

Home Visitors and Domestic Violence

Introduction

This document is a resource for Healthy Families New York programs to enhance their effectiveness working with families experiencing domestic violence (DV) in any of its forms. Along with good training and supervision, it is designed to assist Home Visitors in identifying cues and gathering information that may indicate the presence of domestic violence in the families they serve. Research has demonstrated that the presence of domestic violence within a family diminishes the positive impact of home visiting programs on family functioning. In light of this, our primary objectives in this resource are to:

- Facilitate a deeper comprehension of the intricate dynamics linked to domestic violence.
- Offer practical strategies for engaging with families grappling with domestic violence.

While this document is intended for utilization by all Healthy Families staff, the primary focus is on Home Visitors; as they are often the frontline professionals likely to encounter domestic violence situations.

For purposes of aligning with other trainings and materials, in this document we are using the term “domestic violence.” However, we are primarily focusing on intimate partner violence, which is a component of domestic violence.

Domestic violence can affect anyone, regardless of sex or gender identity. Anyone can be a survivor of domestic violence, and anyone can be an abuser. Our goal is to offer support to all individuals and families who may be facing these challenges, irrespective of their sex or gender identity.

Some other key points:

- Domestic violence can take place in same-sex relationships.
- Throughout this document, we employ the term 'abuser' instead of 'batterer,' as the latter typically implies physical abuse. Some of the most perilous forms of abuse may not necessarily involve physical violence.

- We use the term 'survivor' rather than 'victim' to honor and recognize the resilience, strength, and fortitude of individuals in their efforts to support themselves and their children.
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The Role of Home Visitors in Addressing Domestic Violence

As a Home Visitor, you possess a unique opportunity to observe aspects of a family's life that others may not. Home Visitors are not expected to function as domestic violence counselors. It should not be your goal or the program's goal to end the DV. While domestic violence may exist throughout your work with the family, you can still play an instrumental role in helping the survivor feel competent as a parent.

For your consideration: Implicit Bias

Implicit Bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Bias can stem from factors such as culture, race, religion, sexual orientation, or our personal experiences. Taking time to reflect on biases you may have regarding survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence can help ensure that you are supporting families in a way that aligns with their best interests.

In the context of domestic violence, your role as a Home Visitor encompasses:

- Identifying potential indicators of domestic violence.
- Collaboratively exploring coping strategies with the survivor to address daily challenges.
- Maintaining a focus on nurturing the parent-child relationship to enhance parental understanding of the impact of domestic violence on the child.
- Building on the family's existing strengths.
- Respecting the survivor's autonomy in determining the best course of action for themselves and their children.
- Sensitively assessing when it is safe or unsafe to discuss potential violence.
- Assisting in the development of emergency safety plans.
- Establishing a rapport and making referrals to local domestic violence support services.

It's important to acknowledge that a survivor of domestic violence may not always be in a position to accept help and that this can be a part of their safety strategy. This reality does not reflect negatively on your efforts with the family.

The paramount principle guiding Home Visitors is to exercise caution to prevent inadvertently increasing risk or endangering the family or yourself. In domestic violence cases, well-intentioned individuals, including professionals, can elevate risk while attempting to assist, such as by leaving information where the abuser may access it, confronting the abuser, or pressuring the survivor to leave, among other actions.

AS A HOME VISITOR, if you encounter an incident of intimate partner violence during a home visit, prioritizing your safety is vital. In such a situation:

1. Ensure your safety first. If you feel unsafe, leave the home and remove yourself from immediate danger.
2. Call the police (911) to report the incident and seek appropriate assistance.
3. Notify your supervisor about the situation as soon as possible, providing them with necessary details.

Remember, your well-being is of the utmost importance, and taking swift action can help ensure a safe environment for everyone involved.

Defining Domestic Violence (DV)

Domestic violence differs from a mutual "fight" and revolves around one intimate partner exerting control over another through a consistent pattern of tactics or coercive measures. In such situations, there exists an unequal power dynamic, and one person lives in fear of the other. The tactics employed can shift depending on their effectiveness and may encompass a wide range of behaviors, not necessarily restricted to physical violence. In other words, note that the term "domestic violence" doesn't exclusively involve physical harm.

During pregnancy or after childbirth, domestic violence often escalates, as the abuser may perceive an increased loss of control when the mother shifts her focus to the baby. This is when physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse tactics may intensify, potentially affecting birth outcomes and the mother-child relationship, particularly in cases where the pregnancy resulted from sexual abuse.

Domestic Violence Encompasses:

- Control over the survivor's social interactions, isolating them from family and friends.
- Regulation of their movements and those who enter or exit the household, including Home Visitors.
- Manipulation of finances and spending decisions.
- Undermining the survivor's efforts to attain safety and self-sufficiency.
- Sabotaging their parenting and challenging their authority in front of the children.

- Impeding access to essential services like medical care and financial assistance.
- Instilling fear, intimidation, feelings of inadequacy, or worthlessness in the survivor.
- Shifting blame onto the survivor, often minimizing, denying, or attributing the abuse to external factors.
- Threats directed towards adults, children, and even pets within the family.
- Prioritizing the abuser's needs, leading to the victim's survivor's world becoming increasingly confined.
- Utilization of technology for monitoring calls, emails, or whereabouts.

Understanding these aspects of domestic violence is vital for Home Visitors to provide effective support and ensure the safety and well-being of families affected by it.

Understanding Domestic Violence as a Home Visitor

An abuser might rationalize their actions by saying, "If you had done this, I wouldn't have had to do that." It's essential to recognize that even if the survivor complies with the abuser's demands, they will likely find another reason to continue the abuse. Over time, the effects of this abuse can induce feelings of guilt and fear in the survivor and lead to concerns for their safety and that of their children, potentially hindering their ability to leave.

The Home Visitor may encounter a survivor who appears uncommunicative or hesitant to disclose abuse, which might be a coping mechanism for safety. It's crucial to emphasize that domestic violence is never the fault of the survivor. While various factors, such as stress or substance abuse, may contribute to an escalation of violence, none of these factors justify or excuse domestic violence. Cultural background should never be used as an excuse for such behavior. It is also possible for a Home Visitor to encounter individuals who exhibit physical injuries resulting from "mutual combat" with their partners. It is essential to assess each situation carefully to determine if there is an underlying issue of power and control exerted by one partner over the other.

The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

Understanding the link between Domestic Violence and Child Abuse

Research indicates a strong correlation between child abuse and domestic violence within a family, often with the same perpetrator responsible for both. However, domestic violence itself does not inherently constitute child abuse. Each case must be assessed individually, recognizing that not all children are equally affected, and not all witnesses of domestic violence will suffer physical or emotional harm. If there are concerns that domestic violence has directly harmed a child, consult with your supervisor about reporting it to the appropriate authorities.

Factors that may mitigate the impact of domestic violence on a child include the child's resiliency, which can be bolstered through a supportive, caring adult relationship.

Effects of Exposure to Domestic Violence on Babies and Young Children

Exposure to domestic violence can have varying effects on children, influenced by factors such as the child's age. Younger children are more likely to be exposed to domestic violence incidents.

Babies and children up to approximately 36 months lack the cognitive ability to understand cause and effect or follow explanations. However, infants can sense the emotions of those around them from birth. Babies in utero can also sense the emotions of those around them.

Infants react to the sounds of anger or distress with heightened stress levels, which can impact their brain development if they are repeatedly exposed to such situations. This exposure can lead to long-lasting negative effects, potentially resulting in fearfulness, anxiety, academic challenges, and difficulties forming and maintaining relationships in later life.

Possible Effects of Domestic Violence on Young Children:

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder/Long-Term Psychological Effects
- Low Self-Esteem
- Increased Separation Anxiety
- Heightened Specific Fears
- Regressive Behaviors
- Increased Irritability
- Disruptive Behavior/Imitation of Violent Behavior/Emotional Issues
- Social and Relationship Challenges
- High Startle Response
- Changes in Preferences (alterations in the child's likes, dislikes, or interests as a result of their exposure to domestic violence in the home)
- Altered Sleeping and Eating Habits
- Physical Health Problems
- Loss of Developmental Milestones/Difficulties in School
- Inconsolable Crying
- Disorganized Attachment Behavior
- Repetitive Traumatic Play
- Inattention
- Hypervigilance
- Increased Temper Tantrums
- Night Terrors
- The Cycle of Violence, meaning violence is perpetuated in other relationships in their life.

Recognizing these potential effects is crucial for Home Visitors to provide appropriate support and intervention for families impacted by domestic violence.

Recognizing Signs of Domestic Violence for Home Visitors

Identifying domestic violence within a household can be challenging, as many survivors do not disclose their experiences for various reasons, including:

- Fear of increased risk of harm or danger
- Apprehension about losing custody of their children
- Feelings of embarrassment, shame, and guilt
- Cultural and familial pressures, past trauma
- Lack of awareness that physical or sexual abuse is illegal
- Negative past experiences with seeking help
- Lack of trust
- Financial dependence
- Stigma
- Concerns about immigration status
- Emotional dependency on the abuser
- Minimization and denial

In addition to unexplained physical symptoms such as bruises or injuries, there are cues that may suggest the presence of domestic violence in the home:

- Visible signs of physical injury, such as bruises, cuts, burns, bite marks, or broken bones
- Injuries during pregnancy, miscarriages, or premature births
- Delays in seeking medical attention for injuries at various stages of healing
- Sudden changes in clothing choices, such as wearing long sleeves, turtlenecks, or sunglasses
- Health issues like stress-related illnesses, anxiety-related conditions, and difficulties concentrating
- Reduced social interactions with friends and family (isolation)
- Excessive partner monitoring through frequent emails, calls, or text messages
- Mental health challenges like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), trauma, anger, depression, or suicidal thoughts
- Struggles with parenting, including difficulty caring for children, reduced quality time with them, or overly strict discipline
- Self-blame
- Hypervigilance, leading to an inability to relax or jumpiness
- Eating disorders or substance abuse
- Fatigue, insomnia, or nightmares

Being attuned to these signs is essential for Home Visitors in providing appropriate support and intervention for families impacted by domestic violence.

Considerations for Domestic Violence Assessment by Home Visitors

When assessing for potential domestic violence (DV), home visitors can observe and inquire about the following:

- Is there a noticeable reluctance to speak when the abuser is present?
- Does the individual consistently defer to the abuser when responding to questions?
- Is the survivor heavily reliant on the alleged abuser for decision-making?
- Is the individual only willing to meet with you when the abuser is present, or conversely, only when they are not home?
- Does the individual lack access to financial resources for basic needs like food or diapers? Is transportation a challenge?
- Does the individual appear resistant or uncooperative, perhaps canceling appointments? This behavior may stem from discomfort with having a Home Visitor in the home or restrictions imposed by the abuser, potentially affecting their ability to follow through with referrals.

Responding to Suspected Domestic Violence as a Home Visitor

While you are not expected to assume the role of a domestic violence counselor, these guidelines offer valuable direction. Always consult with your supervisor before and after taking any course of action. Each domestic violence situation is unique and must be assessed and addressed individually, based on that particular family's strengths and needs.

- **Supporting the Survivor:** There are several ways to provide support to a survivor, even if you may not witness immediate changes or results. Your actions can significantly contribute to the safety of the survivor and their children.
- **Consult with the Survivor:** Prior to taking any action, discuss with the survivor the potential risks to the children. Begin the conversation by expressing observations like, "I've noticed that..." or "I was wondering about..." and inquire about experiences and how they affect the child.
- **Maintain a Non-judgmental Approach:** Listen attentively without judgment. Non-judgmental listening can be an empowering tool, especially because survivors of domestic violence often lack someone to confide in.
- **Respect Autonomy:** Recognize that while you may have opinions on what survivors should or should not do, they are the best judge of their situation. Help survivors navigate their options using their strengths and expertise.
- **Provide Emotional Support:** Reassure survivors that they are not alone. You can refer them to a domestic violence program or inform them that many other survivors share

similar experiences. Domestic violence programs can offer comprehensive support if survivors decide to seek their assistance.

- **Validation of Concerns:** Acknowledge their concerns and maintain empathy throughout your interactions.
- **Ask Empowering Questions:** Pose questions that assist them in identifying challenges, options, and their own strengths.
- **Facilitating Access to Resources:** Support the individual in accessing resources by ensuring familiarity with and sharing information about the services available through the local domestic violence program. While providing this information, exercise caution to avoid creating unrealistic expectations that the program can address all their concerns comprehensively. Some individuals may not readily identify with the term "domestic violence" even if they are interested in the program's services.
- **Supporting Creative Problem-Solving and Contingency Planning:** Empower them in creative problem-solving and exploring alternatives. Encourage strategic thinking to stay prepared for different scenarios.
- **Emphasizing Strengths, Survival Skills, Actions, and Decisions:** Direct your attention toward recognizing and acknowledging the strengths, survival skills, actions, and decisions of the individual you are supporting. Understand that these may not always align with conventional expectations or norms. However, they often represent the strategies they have chosen based on their unique circumstances and experiences. Home Visitors want to appreciate and validate the choices the individual has made in navigating their situation, even if these choices might appear unconventional to the Home Visitor. By doing so, you can better understand their perspective and support them effectively.
- **Respecting Privacy and Safety Concerns:** It's essential to seek permission from the individual before leaving any materials, such as pamphlets or contact information for service providers. Additionally, inquire about potential repercussions if someone, including the abuser, were to come across these materials. Consider the safety and privacy implications associated with these actions as a home visitor.

Referring to Local Domestic Violence Services

Each county hosts residential and non-residential programs dedicated to domestic violence support. These programs generally offer shelter, counseling, advocacy, information, referral services, hotlines, and community outreach and education. Additionally, most programs provide supplementary assistance. Home Visitors should acquaint themselves with their community's program, including services, eligibility criteria, and the referral process.

To ensure survivors receive accurate information, Home Visitors should have knowledge of shelter operations, including transportation for children to school, work arrangements, meal plans, and shelter regulations, in case a parent expresses interest in shelter services. Some programs invite staff from these services to make presentations to the HFNY program to support smooth collaboration.

Domestic Violence programs prioritize safety and maintain services as voluntary, confidential, and free. Women must personally initiate contact with the program when they are ready for assistance. Again, sensitivity should be exercised when discussing domestic violence-related services, as some individuals may not identify with the term "domestic violence." Describing the types of available services may be more relatable (such as "housing, transportation for children to school, etc.).

As mentioned, before leaving any written materials about the program, consult with the survivor and consider the potential implications if these materials were discovered by others. Recognize that not all survivors will require services, and some may face challenges accessing them. Respect their decisions.

Immigrants, including undocumented individuals, have the right to live free from domestic violence and may be entitled to various forms of support, including legal status assistance, interpretation and translation services, access to law enforcement, domestic violence programs, rape crisis centers, victims assistance funds, emergency Medicaid, emergency medical treatment, Orders of Protection, and in some cases, legal residency status, if they are survivors of domestic violence, sexual abuse, or human trafficking.

Working with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence

Supporting individuals who have engaged in abusive behavior presents an opportunity to positively impact their children's well-being. Consider the following strategies when working with perpetrators:

Please keep in mind that there are some abusers who should not be sought out or encouraged to have a relationship with their child if doing so would cause more harm to the child, or pose more of a threat to the survivor.

- **Emphasize Positive Parenting:** Continue to highlight the individual's role in parenting, offering accurate information and promoting positive parenting skills.
- **Facilitate Observation and Understanding:** Encourage individuals to become proficient observers of their child's signals and cues, fostering a deeper understanding of their child's needs, both emotionally and socially.
- **Promote Emotional and Social Well-being:** Build on opportunities to engage in discussions that encompass the child's emotional and social development, in addition to physical well-being.
- **Educate on the Impact:** Provide information on the profound influence of their behavior on their children, emphasizing their potential to leave a positive legacy.
- **Awareness of Dual Persona:** Recognize that some abusers may present a different persona outside the home. Beware of control tactics masked as positive gestures, like giving a cell phone as a gift. An example of this could be an abuser who gives his partner a cell phone as a present. To many, including even his partner, this may appear to be a

positive gesture when in fact it might be another tactic to keep track of their whereabouts.

- **Exercise Caution:** Be vigilant regarding subtle, controlling, and manipulative behaviors by abusers. Avoid being unwittingly drawn into their agenda or a negative triangular relationship with the survivor and/or abuser.
- **Avoid Mediation or Confrontation:** Do not attempt to mediate or confront the abuser. Instead, refer them to appropriate resources.
- **Appropriate Referrals:** Make referrals to specialized programs for abusers, such as anger management and substance abuse services are not recommended as interventions for domestic violence.
- **Child's Safety is Paramount:** Prioritize the safety and well-being of the child when considering whether to encourage or facilitate a relationship between the abuser and the child.
- **Batterer Programs:** Understand that batterer programs may not eliminate violence but can hold the abuser accountable.
- **Avoid Couples Counseling and Mediation:** Couples counseling and mediation are not recommended interventions for domestic violence, as they may heighten risks to the victim and children.
- **Consider Parenting Programs:** Explore parenting programs for abusive individuals if available, focusing on their roles as a positive role model.

Approach each case with sensitivity and tailor your support to the specific needs and safety concerns of the individuals involved.

Summary

Domestic violence has far-reaching impacts on survivors, witnesses, families, communities, and beyond, including on Home Visitors. It's a complex issue, and each case is unique. Remember, you are not responsible for the survivor's choices or the resolution of the situation. Instead, focus on supporting parents and strengthening their relationship with their children.

Seek help and guidance from your Supervisor, Program Manager, and Domestic Violence experts when needed. Take care of yourself by examining your own feelings and seeking support for any personal issues. Your safety is important, so avoid putting yourself in harm's way.

Resources:

Domestic Violence Hotline: National or local hotlines provide immediate assistance, support, and resources for domestic violence victims. The National Domestic Violence Hotline in the United States is 1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233). SMS: Text Start to 88788.

https://www.thehotline.org/?utm_source=youtube&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=domestic_violence

Domestic Violence & Sexual Violence service providers may offer: 24-hour hotlines, legal advocacy, counseling, emotional support, information and referral services, transitional housing, emergency shelter and assistance with appointments to court or the hospital for a forensic rape exam. Advocates understand the different systems you may interact with: Criminal Justice, Law Enforcement, Family Court, Social Services, Healthcare and Community Resources. To talk to an advocate, contact the NYS Domestic and Sexual Violence Hotline: call 800.942.6906, text 844.997.2121. <https://opdv.ny.gov/survivors-victims>

New York State Domestic Violence Program Directory: Residential services include domestic violence shelter, safe homes and safe dwellings. Non-residential services include telephone hotline assistance, information, referral, counseling, advocacy, community education and outreach services. <https://www.nyscadv.org/find-help/program-directory.html>. New York State Domestic Violence 24 Hour Hotline (English & Spanish (Español)/Multi-language accessibility): 1-800-942-6906 or 711 for Deaf or Hard of Hearing. National Deaf Hotline Videophone 9am-5pm M-F 1-855-812-1001 or deafhelp@thehotline.org

Domestic and Gender-Based Violence Support: NYC 24-Hour Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-621-HOPE. <https://www.nyc.gov/site/hra/help/domestic-violence-support.page>.