

## **Supporting the Mother/Child Bond to Build Strength & Resiliency: Strategies for Domestic Violence Advocates**

Domestic violence advocates – especially in residential settings – are presented with many opportunities to help battered mothers build stronger relationships with their children. It is helpful to consider each interaction with a battered mother and/or her children as a chance to help them enhance family relationships that have been under the stress of surviving abuse.

Below are 13 key elements of a strong mother/child relationship for families who have lived with domestic violence. Each is followed by concrete suggestions for advocacy and support. It is worth noting that the task of living up to all 13 elements would be challenging for *any* parent, let alone a traumatized battered mother. There is simply no such thing as the perfect parent.

### **1. Mother understands her children's needs and meets them as best she can. She does her best to provide predictable rules and schedules and a stable home life that meet her children's needs for eating, rest, good health, school, friendships and play.**

Advocates can:

- Role model healthy eating, have quick, healthy recipes and food available. Encourage bed times and rest and hand washing, explaining that it helps keep everyone healthy.
- Encourage relationships with schools through notes, visits, attendance at events and having children keep up with school work.
- Mentor help with children's school work.
- Encourage friendship relationships through books, role plays, and group activities.

### **2. Mother feels competent being in charge of her children and they respect her.**

Advocates can:

- Help the mother identify tactics that the abuser has used to put her down as a parent. Reassure her that his behavior means that he is a poor parent, not her.
- Help the mother identify things, however small or few that she has done to challenge the abuser's parenting or parent differently when he's not observing her. Praise these as proof of her ability to be a good parent, and help her think of ways she can build on these steps to be the parent she wants to be.
- Encourage her to be the parent. Even when she is tired or not present, she should always be noted as the parent and respected for her opinions and wishes regarding her children.

### **3. Children know that their mother loves and respects them. She helps them feel good about themselves and believe in their potential for success. They feel that she understands them and meets their needs as best she can, and will always do her best to be there for them.**

Advocates can:

- Role model respectful behaviors by respecting the mother. Discuss her concerns about what is not working in her family and help her to develop different strategies that she can really use.
- Parent support groups and/or family groups bring many people together and allow mothers and children support each other and see other family relationships.
- Videos and books can be used to share new ideas without pointing out deficits.

**4. Mother understands her children’s developmental stages and keeps appropriate boundaries with them in her conversations and expectations.**

Advocates can:

- Provide mothers with information about children’s developmental stages and needs at each stage.
- Give mothers opportunities to ask questions and discuss this information with advocates and other mothers.
- Teach boundaries through modeling and discuss how boundaries help children feel safe as well as help them get along in the outside world.
- Explain boundaries: Many women who are battered do not understand that it is ok to have boundaries and therefore do not know how to teach the children.

**5. Mother understands the potential impact that living with domestic violence can have on children, and realizes that she may not be aware of all the ways the abuse has affected her children. She knows that she has the power and ability to help her children heal.**

Advocates can:

- Provide mothers with information about the potential impact of domestic violence on children and what contributes to resiliency in these children.
- Help mothers identify things they can do to help their children heal, supporting her ideas and offering suggestions.
- Make sure she knows how important she is to her children and that she has qualities that make her capable of helping her children heal.

**6. Mother employs strategies to help keep her children safe. Children feel safe with her and with their siblings and other trusted adults. The family has plans for keeping safe in emergencies.**

Advocates can:

- Build safety strategies for children into safety planning for mothers.
- Help families create family safety plans that identify what each family member will do (and will not do) to help keep safe.
- Point out ways in which mothers have kept their children safe – to both mothers and children.

**7. The family is able to talk to each other about the batterer's behavior and the abuse they have experienced. Children feel reassured that the abuse is not their fault.**

Advocates can:

- Discuss this as a family group, using books, videos and resources.
- Provide mothers with age-appropriate language to help explain the violence to their children.
- Strategize with mothers about how to answer potentially difficult questions from their children.
- Role model with other staff to allow mother to see what open communication is like without repercussions.

**8. The family solves problems equitably and with mutual respect. Family members feel that it's safe to disagree with each other or show emotions.**

Advocates can:

- Role model and encourage open communication with all people.
- Encourage expression of emotions through art, music, and play.

**9. Mother models and teaches empathy. She feels comfortable expressing her feelings and encourages her children to do the same. Children feel comfortable expressing their feelings to their mother and other people they trust.**

Advocates can:

- Encourage expression of feelings through books, talk and games. Allow all feelings to be okay.
- Talk with the mother about the fact that her children have their own stories to share.

**10. Mother discusses values with her children and encourages them to develop their own value system, especially regarding equitable relationships and nonviolence. Mother is able to question and critique the abuser's behavior and values without disparaging him as a person.**

Advocates can:

- Respect and acknowledge mother's and children's feelings of anger, hurt etc. without degrading the abuser.
- Use sticker charts, praise and hugs to develop value system with younger children.
- Do not compare children's behavior with that of the abuser so children do not think they are a bad people if they misbehave.

**11. Mother has other adults in her life that can provide her with emotional support and occasional help with daily life. Children feel that there are other adults who care about them and their family.**

Advocates can:

- Encourage outside relationships with co-workers, family and friends that may have been stifled by abuser in the past.
- Role model healthy relationships and discuss in groups and individual talks.

**12. The family has traditions and rituals that have meaning for them. Children feel proud of their ethnicity and culture. The family has fun together.**

Advocates can:

- Encourage and try to meet the needs of all cultures through food, holidays and daily rituals.

**13. The family is connected with resources in their community that they trust to understand them, care about them, and help them live with safety and stability.**

Advocates can:

- Stay knowledgeable about resources in community.
- Invite community agencies to the domestic violence program to talk about what they do.
- Have resource information out in the open to allow a women to access it without having to check with an advocate.
- Ask women what agencies they want to know more about and seek out that information.
- Don't assume all women can read or understand resources. Discuss them in group or individually with the person.