



December 2024

## How can child welfare partner with other systems to support families experiencing domestic violence?

“Domestic violence is a serious public health issue that requires a strong network of community-based prevention and support. While child protection agencies are responsible for keeping children safe from harm, assuming a parent who has experienced domestic violence is a perpetrator of child abuse is inaccurate, leading to unwarranted and potentially damaging interventions that result in more trauma for both the child and the family.”

—David Sanders, Executive Vice President, Systems Improvement, Casey Family Programs

Child maltreatment and domestic abuse are both traumatic experiences that significantly impact child and family well-being.<sup>1</sup> While these are distinct forms of abuse that may co-occur,<sup>2</sup> they are not one and the same, and may be incorrectly conflated. Issues affecting families that experience both child maltreatment and domestic abuse are complex, and a greater understanding of the [intersection between child maltreatment and domestic abuse](#) is needed to better support families. In particular, it is critical to end the historical practice of conflating domestic abuse with child maltreatment, and [unnecessarily reporting](#), investigating families, or removing children from their families solely because parent-to-parent (or partner-to-partner) violence is present in the home. Instead, [alternatives to mandatory reporting](#) should be considered, and comprehensive community-based prevention and intervention programs that effectively address the safety and well-being of children and families are needed. To provide holistic support to children and families, [child protection agencies must meaningfully collaborate](#) with courts, domestic violence agencies, and other entities that offer resources related to housing, poverty, and behavioral health.

Historically, child protection agencies and domestic violence programs have not always collaborated in serving families. They usually operate in separate parts of the legal system as well, creating additional challenges for families to navigate. This brief summarizes the impacts of domestic violence on families, discusses collaboration challenges, and provides strategies for better connecting child protection agencies with domestic violence agencies and the courts.

## Understanding the impacts of domestic violence

### Impacts on children

Children may be [exposed to domestic violence](#) both directly (when they witness violence or are physically harmed as a result of the violence, either accidentally or on purpose) and indirectly (when they overhear abusive communication between partners, experience the aftermath of an incident, or hear about it through other avenues of communication). While the impact of this exposure varies depending on the child and the circumstances, any exposure to domestic abuse can be traumatic for children and lead to negative outcomes such as:<sup>3</sup>

- **Behavioral, social, and emotional challenges**, including depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, anger, and inability to sustain positive relationships.
- **Cognitive challenges**, including diminished problem-solving and conflict resolution skills, developmental delays, academic difficulties, and challenges with concentration and task completion.
- **Long-term challenges**, including higher rates of substance use, chronic mental health issues, trauma symptoms, delinquency, and increased use of violence.

However, a [national study of children exposed to domestic violence](#) found that their **trauma symptoms were lowest when the perpetrator moved out of the house** and highest when the survivor moved out, underscoring the need to keep children at home with their protective parent.

### Impacts on the adult survivor

While the vast majority of domestic violence is perpetrated by men on women, people of all gender identities experience domestic violence. Adults who have experienced domestic abuse may experience [physical and mental health challenges](#), [homelessness](#), substance use disorders, difficulties in their relationships with their children and others, and feelings of isolation. Research shows that living with a heightened sense of fear can impact individuals' ability to make decisions as well as advocate for themselves, as survivors often [learn to be silent](#) as a result of the abuse they have experienced. Compounding those challenges, survivors report that one of the most devastating impacts of domestic abuse occurs when their children are taken from them by a child protection agency. Fear of losing their children due to allegations of "failure to protect" [discourages some domestic violence survivors from seeking help](#) and thwarts efforts to increase the integration between child protection and domestic violence agencies.

#### Language Matters

In this brief, [the terms "domestic violence" and "domestic abuse"](#) are used interchangeably to refer to a pattern of abusive behavior by an individual toward an intimate partner to gain and maintain power and control.

While the terms "domestic violence" and "intimate partner violence" are used more widely in the U.S., "domestic abuse" is used in the United Kingdom and elsewhere to acknowledge that [abusive behavior is not limited to physical violence](#) — it can include sexual, emotional, economic, psychological, or technological patterns of threatening or coercive behavior.

[Language evolves](#), and therefore being intentional about the words we use, based on dialogue with those most impacted, is essential.

## Challenges to collaboration

[Child protection](#) and [domestic violence](#) agencies and their staff should work to better understand each other and partner to better support families. The federal [CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010](#) called for domestic violence and child protection agencies to develop collaborations to improve investigations, interventions, and services for children who witness domestic violence. In 2024, the Children's Bureau released an [information memorandum](#) urging child protection agencies to partner with programs and providers that support families impacted by domestic abuse.

[Differences in philosophies](#) can make collaboration difficult, however. Domestic violence service providers may believe that child protection staff unnecessarily investigate survivors, blame them for the abuse they experience, and then remove children unnecessarily, while child protection agencies might fear that domestic violence service providers do not think that mothers could ever harm their children and therefore might not do enough to keep children safe. Further, domestic violence advocates are not legally responsible if a person served by their agency is harmed, while child protection agencies and staff are held responsible for the safety of children.

In a qualitative examination of service barriers for families experiencing both domestic abuse and child maltreatment,<sup>4</sup> providers cited a lack of collaboration, limited availability of services, and systemic challenges such as a lack of standardized policies and guidelines for working with cases at the intersection of child protection and domestic abuse, as well as a need for more collaboration between tribal and state courts. These barriers were also felt by parents, who noted lack of trust, communication barriers, inadequate services (lack of housing support and supports for children who have experienced trauma), and providers not serving families well for a variety of reasons including high caseloads, victim blaming, and lack of knowledge about domestic abuse among child welfare providers.

The courts system also is a critical partner serving families experiencing both domestic abuse and child welfare involvement. Most states, however, maintain separate court dockets for child maltreatment, custody, and civil protection orders and, as a result, may issue conflicting court orders on the same case, causing more stress for families.

## Strategies to better support families

### Provide concrete services and supports

Families experiencing domestic abuse often have co-occurring challenges, such as behavioral health and meeting basic needs. Housing, in particular, is a barrier for many survivors of domestic abuse, especially since many shelters cannot accommodate large families and those with older male children or pets.<sup>5</sup> Issues affecting families that experience both child welfare and domestic violence are complex and require coordination between child protection and agencies addressing [housing](#), [economic supports](#), [substance use disorders](#), and mental health.

In Oregon, a Temporary Assistance for Domestic Violence Survivors (TA-DVS) benefit provides people who are experiencing or at risk of domestic abuse with up to \$3,200 in financial assistance. “Unlike TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), eligibility for TA-DVS is based on the income that’s available to you the day that you apply,” explained Sarah Greenwood, domestic violence intervention coordinator for the Oregon Department of Human Services. “It’s what you have available to you the day you walk in. The survivor guides how the grant is utilized. It could be for a new phone, plane or train tickets, or a hotel stay.”

Similarly, some domestic violence shelters provide financial support so that survivors and their children can move into their own housing. Providing [pre-petition legal representation](#) can also support domestic violence survivors so they can advocate for what they need to safely keep their children at home.

### Involve parents in identifying services

Parents should be involved in developing their own service and safety plans. In its 2024 [information memorandum](#), the Children’s Bureau noted the importance of partnering with survivors of domestic violence: “Domestic violence survivors know the most about their circumstances, and the danger they face, as well as what will and will not help their families’ safety and well-being. It is critical that survivors’ knowledge, perspectives, and experiences drive service planning and identifying interventions.” One individual with lived experience emphasized the importance of caseworkers listening to and understanding the whole story from survivors and their family, rather than making decisions based on discrete pieces of the story.

Greenwood described her state’s philosophy in working with parents: “Oregon partners with the survivor as a default position. The partnership builds on the survivor’s lived experience to create more sufficient safety plans, to understand what safety strategies have worked in the past, what strategies haven’t worked, and to try to identify who can be in a circle of support that keeps the children and the survivor safe.”

### Provide peer support from people with lived experience

Agencies serving domestic violence survivors and their children have their roots in [peer support](#). Just as [parent partners](#) with lived experience are instrumental in connecting with and supporting people who are involved with the child welfare system, trained peers who have experienced domestic abuse and have been impacted by child protection can connect with and support survivors in ways that may not be possible with other agency professionals. Sharing [survivor success stories](#) also can provide hope and tangible examples of how lives can change. It is important to tell the stories of survivors, as well as perpetrators who were able to get the support they needed to stop their abusive behavior.

### Hold abusers accountable — and provide services

Providing interventions such as [batterer intervention programs](#) can help abusers address their violence, while also [holding them accountable](#) for their actions. Abusers often have a high level of trauma themselves, which should be addressed through evidence-based interventions.<sup>6</sup> Intervening with the abuser can break the cycle of violence and support child and family well-being. As one mother shared, the intervention provided to her child’s father helped him to change his behavior so he no longer is abusive, she and the child are safe, and they are able to have a respectful co-parenting relationship.

### Streamline court systems

Dependency courts should coordinate with the other courts with which a family may be involved, such as civil, criminal, and family courts. “If judges don’t have good information, it makes it much more difficult (for them) to make good decisions,” said Alicia Davis, principal court management consultant with the National Center for State Courts. When possible, [one judge](#) should be assigned to a family throughout the life of a case.

## Strategies to improve cross-system collaboration

### Co-locate staff

Domestic violence specialists can work within child welfare and court systems to provide expertise and help those systems work with parents more compassionately. Effective [multi-disciplinary collaboration](#) includes the co-location of domestic violence advocates working with child protection caseworkers from intake through the investigation and subsequent stages of a case. Parents experiencing domestic abuse may feel more comfortable working with a domestic violence advocate than with other social services staff.<sup>7</sup> Co-locating domestic violence advocates within a child protection agency, as [New Jersey](#) does, allows subject-matter experts to provide training, conduct home visits, and offer consultation to caseworkers interacting with families experiencing domestic abuse.

Physical proximity through co-location alone is not sufficient, however. All partners in the collaboration



need to understand each other's roles,<sup>8</sup> and recognize and address power differentials. Child welfare professionals and domestic violence service providers may feel intimidated by court staff, who wield a significant amount of power. In addition, domestic violence service providers may feel that they are the least powerful because they lack governmental authority.<sup>9</sup> Leadership across each agency must prioritize collaboration and provide resources and opportunities for building relationships. Approaches for leveraging community collaboration, such as the [Upstream](#) framework from the National Center for State Courts, can help bring stakeholders together through strategies including community mapping, state and local coordination, and action planning.

### Cross-train professionals

Cross-training for domestic violence service providers, court staff, and [child welfare professionals](#), including peer partners, helps each system better assess the needs of survivors and their children, and provide more effective services to them. Cross-training that involves hypothetical case scenarios helps participants better understand their different perspectives and find common ground on which to develop plans to support families. Individuals with lived experience should be included in the development and administration of trainings.

Judges — in addition to court staff — should also receive training on child welfare, domestic violence, and how they intersect.<sup>10</sup> “Judges are leaders in the court and in the community,” said Jamie Pizzi, STOP Grant program consultant the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts. “The more educated they can become on the intersection of domestic violence and child welfare, the more that knowledge can trickle down through the court and trickle down through the community.”

### Los Angeles County Hotline

A study of California's administrative records found that hotline calls that allege domestic abuse are much less likely to be screened out (3%) than calls that do not allege domestic violence (20%). The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has been working to better understand the intersection of child protection and domestic abuse and has significantly decreased the percentage of hotline calls it screens in, screening in 21% of its hotline calls in 2023 compared to 50% in 2014. While numerous factors contributed to the reduction, one factor is the agency's intentional focus on better understanding cases involving domestic violence.

“Our expertise lies in assessing the safety and risk of children, and we understand that domestic violence requires specialized knowledge,” said Carlos Torres, division chief of the DCFS Child Protection Hotline. “This awareness led us to seek a multidisciplinary approach, working with a community agency specialized in intimate partner violence, to best meet this essential need.”

DCFS contracted with two domestic violence experts to consult on hotline calls and participate in child and family team meetings, connecting families to resources. The partnership included developing an eight-hour training program for hotline social workers focused on domestic violence, which included enhancing an existing screening protocol for domestic abuse calls. “During the investigative process, domestic violence experts offer rich insights to social workers and build positive connections with survivors,” Torres explained. “This collaboration fosters a deeper understanding of family dynamics and, in many cases, helps survivors maintain custody of their children and prevent further child welfare involvement.”

Shiloh Davenport, assistant regional administrator at the DCFS Child Protection Hotline, added: “The presence of a domestic violence expert gives parents the opportunity to connect with valuable services in real time. Their relatability strengthens bonds, as families often feel a deep connection with domestic violence advocates. This approach promotes trust, and families feel supported and empowered.”

## Create supportive practices and policies that do not punish survivors

Policies should focus on keeping children with their protective parent and, when safe and possible, preserving the family. A policy analysis of all 41 state-administered child welfare systems found that in 71% of policy manuals, children's exposure to domestic violence had to be linked to actual harm or threat of harm in order to be classified as child maltreatment.<sup>11</sup> In two states, however, exposure alone is classified as maltreatment. Only four states – Iowa, New Hampshire, Oregon, and Wisconsin – offer unconditional protections to survivors of domestic abuse so that they are not held responsible for child maltreatment solely because of their own victimization. Policies that do not punish survivors and proactively seek to keep children safe with their protective parent can encourage survivors to seek safety and services without the fear of child welfare involvement.

When child welfare does become involved, clear [practice guidance](#) can help staff respond in supportive ways rather than causing more harm to survivors and children. The following organizations provide resources to that end:

- [Bridges to Better](#) offers tools and solutions for service providers, researchers, and policy developers.
- [FUTURES](#) provides programs, policy development, and public campaigns to professionals, advocates, and policymakers to end violence against women and children around the world.
- The [National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges](#) provides technical assistance, education, resources, and individualized consultation to professionals working with families experiencing family violence.
- [Promising Futures](#), a collaboration between child protection and domestic violence agencies, outlines key considerations and reflective questions for effective cross-system collaboration:
  - *What data is available about families and survivors who are involved in both child welfare and domestic violence services? Is there a shared process of making meaning of data?*
  - *What community-connected, culturally-specific organizations should be invited and funded to participate as full partners in meaning-making and policy & practice design?*
  - *What do child serving organizations understand about the impact of mandatory reporting and child welfare practices on families experiencing domestic violence?*
  - *How can practices be developed to support both children and adult survivors so that reporting is not necessary, or is not the only option?*
  - *Are partnering systems and agencies with more power willing to have open and difficult conversations about the impact of their work on families and communities?*
  - *How can conditions be created to encourage partners to commit to transparency (truth-telling), sharing resources and decision-making, and accountability to the community and families served?*
  - *Are there staff at multiple levels in both organizations with adaptive leadership skills who are invested in innovation to improve outcomes for all survivors?*
- The [Quality Improvement Center on Domestic Violence in Child Welfare](#) develops, tests, evaluates, and disseminates innovative interventions that improve how child protection agencies and their partners work with families that are both experiencing domestic violence and involved in the child welfare system.

### Safe and Healthy Families Court in Nebraska

Lancaster County's [Safe and Healthy Families Court](#) is Nebraska's first domestic violence-centered child welfare problem-solving court. The court works alongside the county's Safe and Healthy Families Initiative, which created a community coordinated response for domestic violence-related child maltreatment cases. One judge presides over nearly all of the domestic violence-related child welfare cases, and all attorneys who work these cases in the judge's courtroom receive specialized training on domestic violence as well as regular opportunities to collaborate with the county's specialized domestic violence child welfare team, including caseworkers, the supervisor, and the administrator. The initiative provides training and consultation to build the capacity of community professionals who work at the intersection of domestic violence and child welfare. Data show that this court helps keep children with their families more and cases move through the system faster, when compared to traditional domestic violence cases.

### Seek input from lived experts

Individuals with [lived experience](#) should be meaningfully included in systems improvement efforts, as their personal experiences provide invaluable context for the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs and policies. Bridges to Better provides [resources](#) to support the inclusion of people with lived experience in the development of survivor-centered systems. Inclusion of lived experts must [follow best practices](#) and [the participation of lived experts must be valued](#) in the same way as other contributors.

### Include cultural considerations

Cultural and religious beliefs can impact a family's perspective on domestic violence and willingness to ask for or receive support. The [National Center to Advance Peace for Children, Youth, and Families](#) provides culturally-informed resources, technical assistance, and training for professionals working at the intersection of child welfare and domestic violence, and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges [produced a webinar](#) on addressing the unique needs of American Indian and Alaska Native families within the context of child welfare and domestic abuse.

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<sup>1</sup> Content of this brief was informed through consultation with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Board. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived expertise of in the child welfare system who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Members who contributed to this brief include: Divina Cordeiro, Churmell Mitchel, Genia Newkirk, Pasqueal Nguyen, and Samaris Rose. This brief also is based on interviews with: Alicia Davis, Principal Court Management Consultant, National Center for State Courts, April 17, 2024; Jamie Pizzi, STOP Grant Program Consultant, Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts, and Kathy Sauter, Judicial Programs Administrator, Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts, April 29, 2024; Shiloh Davenport, Assistant Regional Administrator, Child Protection Hotline, Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, and Carlos Torres, Division Chief, Child Protection Hotline, Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, May 7, 2024; Sarah Greenwood, Domestic Violence Intervention Coordinator, Oregon Department of Human Services, May 23, 2024; and Jamie Bahm, Project Manager, Center on Children, Families, and the Law, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, Taileigh Sorensen, Problem Solving Court Coordinator, Separate Juvenile Court of Lancaster County, Neb., and Beth Buhr, Children and Family Services Administrator, Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services, June 4, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Lawson, J. (2019). [Domestic violence as child maltreatment: Differential risks and outcomes among cases referred to child welfare agencies for domestic violence exposure](#). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 98, 32–41.

<sup>3</sup> Holt, S., Buckley, H., & Whelan, S. (2008). [The impact of exposure to domestic violence on children and young people: A review of the literature](#). *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 32(8), 797-810.

<sup>4</sup> Meier, J. S. & Sankaran, V. (2021). Breaking down the silos that harm children: A call to child welfare, domestic violence and family court professionals. *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law*, 28(3), 275–304, p. 276.

<sup>5</sup> UCLA Pritzker Center for Strengthening Children and Families. (2021). [Child welfare and domestic violence: The report on intersection and action](#).

<sup>6</sup> Woollett, N., & Thomson, K. (2016). [Understanding the intergenerational transmission of violence](#). *SAMJ: South African Medical Journal*, 106(11), 1068-1070.

<sup>7</sup> Goodmark, L., & Rosewater, A. (2008). [Bringing the Greenbook to life: A resource guide for communities](#).

<sup>8</sup> Langenderfer-Magruder, L., Alven, L., Wilke, D. J., & Spinelli, C. (2019). [“Getting everyone on the same page”: Child welfare workers’ collaboration challenges on cases involving intimate partner violence](#). *Journal of Family Violence*, 34(1), 21–31, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Goodmark, L., & Rosewater, A. (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Meier, J. S. & Sankaran, V. (2021).

<sup>11</sup> Victor, B. G., Rousson, A. N., Henry, C., Dalvi, H. B., & Mariscal, E. S. (2021). [Child protective services guidelines for substantiating exposure to domestic violence as maltreatment and assigning caregiver responsibility: Policy analysis and recommendations](#). *Child Maltreatment*, 26(4), 452–463.



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### Casey Family Programs

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families in the United States. By working together, we can create a nation where Communities of Hope provide the support and opportunities that children and families need to thrive. Founded in 1966, we work in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations across North America to influence long-lasting improvements to the well-being of children, families and the communities where they live.

**P** 800.228.3559

**P** 206.282.7300

**F** 206.282.3555

[casey.org](http://casey.org) | [KMResources@casey.org](mailto:KMResources@casey.org)



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