with an activity to make a list of those times or behaviors that cause frustration and ends with suggestions "What To Do When You Are Feeling Angry Or Frustrated."



**Funding for this project from
DHHS/ACYF/Family Youth Bureau
Grant# 90EV03553**

Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence
6400 Flank Drive, Suite 1300 * Harrisburg, PA 17112
800-932-4632 * TTY: 800-553-2508 * Fax: 717-671-8149
www.pcadv.org