

“It has empowered me”
***Domestic violence survivors’ reflections on applying the Safe & Together Model
in their role as Parent Partners.***



Summary

This brief serves as a small window into how the Safe & Together Model™, as its being implemented all over the world, is impacting the experience of domestic violence survivors who are involved with child protection systems. A few years ago, the Iowa Department of Human Services embarked on Safe & Together Model training for regional teams of case workers, domestic violence advocates and Parent Partners. Many of the Parent Partners were domestic violence survivors, which offered a unique opportunity to ask them about their experience with the Model, and how it affected the current work with domestic violence survivors involved with child welfare. It also provided survivors with a chance to comment, retrospectively, on their experience with child welfare as a client. We learned Parent Partners felt the Safe & Together Model was extremely beneficial for adult survivors and their families; it aided the employees of DHS; and it should be available to all child welfare employees.

INTRODUCTION

Safe & Together Institute (S&TI) partnered with the Iowa Department of Human Services to teach child welfare practitioners

“This brief shares Parent Partners’ thoughts on how their own experiences as domestic violence survivors in the child welfare system may have been different if their case workers had been trained in the S&TI approach.”

“For my kids...they were traumatized even further because not only were they taken from the parent that always kept them safe, they were taken and weren’t able to see me at all. That made it harder. The foster care system failed my kids too. My son was perpetrated on while he was in foster care... it was hell. My kids were immediately brought home to me... Had she [the case worker] been trained in the Safe & Together model I believe that that first of all wouldn’t have happened because they wouldn’t have been taken from me. We would have at least been able to go to a shelter together and wouldn’t have been separated.”

- FROM STUDY PARTICIPANT

a domestic-violence informed, perpetrator pattern-based approach to case work, mentorship and support of families. A group of these practitioners were Parent Partners.

The Iowa Parent Partners program in the Iowa Department of Human Services empowers and trains men and women who were previously involved in the child welfare system to provide mentorship and support to families entering the system. Parent Partners ensure families currently in the child welfare system receive the resources and support best suited for their situation by providing a safe space for transparent discussions about their needs then connecting them directly to services and supports. As it is commonly understood that domestic violence is one of the most pervasive issues facing families involved with child protection, it is not surprising that many of the female Parent Partners themselves also identify as domestic violence survivors.

S&TI provides professional training to individuals working within the child welfare system across the U.S. and internationally. The trainings provided in Iowa focused on recognizing (i) perpetrators’ patterns of abuse and how these patterns impact the entire family system; and (ii) survivors’ strengths in promoting their children’s safety and well-being. The goal of these efforts was to develop domestic violence-informed professionals who are able to contribute to a system-wide implementation of a survivor strength-based approach that can improve outcomes for families. Parent Partners were trained in these approaches and tools in order to improve their ability to effectively support families experiencing domestic violence.

Numerous Parent Partners were trained in the Safe & Together Model. Six parent partners received more extensive training so they could be part of local Connect and Protect teams that provided domestic violence case consultation. Three of these more highly trained parent partners were interviewed for a small, pilot evaluation following these efforts. This brief shares Parent Partners’ perceptions of the impact of this training on their practice with families experiencing domestic violence. It also highlights their reflection on the changes they have seen to other child welfare practitioners’ practices when these individuals were introduced to the S&TI Model. Finally, the brief shares Parent Partners thoughts on how their own experiences as domestic violence survivors in the child welfare system may have been different if their case workers had been trained in the S&TI approach.

Evaluating the Model

To better understand the impact the Safe & Together Model training might have on domestic violence survivors, S&TI conducted a small, pilot evaluation study with Parent Partners. The Iowa Department of Human Services staff conducted initial outreach to invite Parent Partners who had been trained in the model to take part in brief interviews about their experiences. If a Parent Partner expressed interest in participating in the study, the evaluator reached out to schedule and conduct the conversations. A total of three participants consented and participated in the in-depth telephone interviews.

The semi-structured interview guide was drafted collaboratively by S&TI and the Department of Human Services, and was followed consistently across participants. The interview guide covered several different research questions related to the overall impact of the model on both the Parent Partner trained, as well as the outcomes of the families they mentored who were navigating the child welfare system. All interviews were audio recorded, and notes were taken during the recorded interviews. Thematic analysis was performed on the data after each call. Notes and themes were coded and organized, and once all interviews were complete, cross-interview themes were explored.

Findings & Implications

Three Parent Partners were available for interviews for this evaluation. All three were women who were in the first cohort of Parent Partners to receive the Safe & Together Model training. Participants varied in the length of time they had served as Parent Partners (ranging from beginning in 2008-2013). All three women had previously navigated the Iowa child welfare system as parents, and all were domestic violence survivors. As such, they offered a unique viewpoint as both a practitioner and a domestic violence survivor with experience in the system. Below is a snapshot of the main successes identified in the interviews.

Successes of the Safe & Together Model in Iowa

Four key findings from the interviews with Parent Partners are detailed below.

BUILDING TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY AROUND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Quite possibly the most significant impact of the Safe & Together Model expressed by participants was that the training enabled them to more effectively engage in open and honest conversations about domestic violence experiences with their clients. Breaking down this secrecy was characterized as crucial among interviewees. Parent Partners similarly expressed they had seen this same phenomenon

“Domestic violence is happening...They’re sending kids back into homes that are not fixed, they’re sending kids into adoptive homes that have it happening, into foster homes that are having it happen, into grandparents homes where it originated... where the cycle had never gotten broken.”

- FROM STUDY PARTICIPANT

unfold when child welfare workers were trained in the Safe & Together Model. They reported that families lucky enough to work with these practitioners usually experienced less shaming and blaming if they were to disclose experiences of domestic violence. Interviewees felt workers trained in the model were better able to understand what survivors were going through and more equipped to make the appropriate referrals to support the family.

In reflecting on their own experiences in the child welfare system, Parent Partners shared that they had rarely talked about any domestic violence they were experiencing with child welfare workers, because “you didn’t want to throw another wrench in there.” One participant explained that when she was engaged in the system with a worker who had not been trained in the Safe & Together Model, she never wanted to give the worker any more information than was absolutely necessary. As a result, her family didn’t receive the referrals and resources they truly needed to improve their situation. For another participant, this same secrecy led to further victimization of her and her family in tragic ways after she and her children were separated. (Her child was victimized by others in his foster home placement.)

Implication: When providers are trained in the Safe & Together Model, they engage in fewer destructive practices. Clients feel less judged and more welcome to open up about the domestic violence they may be experiencing. They no longer feel the need to keep secrets as the provider understands the perpetrator’s

abusive behavior does not equate to poor parenting by the non-offending partner. In short, practitioners’ improved understanding of domestic violence may lead to more open channels of communication, potentially paving the way for better risk assessment, improved case practice, and ultimately better family outcomes.

“I think the survivor feels more safe about discussing their DV. Even in my own case, DHS would have had no clue that I had DV in my own personal case because I never talked about it. Now, letting them know it is okay to talk about it, that is huge.”

- FROM STUDY PARTICIPANT

RECOGNIZING SURVIVORS’ STRENGTHS & PERPETRATORS’ PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR

Participants felt the S&TI training provided them with the skills to understand domestic violence as a problem based in the perpetrator’s pattern of behaviors rather than survivor deficits; and gave them an opportunity to speak about those patterns with their clients and families.

While all interviewees expressed that their practices with survivors had always been empowerment-centered, this non-judgemental orientation was enhanced by the S&TI training. Interviewees mentioned learning to more deeply honor the survivor as the expert on their own life, and to recognize and acknowledge all of the incredible lengths survivors go to in order to keep their children safe. Overall, participants reported a deepened commitment to continuous bias checking; and removal of any judgment toward survivors as the biggest shifts in their approach.

One major way this perspective was enacted was through a shift in language (e.g., honoring the survivor's strengths, expressing the accountability of the perpetrator, acknowledging that any violence they experienced wasn't their fault). One thing noted across participants is that the S&TI Model confronts the "why don't you just leave" perspective many DHS workers have toward survivors. The model challenged participants to eliminate this thinking entirely.

Implication: When providers are better able to recognize perpetrators' patterns of abuse and the actions survivors are already taking to keep their children safe, they may be better able to step beyond a "failure to protect" analysis of domestic violence in child welfare cases. By removing this judgemental lens, they may be better able to see the risk and harm to the children lies in the perpetrator's behaviors, not in the relationship or in the adult survivors' choices. Likewise, when parent partners articulate these perspectives to survivors, these non-offending parents may be more likely to recognize their own strengths and build upon them to promote greater overall family well-being and safety. This could lead to better survivor self-advocacy, further helping the overall system to recognize the survivor's parenting strengths and the perpetrator's risky behaviors.

HOLDING PERPETRATORS ACCOUNTABLE

Interviewees shared that they had witnessed more efforts across the system after the S&TI trainings to intervene with the perpetrator. Parent Partners believed this model encouraged workers to confront their bias toward the perpetrator, helping them to recognize fathers need services and need to be held accountable too.

Parent Partners all expressed feeling that "finally" fathers in the system were more likely to be held to the same high standards as the mothers. This felt like a needed antidote to the general pattern in child welfare of mothers being held accountable for their partners' abusive patterns. Interviewees reported that this accountability took the form of case workers expecting perpetrators to engage with resources and services, to seek out therapy, and to recognize how their behavior negatively impacts the entire family.

Parent Partners also believed the training helped some workers be more confident in their interactions with the perpetrator. One interviewee shared a perpetrator success story wherein the father made significant, positive changes in partnership with another Parent Partner who held him accountable. While this particular Parent Partner had not been formally trained in the Safe & Together Model, he had been inundated with the model's concepts and approach. The interviewee felt this was why the Parent Partner had so much success with this particular client.

"One of the first families I worked with in this new model...I was able to build into her confidence enough that she...showed me her bruises and marks all over her body, which is something that nobody just does unless you build that trust immediately. We built this by the language I used."

- FROM STUDY PARTICIPANT

Implication: The S&TI Model helps practitioners in the child welfare system hold fathers to high parenting standards and require that perpetrators recognize the impact of their abuse on their family. This suggests that even Parent Partners who work with perpetrators may positively influence family outcomes by holding their clients accountable for improving their abusive behavior. Additionally, it may be the case that there is an “influencing” effect that occurs in agencies, wherein trained providers influence untrained colleagues around them to engage in S&TI-informed approaches.

USING TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES TO IMPROVE PRACTICE

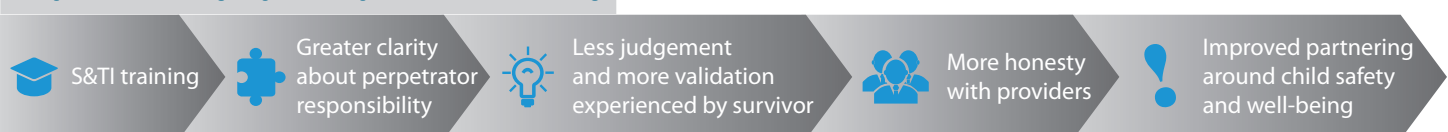
Parent Partners noted several shifts they had witnessed that seemed to be linked to the tools and skills covered in the trainings.

For example, they had seen others shift their language in documentation. Rather than stating a parent had “a history of domestic violence,” the details of past violent behaviors from the perpetrator were included. Additionally, the documentation more comprehensively acknowledged the complexity of the situation, rather than treating it as cut and dry; case closed. One Parent Partner described that one of the workers trained in the model produced reports that were hugely different from what she had seen before. She shared that these reports opened their local judge’s eyes to the client’s experiences of abuse. Another interviewee went so far as to say that supervisors shouldn’t accept reports that aren’t written from the strengths-based perspective of the Safe & Together training.

Interviewees also felt their clients were receiving better referrals because practitioners trained in the model were better able to build trust and truly learn about the intricacies of their situations. One Parent Partner said that in such cases she saw different services put in place, including supports provided by domestic violence advocates and more supports for children.

Implication: Practitioners trained in the tools and techniques of the Safe & Together Model often produce better documentation and better referrals. This can have huge potential implications for the system and for families - from more appropriate services that better meet the needs of families and children to supporting supervisors, managers, and judges in making better decisions about families with which they have not had any direct contact. This has the potential to reverberate through the system, possibly ultimately resulting in improved child safety and cost savings for child welfare.

FROM TRAINING TO IMPROVED PARTNERING



Conclusions

While further study is needed to definitively determine the impacts of the S&TI training on this system, these results represent the viewpoints of individuals who inhabit a unique position within this context. As practitioners, former clients and survivors, the perspectives of the interviewees provide compelling, multifaceted evidence that training on the Safe & Together Model can promote improved practice and better family outcomes. Additionally, the interviews suggest this training may help move systems in significant and meaningful ways.

Interestingly, even though the interviewed Parent Partners were survivors themselves, the training seems to have unlocked greater comfort in engaging their clients in open and honest conversations about their clients' abuse. The Model may have opened a window into a different, less judgemental understanding of the experiences of domestic violence survivors, paving the way for more strengths-based, perpetrator behavior-focused support.

Such a shift has the potential to circumvent a cycle of harmful social responses that can result from domestic violence-destructive practice. Lessons from the field suggest bad practice can lead to more harm to the family - particularly the form of greater institutional scrutiny and coercion. These harmful social responses can potentially contribute to increased length of involvement with child welfare and greater risk of children being removed. Such outcomes have important familial and social implications, not to mention adverse impacts on child welfare organizations themselves, such as increased caseloads and more spending on children in care.

It is truly a powerful testament to this possibility that participants suggested their own child welfare case outcomes might have been better if their workers had been trained in the Safe & Together Model. Instead, judgment led to secrecy, which impeded their capacity to advocate for themselves and their children, and significantly hindered resource allocation and services. A domestic violence-informed system likely would have been better equipped to support these survivors and their families effectively from the beginning, while keeping the survivors and children safe and together.

“The wording has changed in their reports and some of their outcomes that I’ve noticed have been different... So, seeing those things and the list under domestic violence in those reports broadening, made huge impact on the way everybody was treated, it made a difference in who got referred to what... what services were put in place... it helped the victim get more services like domestic violence advocates were more prevalent during the cases, the children were getting more help... the workers wanted to help make sure we didn’t send these kids back home just to end up back in the system.”

- FROM STUDY PARTICIPANT

While the Parent Partners were highly satisfied with the impact of the training they received, they highly recommended deeper saturation of the model within the Iowa Department of Human Services. Interviewees all believed it should be a requirement that all parties working for, with, or within the Department of Human Services receive training in the Safe & Together Model, including case workers, law enforcement, attorneys and judges. Participants reiterated that they can only do so much in their role as Parent Partners; they need alignment of perspectives from all parties to truly move the system toward domestic violence-informed practice.



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