

Helpful Things to Say in Domestic Violence Cases

Helpful things to say to or ask a battered mother (when her partner is not present)

Please note that what follows is not a protocol for practice on domestic violence cases. Instead, it is a menu of some things you might say to a battered mother that might help you engage her and better understand the situation in which she and her children live. Do not feel you need to use every statement or question, and do not say things to battered mothers that you aren't sure you can follow through on.

Establishing a partnership with her/building rapport

- I'm worried about your safety as well as your children's safety.
- You are not responsible for your partner's violence.
- What does your partner understand about why we're meeting with you alone? How did it go for you when we said we needed to have separate meetings (or have him come in by phone, etc)?
- We know that women stay with abusive men for a lot of reasons—for financial support, out of love, because they feel sorry for him, because they're too afraid to leave, because they can't afford to leave, because they have children together, and so on. Are any of those true for you?
- I'm really sorry about what has been happening for you and your kids. How can we help?
- What does your partner understand about why we're meeting with you alone? We know that our being involved can make things more dangerous for you.
- We'll make every effort to keep what you tell us confidential. We won't talk about what you or the kids disclose, but if, for instance, he or his attorney request records that contain the information, we'll let you know what's happening.

Risk to and impact on children

- What have the children seen and heard? We know from experience that children are often aware of the violence even if you've tried protecting them from it.
- We know that children exposed to violence can be affected in a number of ways—they might have nightmares, worry about being away from you, have trouble in school, become emotionally withdrawn, or act aggressively. Older kids sometimes use substances, become violent themselves, struggle academically, and so on. How do you think your children have been affected by the violence in your home?

- How does he treat the kids? Are the kids afraid of their dad?
- Has he ever threatened to kidnap them or to get custody so you can't see them?
- Has he ever hit any of the kids? Has he ever assaulted you while you were holding your child?
- Have you ever had a conversation with your kids about what to do if their father becomes violent? Safety planning with kids can help them feel safer because they know what to do—go to a neighbor's house or into the other room, stay out of the fight, call 911, etc.
- What worries you about your children's behavior? What do you feel proud of?
- How do you think he'll respond to us being involved with your family?

Assessing dangerousness

- Has your partner ever threatened to kill you, the kids or himself? Do you believe that he could kill you or the children?
- Has he ever threatened to take the kids?
- Is your partner depressed? Does he have any sort of diagnosis? Is he on meds? Does he take them?
- Is he an extremely jealous man? Can you tell us about that?
- Does your partner drink or use drugs? How frequently? How does he act?
- Does your partner have access to weapons? Has he ever threatened to use them on you?
- Is his violence or abusiveness getting worse, or happening more frequently? Can you tell us about that?
- What's the worst thing he's ever done to you? Has any of his behavior seemed bizarre or sadistic?
- When you've taken steps to protect yourself or the kids in the past (leaving, restraining orders, fought back, kept him from hitting the kids) how has he responded?
- What do you feel most afraid of with him?

Substance use and mental health-related issues

- In what ways has your substance use made the violence easier to bear? In what ways has it made your life harder?
- Were you using before the violence began? When did you start? How has your use changed since you became involved with your partner?
- Do you use with your partner? Does he encourage or force you to keep using?

- We know that women who use drugs or alcohol have a harder time keeping themselves safe, and so their kids are often at increased risk. Have can we help you make sure your kids are going to be safe, whether you're using or not?
- Can you tell us about when you first started feeling depressed? How does your depression affect your ability to do the things you need to do?
- Does your partner have anything to do with you not taking your meds, or taking too much of them?

Safety planning

- I'm concerned about what will happen when you go home (with or without) the kids. How do you think it will go? How can we help you stay safe with your kids?
- Can you tell us what you've tried in the past? What has worked, and who has been helpful in keeping you and your kids safe? What *hasn't* worked?
- Can we connect you with someone from (battered women's program) to do safety planning? What if we call them right now?
- Can we reach out to anyone who can support you and help you stay safe—a friend, a family member, a pastor? Do you have family or friends who know what's happening, or who you could tell? How can they be part of the safety plan?
- Can your worker check in with you over the next few days so you can let us know if things have gotten worse, or if you need more help? How can we make that happen—should we call you, you call us, go through a third person?
- Men who use violence respond in a variety of ways when child protection becomes involved with the family. We want to be sure that we don't make things worse for your kids or for you. How can we talk to him safely? What can we talk about, and what do we need to avoid?
- We'll make every effort to keep you informed of how our conversations with him are going, and we'll let you know after the fact how he appeared to respond. We know that our being involved can increase danger to your family.
- Sometimes it can be helpful if we "take the heat" for the things that need to happen next (i.e. him having to leave the home, her taking out a restraining order, her going to stay with another family member, etc). Would that be a helpful thing for us to do?

Helpful things to say to men who use violence/abuse

Adapted from Accountability and Connection with Abusive Men: A New Child Protection Response to Increasing Family Safety by Dr. Fernando Mederos (available at <http://www.endabuse.org/programs/display.php3?DocID=9929>)

TDMs provide a unique opportunity for child protection agencies to engage more men in decision-making and planning for their children’s well-being. With men who use violence within their families, precautions must be taken to ensure safety of adult survivors and children, for whom unplanned, open discussion of domestic violence can increase danger or risk.

Positive engagement of abusive fathers does not mean that limits, boundaries, policies, and procedures are ignored. In fact, many years of practice with men who are abusive have clearly established that they need very clear limits and rules. Many abusive men respond better to limit-setting when they feel that the rule enforcer respects them, cares about them, and genuinely wants to assist them. Guidelines for respectful limit-setting when working with abusive men include:

- Clearly point out specific behavior or specific rule that is being broken
- Define unintended impact
- Ask for it to change
- Describe what the different, appropriate behavior should be
- Reaffirm interest and connection

Avoid the following situations:

- Getting into arguments, debates, and power struggles
- Pressing too hard; hostile confrontation
- Interpreting all anger as intimidation and threatening behavior; getting overly reactive to an abusive man’s anger

Following is a list of things that facilitators or other participants in a TDM can say to men who use violence in an effort to hold them accountable for their behavior and to engage them in a process of changing that harmful behavior. The need to balance engagement and accountability is critical to effective work with abusive men, and you can and should say things about each within a single conversation

Accountability	Engagement/building rapport
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ We’re here because your worker thinks that your children aren’t safe in your home, and she thinks that’s because of your behavior. (Offer third party information whenever possible—reference a police report, for example.) ○ I believe you want to be a good father. How do you think your children were affected by what you did? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fathers play an extremely important role in the lives of their children. You are very important to your children. ○ Can you tell us about your relationship with your kids? What do you like to do together? What kind of relationship would you like to have? ○ What do you feel you do really well as a parent? What do you think needs improvement in your parenting?

<p>Accountability (cont)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ I know you want to be a good father, but it's not safe for your kids if you're around right now. You don't seem able to manage your behavior. You need to find another place to stay for your kids' sake and make sure you can do some work on changing the way you sometimes act. Do you have a place to stay? Can we help you find a place? ○ Do you know that there's a place where men with these behaviors can get help and support for themselves? Are you interested in checking it out? It would be a really positive step for you and would demonstrate your commitment to being a good dad. (Describe local BI program) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (If he has been to a BI program) Can you tell us something about what you've learned? Have you made any changes in your life as a result? • (If you get only a cursory, or no, answer) Do you understand that showing up to the group is only part of what needs to happen? We need to understand how you're applying what you're learning to your life. How are your kids/partner safer than they were in the past? 	<p>Engagement (cont)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In thinking about your children, what are you worried about? What do you think your children are worried about? ○ How do you want your children to remember you? What kind of emotional legacy do you want to leave for them? ○ What's your perspective on why you're here today? ○ Our goal is figure out what needs to happen for your children to keep them safe. Even though we may not see eye to eye on everything, I think we share that goal—do you agree? ○ In our experience, most men really want to be good husbands and fathers. What do you think it means to be a good husband? A good father? ○ Talking about these things can be really hard--sometimes people feel judged and defensive. We don't think you're a bad person. ○ Men who do these things can change, and we can help you get connected to services that will help you and your family. ○ We know that men get a lot of harmful messages as they're growing up about what it means to "be a man." Sometimes it can be hard to sort through those messages and figure out what kind of man you really want to be. How do you think men earn respect?
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Limit setting

- When you behave in this way (describe what just happened) it is threatening (highly disruptive) and we can't get anything done when things are like this. I know that you are upset and that this doesn't feel good, but if this continues I'll have to end the meeting or ask you to leave, and document the reasons why. We want to get your side of things.
- We need to be able to continue this conversation in a way that helps us make a good decision. I don't know if you are aware of it, but you are (interrupting, refusing to talk about yourself, getting very loud, making threatening gestures, etc.). This has to be a two-way conversation. We want to listen to your side of things, but I also need to ask you some questions. Can we continue?

Talking about the impact on children

- How do you think violence at home affects your children?
- Even if you don't think your kids have seen anything, here are some examples of how living in a home where there is violence can affect kids: they may become violent or victimized in future relationships, be angry with you for a very long time, or do poorly in school. Have you seen any of these things in your children?
- Even if your kids don't show anything, witnessing this kind of behavior will affect them. I know you are not trying to scare them and leave them with bad memories, but this is what is likely to happen. Please get help. Do it for your children. Go and try the (batterer intervention program).
- When you were a child, did you ever see a man in your family hit or beat his wife? Do you remember how you felt as child witnessing that? I believe you want your children to have better memories than that—am I right?
- Your behavior has a lifelong impact on your children. It's never too late to turn it around. You have the power to change things for them.
- You are an example for your children in everything you do. They will carry memories of you and your actions forever. It's never too late to change your behavior.
- When you hurt your partner, you also hurt your children.
- If you disrespect your children's mother or undermine her parenting, you are hurting your children's capacity to respect adults in general and women in particular.

Questions to Assess Appropriateness of Relative Placements in Domestic Violence Situations

- This must be difficult for you, since your (son/daughter/relative) was (the perpetrator/adult victim) in this situation. How are you feeling about being here today and hearing about what has been going on?
- Were you aware that there was violence occurring within the family?
- What did you do to try to help (the non-offending parent)?
- Who do you think is responsible for the violence?
- How do you think this has affected the children?
- What do you think the children need? How will you provide it? (Offer concrete assistance here if possible—therapeutic services for children who have witnessed, services of a supervised visitation programs, transportation, and so on)
- Are you afraid of (the perpetrator of violence)? How will keep yourself safe if you think he poses a threat to you?
- What will you say to the child when s/he asks why s/he can't go home, or asks about the violence that s/he has witnessed?