



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE-INFORMED RESEARCH BRIEFING

August 2017 • Domestic Violence Survivors' Parenting Strengths



ABSTRACT

Focusing on the impact of domestic violence on children, in many ways, has been synonymous with a “failure to protect” approach to mothers who are domestic violence survivors. This approach can come with the cost of alienating adult survivors and their children from support and services, increasing danger from the perpetrator, and removing children unnecessarily. As strengths based work with families becomes more prevalent, the research on protective capacities of domestic violence survivors as parents becomes more important to supporting a shift in policy and practice—from “failure to protect” to domestic violence-informed. In this briefing, we will explore some of the research that demonstrates the protective capacities of adult survivors and their implications for policy and practice.

— By David Mandel and Claire Wright

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, family violence research has clearly outlined the negative impact of domestic violence perpetrator's behaviors on children. Multiple studies describe how children who are exposed to domestic violence experience greater levels of trauma, anxiety, and depression, as well as increased behavioral and cognitive problems (Herrenkohl, Sousa, Tajima, Herrenkohl, & Moylan, 2008; Holmes, 2013; Humphreys & Stanley, 2015; Tailor, Stewart-Tufescu, & Piotrowski, 2015). Research and direct work with families leaves no room to doubt that the impact of domestic violence perpetrator's behaviors on children is relevant to child welfare, family courts, juvenile justice, and health (home) visiting. It even has implications for areas of policy that are often not perceived as child focused e.g. adult criminal justice systems. The prevalence and severity of domestic violence as a potentially adverse experience impacting children's functioning and development into adulthood makes the intersection of domestic violence and children's safety and well-being a key consideration for many significant areas of public policy (Humphreys & Stanley, 2015; Mills et al., 2000).



These negative impacts ripple out from the domestic violence perpetrators' choices and behaviors. It is their behaviors as parents and caregivers that undermine the other parents' parenting, normal healthy development of the children, and the day-to-day functioning of families (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Humphreys & Stanley, 2015; Thiara & Humphreys, 2010). Despite the fact that domestic violence perpetration represents a significant parenting failure, perpetrators, usually fathers or male caregivers, are rarely held accountable as parents (Radford, 2006).

RESEARCH BRIEFING HIGHLIGHTS

- *Research on the negative impact of domestic violence on mothers and children has been used to justify “failure to protect” approaches to domestic violence and children.*
- *There is a growing body of evidence to suggest many domestic violence survivors are good parents who actively take steps to promote their child’s safety and well-being.*
- *Multiple studies find that mothers who are domestic violence survivors are functioning similarly or even better as parents than their counterparts who are not being abused.*
- *Greater stress and negative effects of violence on the adult survivor does not always equal compromised parenting.*
- *A majority of domestic violence survivors, even those experiencing severe violence, do not experience depression or anxiety.*
- *Most domestic violence survivors do not use drugs nor abuse alcohol to the point of drunkenness.*
- *Despite barriers created by the perpetrator, many domestic violence survivors engage in a range of actions to promote the well-being and safety of their children including medical care, employment, and housing.*
- *Maternal warmth or “mothering resilience” may play a critical protective role for children exposed to perpetrator behavior.*
- *Women from marginalized communities may have the most to gain from a wider, more comprehensive parenting strength assessment lens.*



Instead, it has been domestic violence survivors (usually the mother¹), and their choices and behaviors who have more often been the target of domestic violence-related parenting policy and research. Much of that research has been focused on parenting deficits, real and perceived, and their correlations with children's harm and needs. For example, there have been numerous studies highlighting the negative impact of domestic violence on the mental and physical functioning of adult survivors (Campbell & Boyd, 1997; Coker, Watkins, Smith, & Brandt, 2003). While these studies have played an important role in raising awareness of the negative impacts created by domestic violence

perpetrator's behaviors, they have also raised questions, often in the context of child welfare, about survivors' ability to parent (Sullivan, Nguyen, Allen, Bybee, & Juras, 2001). Along with the work of domestic violence advocates, this research has also led to significant legal shifts and the investment of resources in services and enhanced court and law enforcement responses.

“Abused women are likely to be seen as ‘failing’ as mothers regardless of their actions, because the problems displayed by children who have been exposed to domestic violence are frequently seen as resulting from ‘deficiencies’ in women’s mothering.” — LAPIERRE, 2008

RESEARCH BRIEFING NOTE

This research briefing is an attempt to clear away the cloud of judgment and misperception around domestic violence survivors that has often guided policy and practice. By highlighting more recent research that suggests a more complex and nuanced picture about the strength, resiliency, and positive parenting of domestic violence survivors, we hope to encourage systems to more confidently and systematically apply strength-based practice to work with domestic violence survivors.

¹ Because this policy briefing is focused on the gendered nature of the system's response to the intersection of domestic violence and children, we will be using the terms “mother” and “domestic violence survivor” interchangeably. At the same time, the authors acknowledge that both men and women can be violent and controlling, and domestic violence can occur in both same sex and heterosexual relationships.

At the same time, when it came to responding to domestic violence survivors as mothers, the approaches of child welfare² and other child focused systems were based on a “failure to protect” mentality: if the children are in danger, it is because the mother is “allowing” the perpetrator to harm the children. Despite evidence that some mothers’ parenting is compromised by the perpetrators’ coercive control, it became common to assume that all or most domestic violence survivors are inadequate or “failed” mothers (Buchanan, Power, & Verity, 2013; Stark, 2002; Thiara & Humphreys, 2015). In many ways, the research focus on the negative impact of domestic violence perpetrators’ behavior on mothers was turned against them (Douglas & Walsh, 2010). Moreover, this all occurs in the context of policy and practice that all but ignores the responsibility of fathers and male caregivers for the negative impact of their behavior (Lapierre, 2008, 2010a).

The fear of being blamed for the perpetrators’ behaviors, perhaps losing their children to removal by child welfare or in family court, has often made women hesitant to reach out for assistance.

The consequences of the “failure to protect” (or domestic violence-destructive³) approach can be significant (Lapierre, 2010a; Stark, 2002). The fear of being blamed for the perpetrators’ behaviors, perhaps losing their children to removal by child welfare or in family court, has often made women hesitant to reach out for assistance. Even while some mothers acknowledge significant benefits from working with statutory child welfare systems, such as the availability of counseling or educational services for children, these advantages can be outweighed by fears of having children removed automatically or being assumed to be a bad mother because of the perpetrators’ violence (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Rhodes, Cerulli, Dichter, Kothari, & Barg, 2010). Mothers’ alienation from assistance and support may be amplified by the perception that child welfare and law enforcement work together, e.g. a call to the police equals a call to child protection (Radford, 2006; Rhodes et al., 2010). This fear is reasonable given the common practice of collaboration between child welfare and law enforcement, and for some women, a call to the police for protection from violence has led to a “domestic violence-destructive” child welfare involvement with the family. This fear of blame and negative consequences is also validated by other sources. Many mothers

² A comment about language: We will be using the word “child welfare” to refer to the continuum of services, agencies, and courts that address issues related to child abuse and neglect. This term is inclusive of but limited to statutory child protection or child safety agencies, e.g. state social worker agencies with the mandated responsibility to investigate and intervene regarding concerns of child safety and well-being. While the statutory agencies are the “sharp end” of the child welfare system, they are part of a larger web of service providers, courts, and other government agencies that shape the response to domestic violence and children.

³ “Domestic Violence–Destructive” refers to policies and practices that either increase harm to the survivor and her children or make services harder to access, often due to unreasonable requirements or impractical, even dangerous, expectations (Mandel, 2017).



report that social norms and services lead them to feel guilty or responsible for the violence that the perpetrator chooses to commit (Moulding, Buchanan, & Wendt, 2015).

Furthermore, the “failure to protect” response of child welfare systems and the fear it engenders in mothers is often leveraged by domestic violence perpetrators. Perpetrators are known to use the threat of statutory child welfare intervention to intimidate or frighten mothers from calling law enforcement, reaching out for other forms of assistance, and even leaving the relationship.

Domestic violence perpetrators have even managed to use the child welfare system to further abuse of the mother for example, through visitation rights, turning the children against the mother, or charming child welfare into perceiving the mother as the negative force in the home (Thiara & Humphreys, 2010; Varcoe & Irwin, 2004). The fear that child welfare services may be used by perpetrators to further control or harm mothers helps to explain why women may be so afraid to engage or reach out to child welfare services.

The “failure to protect” approach is in many ways the quintessential “domestic violence-destructive” policy: punishing the adult survivor, pushing her away from help and assistance, and expecting her to engage in behaviors that actually increase danger.

Regularly reported aspects of child welfare practice include ultimatums if the mother doesn’t leave immediately as well as prosecution of mothers for failing to protect her children if she remains or if the children are harmed by the perpetrator (Bourassa, Lavergne, Damant, Lessard, & Turcotte, 2008; Coohey, 2007; Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003). Such approaches often rest on a failure to assess perpetrators’ patterns of behavior and the impact they are having on families. This approach can often lead to a cascading set of circumstances where women and children are placed in greater danger of violence, economic uncertainty, and homelessness. For these reasons, the “failure to protect” approach is in many ways the quintessential “domestic violence-destructive” policy: punishing the adult survivor, pushing her away from help and assistance, and expecting her to engage in behaviors that actually increase danger.



“Failure to protect”, as a policy framework, can create unnecessary⁴ harm for women and children and offer perpetrators added avenues to use systems against women and children. Therefore, we need ask —

Is this framework the only option or are there other, better options?

For years, domestic violence advocates have been promoting the concept that “keeping the adult survivor safe means keeping the children safe.” While there is clear logic and reality in this formulation, it has not provided a sufficient framework for child welfare agencies and systems that need to justify decisions based on the status and needs of the children.

The evolution of child welfare systems to being more explicitly family centered and strengths based offers a unique opportunity to shift the paradigm related to children and domestic violence from “failure to protect” to a more “domestic violence-informed” approach (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014; Kyte, Trocmé, & Chamberland, 2013; Munro, 2011; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2003).

A “domestic violence-informed” perspective explicitly focuses on concepts, knowledge and skills that prioritize a strength-based approach to domestic violence survivors. This shift not only offers opportunities for families involved in the child welfare system, but has the potential to change the conversations in family court and other settings where perpetrators have often avoided consequences and gained advantages from the old paradigm.

To support this shift, this research briefing attempts to highlight a neglected stream of thought and evidence in the literature: one that identifies a range of mothering (or parenting) strengths, some intuitive and some more complex, to aid child welfare, family court,

⁴ The use of “unnecessary” here refers to the concept that there are certain “harmful” actions by systems to adult survivors that are unavoidable and necessary. For example, there are situations where child protection must act to remove children from situations where a domestic violence perpetrator is acting dangerously. This doesn’t mean the adult survivor did anything wrong. Still, she is likely to experience this as “harm” to her, e.g. she is paying another cost of his behavior. This would be a situation where the “necessary” and appropriate removal of those children from that situation involves removing them from a parent who has done their best to protect them and from that perspective is “blameless.”



and other systems in developing a more nuanced, positive perspective of mothering in the presence of domestic violence. It is an attempt to clear away the cloud of judgment and misperception around domestic violence survivors that has often guided child welfare policy and practice. By highlighting more recent research that suggests a more complex and nuanced picture about the strength, resiliency, and positive parenting of domestic violence survivors, we hope to encourage these systems to more confidently and systematically apply strength-based practice to work with domestic violence survivors.⁵

“Professionals working with women and children living with domestic violence should start from a positive stance that acknowledges that these women typically strive to be ‘good’ mothers, but that they do so under very difficult circumstances.” — LAPIERRE, 2010

At the same time, we want to make sure that this briefing is not construed as an assertion that there is never any negative impact of the domestic violence on the adult survivor’s parenting, or that all domestic violence survivors are protective or positive parents. It is presented with the hope that the growing body of evidence regarding adult survivors strengths can help child-welfare agencies and systems better partner with a wider range of adult survivors around improving child safety and family functioning (Buchbinder & Birnbaum, 2010; Sherry Hamby, 2014; Stark, 2002; Sullivan et al., 2001).

MAYBE NOT THAT DIFFERENT THAN OTHER MOTHERS

Attention to children’s safety and well-being in the context of domestic violence has been quick to label women as parenting failures without considering the ways in which mothers experiencing domestic violence do actually succeed as parents (Lapierre, 2008). When we examine the literature more closely, particularly in the last ten years, we find that the picture may be far more complex and more positive

⁵The authors want to acknowledge the existence of many professionals who already engage in strength-based work with domestic violence survivors as parents. For example, domestic violence advocates commonly approach domestic violence survivors and safety planning for her children from a strengths-based perspective.

than previously assumed. In fact, the automatic assumption that domestic violence survivors are poorer mothers than their “non-victim” counterparts appears to be incorrect.

“I’d always thought of the children, not myself” — ANONYMOUS MOTHER (ANGLESS ET AL 1998)

PARENTING

Contrary to the assumption that all domestic violence survivors are poor parents, there are a number of studies that suggest that mothers in violent homes possess similar or higher quality parenting strengths to those mothers in non-violent homes. For example, Tailor et al. (2015) found that even though women who parent in the context of domestic violence report higher levels of stress, their rates of both positive and negative interactions with their children were not significantly different to those mothers in homes without domestic violence.

Women who have in the past, but are not currently parenting in the context of domestic violence, have higher parenting scores than those women who have never parented in the context of domestic violence (CASANUEVA, MARTIN, RUNYAN, BARTH, & BRADLEY, 2008).

This finding has been replicated in other reviews as well; both Lapierre (2008) and Masten et al. (1990) found there was no significant difference between parenting in the context of domestic violence and parenting in homes without domestic violence. Additionally, Sullivan et al. (2001) found that battered women were still extremely emotionally available and supportive as parents. Furthermore, women who have in the past, but are not currently parenting in the context of domestic violence, have higher parenting scores than those women who have never parented in the context of domestic violence (Casanueva, Martin, Runyan, Barth, & Bradley, 2008). Given that perpetrators frequently seek to undermine a mother’s security and her relationship with her children, considerable parenting skill and energy is often required to build and maintain positive parent-child relationships. Therefore, any data that points toward equivalent or even superior parenting by domestic violence survivors is very encouraging of a strengths-based approach.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Beyond parenting itself, there is often a constellation of interlocking negative assumptions swirling around domestic violence survivors. For example, there may be assumptions that: 1) all domestic violence survivors suffer from emotional and behavioral health issues like depression, anxiety, or substance abuse; and 2) these problems automatically impede mothers’ ability to effectively parent. Current



research underscores that when domestic violence survivors do experience mental health problems or turn to substance abuse, it is often as a result of domestic violence victimization. Thus, addressing issues such as mental health as the cause or simply a co-occurring unrelated issue, rather than a consequence, of violence is problematic (Humphreys & Stanley, 2015; Humphreys & Thiara, 2003; Hutchison, 2003; Kroll, 2004). While acknowledging the importance of this observation, this briefing goes further: challenging the assumption that most women in homes with domestic violence suffer from severe illness and/or abuse substances. For example, Carlson et al. (2002) found that, depending on the protective factors (such as social support, education, health, self-esteem, etc.),

depression rates for women who experienced severe domestic violence could be as low as 16.7% and anxiety rates could be as low as 33.3%. Furthermore, rates of depression and anxiety were even lower for women experiencing less severe violence (Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002). These rates of depression and anxiety for women reporting high levels of protective factors and/or lower levels of violence are actually similar or even lower than sample-wide rates of depression indication found using the same questionnaire in Spitzer's 1994 study. Spitzer found that 26% of respondents scored positively for indicators of depression and 18% scored positively for indicators of anxiety (Spitzer et al., 1994).

“When he [partner] is out of the way you think, ‘Right, we’ve got five minutes, let’s go and do something happy, let’s go and get soaking wet in the garden playing with the water...or let’s play hide and seek in the house.’ You know, stupid things, but for five minutes, that child is happy” — ANONYMOUS MOTHER, (LAPIERRE, 2010)

While rates of mental illness were higher for domestic violence survivors with fewer protective factors, such as social support, it is important to note that most women who experience domestic violence report similar levels of social support to those women not experiencing domestic violence (Carlson et al., 2002). Similarly, rates of substance abuse by mothers in homes with domestic violence are typically lower than one might expect. For example, two large-scale analyses found, respectively, that 76-86% of women experiencing



domestic violence do not take drugs and the majority of women do not abuse alcohol to the point of drunkenness, with only 4% regularly getting drunk (Hutchison, 2003; Kantor & Straus, 1989).

Based on this research, automatic assumptions that most mothers in homes with domestic violence are likely to suffer from mental illnesses and/or abuse substances appear misguided. When this data is combined with research that suggests that some mothers with substance abuse and mental health issues are similar to other mothers, we have even more reason to focus assessments on actual parenting behavior instead of a mother's status as a domestic violence

survivor with mental health or substance abuse issues. (Baker & Carson, 1999; Brown, 2006; Colten, 1982; Litzke, 2005; Montgomery, Tompkins, Forchuk, & French, 2006; Suchman & Luthar, 2000).

MOTHERING RESILIENCE

Children impacted by perpetrators' behaviors, like all children, need safety, stability, and nurturance. Research suggests that caregivers, often mothers, play a major role in mitigating the impact of their children's exposure to violence, be that community violence or abuse within the home (Hardaway, McLoyd, & Wood, 2012; Herrenkohl et al., 2008; Holmes, Yoon, Voith, Kobulsky, & Steigerwald, 2015; Skopp, McDonald, Jouriles, & Rosenfield, 2007). As one might expect, the positive benefits of strong mothering also hold true in cases of domestic violence exposure.

Expressions of maternal warmth, such as words of encouragement or positive embraces, can lessen the impact of partner violence by reducing child externalization of such violence (SKOPP ET AL., 2007).

For example, strong communication between children and mothers can greatly mediate the impact of domestic violence (Haight, Shim, Linn, & Swinford, 2007). Similarly, expressions of maternal warmth, such as words of encouragement or positive embraces, can lessen the impact of partner violence by reducing child externalization of such violence (Skopp et al., 2007). These studies all point to the



importance of commonly-identified mothering strengths, such as parent-child communication and maternal warmth, in protecting children from the potential negative effects of exposure to domestic violence. When mothers develop and utilize strong parenting skills in the context of domestic violence, Masten et al. (1990) suggests that such maternal strength and warmth should be viewed as a form of “family resilience” or, in this context, perhaps *mothering resilience*.⁶

“ESSENTIAL” STRENGTHS: EDUCATION, HOUSING, MEDICAL & SOCIAL SUPPORT

Any comprehensive, holistic discussion of adult survivors’ protective capacities would be incomplete without consideration of what might be called “essential” strengths: efforts to support children’s basic needs and day-to-day functioning. These strengths can often be in plain sight, but unrecognized due to a gender bias: it’s what we expect of mothers. These “essential” mothering strengths are “not generally recognized as protective” (Buchanan, Wendt, & Moulding, 2015). For example, research shows the benefits of maternal education, economic independence, stable

housing, and social support in reducing domestic violence, creating options for leaving, and/or improving child and adolescent development (Gilroy, Symes, & McFarlane, 2015; Graham-Bermann, Howell, Miller, Kwek, & Lilly, 2010; Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, & Semel, 2002; Thiara & Humphreys, 2015).

In a study of children’s visits to an emergency department related to physical injury from domestic violence, while the majority of the injuries were caused by a male caregiver, the majority of children were brought for medical care by the mother alone (Christian, Scribano, Seidl, & PintoMartin, 1997). While these factors are often not discussed in relation to domestic violence survivors’ mothering strengths, when a perpetrator’s behaviors are effecting family functioning, the attainment of education, housing, child medical care, and social support, it’s reasonable to consider them indicators of positive mothering.

⁶ “Resilience refers to the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990, p. 428).

Research suggests that living in poverty is significantly correlated with exposure to domestic violence, especially for single mothers (Berger, 2005). Furthermore, domestic violence perpetrators' behaviors create environments where domestic violence survivors are significantly more likely to struggle to maintain steady employment because of the stresses, both physical and emotional, resulting from their behavior (Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1999). How can this understanding of the impact of perpetrators on day-to-day functioning guide a strengths-based approach to survivors' protective efforts? In situations where domestic violence survivors are working, we can seek to understand the efforts needed to seek or maintain employment. These women may be overcoming significant odds to find and maintain employment in the face of perpetrators' control and direct interference with basic family functioning (Browne et al., 1999).

Maintaining any form of employment, especially in the face of current or recent violence, can be viewed as a mothering strength that protects children from severe material neglect.

It is also important to understand that by contributing an income to the household, adult survivors who are working are reducing the level of poverty and material need within the home thus protecting children from experiencing more severe levels of material neglect. Maintaining any form of employment, especially in the face of current or recent violence, can be viewed as a mothering strength that protects children from severe material neglect.

In addition to maintaining work, women in violent relationships face considerable challenges maintaining or accessing housing. Whether they decide to leave an abusive relationship or not, housing may be threatened. For example, a perpetrator's control over finances or sabotaging of the survivor's employment, combined with the basic costs of moving and starting over, often make it harder for survivors to find affordable, stable housing on their own. Unfortunately, without alternative housing, survivors are often unable to leave the perpetrator (Angless, Maconachie, & Van Zyl, 1998; Riger, Raja, & Camacho, 2002; Vatnar & Bjørkly, 2010). Thus, a comprehensive assessment of adult survivor's protective efforts need to look at her attempts to maintain safe, stable housing, considering both efforts to leave and calculated decisions to stay because of lack of resources.

When systems assume that adult survivors' protective efforts can only be measured by her willingness to leave her own home or the relationship with the perpetrator, it is failure to identify and label her desire and efforts to maintain stable housing as strengths. Consider,



for example, that a child's social connections, which are often based in a specific residential area or school district, play an essential role in promoting healthy adolescent development (Levendosky et al., 2002). As a result, a mother may be hesitant to flee a violent perpetrator if leaving requires uprooting her child's social safety net. While a decision to stay is often viewed as selfish, it may, in actuality, reflect a calculated decision to protect the child's development and social stability. Because the "cost" of such a decision may involve the mother's continued exposure to a perpetrator's violent behavior, it may be reasonable to consider it a sacrifice she is making for the sake of her children.

As shown above, even seemingly basic activities, such as maintaining employment or housing, can be extremely challenging in the presence of a violent perpetrator. Therefore, the actions mothers take on an everyday basis, such as pursuing education or developing a positive relationship with their children, can be viewed as displays of positive mothering strengths. Returning to the study that documented how mothers were the ones who brought the children for medical care for injuries resulting from the male caregiver's behaviors, what forms of retribution or punishment might they have been risking for the simple act of seeking help for their child (Christian et al., 1997)?

“They need to know that they are still loved and they are not the ones causing this argument”

— ANONYMOUS MOTHER, (HAIGHT ET AL, 2007)

Similarly, consider the effort required to pursue education while in the presence of a coercive or violent perpetrator. If attending classes requires transportation, the perpetrator may set conditions for accessing transport to class. Likewise, a perpetrator may create disruptions at home (or even school) which make learning, let alone completing an educational degree, near impossible. However, many women choose to pursue education due to the positive impact that higher levels of education can have on personal development and the development of one's children. For example, research shows that children exposed to domestic violence who had more educated mothers displayed stronger verbal abilities than those with less-educated mothers (Graham-Bermann et al., 2010). While achieving in school



can be challenging under normal circumstances, being able to consistently attend class, complete assignments, and learn new material while being exposed to physical, emotional, and/or psychological abuse from a perpetrator requires incredible resilience and perseverance. A domestic violence survivor's educational attainment, especially in the presence of domestic violence, can be seen as a display of strength that may contribute to the well-being of her children.

By recognizing the obstacles that perpetrators create for even the most “essential” tasks – maintaining work, stable housing, employment, child medical care, education, or parent-child relationships – we can better acknowledge the strength that many mothers display when being impacted by a perpetrator of domestic violence.

ACKNOWLEDGING RACISM AND OPPRESSION DYNAMICS

With respect to considering women's displays of essential or common strengths, women from marginalized and oppressed groups may have to work even harder to get their parenting strengths recognized. Often, social services focus on “take-control” responses to domestic violence such as suggesting women involve the police or attend domestic violence counselling. While helpful for women with more economic, political, or social power, these interventions are less likely to be helpful for women experiencing multiple levels of marginalization (Kasturirangan, Krishnan, & Riger, 2004). For example, given the negative relation between minority or immigrant communities and the police, many minority women may not wish to engage with law enforcement when police have been disruptive in their communities (Erez, Adelman, & Gregory, 2008; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Those who do choose to work with the criminal justice system are often further hurt by racial bias. For example, the common legal defences for women who retaliate against a perpetrator rely on the image of a victim as emotional, passive, and dependent – characteristics associated with white middle-class women, not black women (Condon, 2010). Thus, this legal defence may be harder for minority women to access than for white women (Condon, 2010).



Apart from criminal justice resources, black women are also less likely to be referred to follow-up services or perceived as needing emotional support from providers (Grossman & Lundy, 2007). These are a few examples underscoring how survivors from marginalized groups can be cut-off from services or receive lower quality care. Therefore, when child welfare or other systems use the engagement with the police or services as the measure of responsible mothering, marginalized women are likely to suffer more negative consequences, e.g. higher rates of removals. A broader strengths-based assessment approach focused on individual parenting skills, a wide ranging review of protective actions, and the utilization of both informal and formal support services may help reduce bias against women from marginalized communities.

“I always tell my daughter, you don’t let a man hit you. The first time he hits you, you get out and you don’t never go back” — ANONYMOUS MOTHER, (HAIGHT ET AL, 2007).

“OUT OF THE BOX” STRENGTHS

In addition to recognizing the role of traditional maternal strengths as protective factors for their children who experience domestic violence, it is also important to recognize less conventional forms of mothering strengths that are “not generally recognized as protective” (Buchanan et al., 2015, p. 401). Qualitative studies of mothers who live with violent partners reveal a variety of ways in which mothers seek to protect their children, sometimes through passive actions and sometimes through active, even violent, measures. For example, in one interview a mother stressed her role in minimizing the visibility of violence in the home, a common theme across qualitative interviews with mothers in homes with domestic violence (Buchanan et al., 2013). These attempts to minimize violence exposure may involve separating the children from the violent outbursts, playing music during a fight to block out the sound of violence, or sending children to family of friends’ home when violence occurs (Haight et al., 2007; Lapierre, 2010b).

When minimizing exposure is not possible, mothers often take it upon themselves to discuss the violence with children in a way that can help them better cope. One study gave an example of a mother who reported trying to explain the violence in a factual, but non-traumatic manner (Haight et al., 2007). Other mothers reported emphasizing the importance of healthy relationships and the danger of violence in relationships in an attempt to protect children from entering their own violent relationships in the future (Haight et al., 2007; Lapierre, 2010b). Adult survivors may also try to direct attention to the possibility of a future without violence or to separate parental conflicts from the father-child relationship in order to help children cope with violence (Haight et al., 2007). Such examples of protective, maternal behaviors speak to the many ways in which mothers living with domestic violence do exhibit parenting strengths tailored to their children's specific needs in the context of violence.

Even when acting in the child's best interests, mothering protective behaviors may be judged as neglectful, reckless, or violent. Here is the voice of one mother describing challenges of mothering in the context of domestic violence:

“The first year (of the baby’s life) is when he knocked me around, when he started every time he came in, you know, can’t say nothing. Throws things at me and I used to run, four or five times a week, cross that main road, Wunyi half naked and the other three kids behind me. I’d run to my parents.” — BUCHANAN ET AL., 2013, P. 1824

This is an example of a mother attempting to protect her child. However, her actions might be interpreted as neglectful (letting a child run across a main road without clothing), even though such an escape actually protects the child. Similarly, another woman reports that her partner threatened to take custody of her baby if she ever left (Buchanan et al., 2013). The choice to stay could be interpreted as reckless, potentially placing her child in greater danger, but a deeper understanding of the mother's situation actually reveals the mother's goal to protect and stay with her baby. In another interview, a woman reported driving her children to school even though her foot was severely injured and she had been directed not to drive (Lapierre, 2010b). Negative interpretation of this action might view this choice as a lack of compliance with doctor's orders. A strength-based view would see it as choice to prioritize her children's education over her own needs.

In more controversial situations, mothers also report using violence themselves at times in order to keep their children from experiencing greater harm. Women speak of using violence as a way to keep children from acting out in moments when they fear their perpetrator



might act out at the children in a far more violent manner. For example, Mullender et al., 2002 report that “sometimes, abused women physically punish their children in the knowledge that, if they do not, the perpetrator will inflict far greater damage” (Humphreys, Mullender, Thiara, & Skamballis, 2006, p. 55 citing Mullender et al., 2002). These are complex situations which need to be evaluated on an individual basis and with a rigorous view to the physical and emotional safety of the children. Still, it is important to acknowledge the extreme environment created by some perpetrators – an environment which can lead to situations where lower levels of violence may be the best way to prevent more serious or potentially lethal harm to children.

It is useful to recognize the context for these women’s behaviors including the intent, which is to prevent harm to their children or, potentially, to themselves. By recognizing how even the more controversial mothering behaviors can function as protective factors, we can uncover a much larger repertoire of actions that speak to the strengths of mothering in the context of domestic violence and the goal of mothers to be good parents.

POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

This briefing, while acknowledging that some domestic violence survivors’ parenting has been compromised by the abuse, is intended to emphasize the importance of discarding any automatic assumption that domestic violence survivors are “failed parents” by virtue of being a domestic violence survivor or because the perpetrator continues to choose to perpetrate. Child welfare policy makers and practitioners, if they desire to be domestic violence-informed in their work, need to ensure that each individual adult survivor’s protective capacities and parenting functioning receives an even handed assessment. Recognizing and valuing mothering strengths in the context of domestic violence may be particularly important in off-setting mother’s fears of inadequacy that are often perpetuated through child welfare agencies or perpetrators who attack women through the belittling of their mothering skills (Humphreys & Stanley, 2015; Lapierre, 2010b). By building partnerships with adult survivors based on an accurate and comprehensive assessment of mothering strengths, child welfare systems services can 1) better align

themselves with needs of the family, 2) hold the perpetrator accountable as a parent and 3) keep more children safe in their own home. Evidence shows that when a child welfare system takes a more strengths based approach to the domestic violence survivor, it can improve practice and reduce out of home placements (Safe and Together Institute, n.d.).

The following are domestic violence-informed policy and practice recommendations that are consistent with the research examined in this briefing:

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE-INFORMED POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Research on the negative impact of domestic violence on mothers and children should be complemented with continuing research on adult survivors' protective capacities.*
- *Child welfare and related agencies should amend policies and tools to focus on parenting strengths, family centered assessments, or other similar efforts to specifically articulate the full range of domestic violence parenting strengths. When appropriate, specific case examples should be used to help clarify the unique nature of protective parenting in the context of domestic violence.*
- *Assessments of domestic violence survivors, especially those with substance abuse and mental health issues, should actively seek to understand the actions they are taking to promote the safety, stability, nurturance, and healing from trauma of their children. Training and supervision should be used to help workers focus on avoiding assumptions of parenting deficits based on status, e.g. "substance abusing domestic violence survivor."*
- *Evaluators, guardians ad litem, and others providing court reports to guide judicial decision making should receive domestic violence-informed training on comprehensive evaluation of survivors' protective capacities.*
- *Mental health, substance abuse, and other community providers who work with domestic violence survivors should be trained in domestic violence-informed assessment of survivors' protective capacities so they integrate this into treatment and feedback to child welfare and courts.*
- *Co-located domestic violence advocates, consulting to child welfare and working with child welfare-involved survivors, should develop strategies for educating child welfare staff on the full range of survivors' protective efforts. These efforts can include education around documentation and assessment skills. Individual advocacy for child welfare-involved survivors may benefit from homework assignments and other activities to help survivors more fully communicate their own protective efforts to child welfare.*
- *Diverse systems such as criminal justice, health (home) visitors, batterer intervention/men's behavior change programs, family court, and other systems should consider the policy and practice implications of the literature on domestic violence survivors' protective capacities.*

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