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# Worker Safety and Domestic Violence in Child Welfare Systems

BY DAVID MANDEL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

*“Worker fear can result in victim-blaming and in under or over-estimating the level of danger, which affects the safety of both victims/survivors and workers: ‘We become angry at her for ‘not making the right choices’ so we don’t have to deal with our fear’.”*

*-from Invisible Practices participant*



Addressing workers' emotional and physical safety concerns must be at the forefront of efforts for child welfare agencies that want to become domestic violence-informed. From the inception of the Safe & Together Model's perpetrator pattern-based approach, worker safety has always been part of the approach. Worker safety fears are tied to gaps in perpetrator engagement and partnering with adult survivors. This "white paper" outlines key issues related worker safety in the context of domestic violence cases with a focus on supervisory and systems strategies for change.

### Ignorance of perpetrators' patterns hinders workers' safety

In case consultations that shaped the development of the Model, it was a concern when child welfare workers couldn't describe whether a domestic violence perpetrator had a history of assaultive or threatening behaviors to persons outside the family. It was a rare worker who could answer questions about aggressive behavior directed at professionals, e.g. social workers and police. Similarly, workers frequently lacked knowledge of whether the perpetrator had threatened or assaulted family and friends who attempted to intervene to help the adult and child survivors. Few workers even considered this information might be meaningful to them.

While this gap in knowledge is a subset of the wider problem of an overall lack knowledge of perpetrators' patterns, it was and is a glaring omission from a worker safety perspective. Child welfare workers are amongst the human services professionals who are most at risk for workplace violence which includes both physical and psychological violence. Since domestic violence is one of the most common case factors they face, it is reasonable to assume that domestic violence cases are one of the main sources of dangers to social workers. Similar to law enforcement, who identified domestic violence as one of the factors most associated with officer fatalities, child welfare assessments of patterns of violent behavior needs to be one of the central strategies for managing domestic violence interventions as safely as possible.

### Worker safety is a supervisory issue

Worker safety issues surface in different ways. Supervisors and managers may struggle with how best to support a worker who is expressing fears about working with a particular violent perpetrator. Workers need assistance in reflecting on how their own personal and professional history might impact their professional attitudes and behavior. Many workers have been impacted by domestic violence as child or an adult. The following is a brief example from a case consultation:

*"I met with a new worker who, just before going on his first home visit to meet with an identified domestic violence perpetrator, shared with me that his father had been abusive. He expressed his concern that in meeting with this client, he (the social worker) might "go over the table at him" or freeze up. Because he was able to share with me these fears around "fight, flight or freeze," I was able to support him in bringing these concerns to his supervisor. I encouraged him to request that his supervisor accompany him on the home visit." (David Mandel)*

In another instance, the linkage between addressing workers' safety concerns and greater engagement with perpetrators was clear. An Australian team of child welfare workers, who received guidance on planning for safety during an interview with a resistant perpetrator, were able to be more assertively and effectively him. Discussions of field work personal safety strategies have been a regular part of Safe & Together Model trainings.

These strategies were often complex and sophisticated. They encompassed a variety of areas including timing of visits to reduce risk; the selection of what to wear in the field, e.g. shoes that were easy to move in; informing supervisors of their movements; and ensuring their mobile phones are fully charged. An exploration of this wide diversity of their own safety strategies often allowed them to better understand the full range of safety efforts made by domestic violence survivors.

### Unaddressed worker safety fears may increase victim blame and perpetrator manipulation

There is a likely correlation between workers' safety concerns related to domestic violence perpetrators and a "failure to protect" approach that places the focus of the intervention on the adult survivors' decisions. If workers have unidentified and unaddressed fears surrounding working with domestic violence perpetrators, then it is more likely they will:

- center their family engagement and case planning on the domestic violence survivor who is usually female;
- expect the survivor to take drastic, potentially dangerous steps to avoid removal of her children;
- remove children when other options may exist to keep them safe in their own home and community;
- have no or limited engagement with the perpetrator;
- have little to no documentation of the perpetrator's attitudes about his behavior and its impact on his partner and the children; and
- do little to no service planning related to the perpetrator's behavior change.

Beyond avoidance, unaddressed worker safety concerns can manifest as collusive or placating behavior. For example, workers may be more likely to avoid direct engagement with a perpetrator about his behavior. This can lead to case plans that focus on "safer" issues like substance abuse or mental health issues and avoid a direct focus on violence and abuse.

Avoidance associated with worker safety concerns can also create opportunities for the perpetrator to manipulate the system. For example, in the U.S. context, parents have the right to "reasonable efforts" to prevent removal and/or reunify with their children. Perpetrators, who never have had visits from child welfare workers, can make a claim during court hearings that he was never given "reasonable efforts". This will allow him present himself late in the court case, complete required services, and get the children placed back with him. This can occur even while he is sabotaging her achievement of her case plan goals and when his behavior was central to the reason the children were removed in the first place.

Unaddressed safety issues, that manifest of worker avoidance of the perpetrator, may lead the survivor to think that professionals are just as scared as she is. This can cause her to lose faith that outside intervention will make her and the children's situation better.

**“It's really important to recognise that workers' fears about perpetrators show up in subtle and not so subtle ways. Workers may not try all avenues to locate perpetrators because of fear for their own or survivors' safety, or not see the point in engaging him as they don't think it will achieve anything.”**

*- Invisible Practices participant*

## Organizations are failing to address workers safety concerns in domestic violence cases

**“Talking it through with a supervisor occasionally, but only when it’s bad enough that I don’t expect them to laugh about it / tell me ‘it comes with the job’.”**

*- Child welfare worker on the organisational cultural barrier to gaining supervisory support around client’s violent and intimidating behavior*

Finally, unaddressed worker safety issues may interfere with our engagement of the perpetrator. In workplace environments where there is little to no support for bringing forward safety concerns, these fears will go unnamed and show up “symptomatically.” These “symptoms” may manifest as “inability” to find the perpetrator; complaints that the perpetrator is avoiding or not returning calls; choices to use time to meet with the mother and children repeatedly instead of meeting with the perpetrator; complaints about the survivors’ poor choices and being at fault for the continuing danger; and minimization of the importance or value of meeting with the perpetrator.

These “symptoms” cannot just be attributed to workers’ fears but need also to be connected to organizational and systemic issues that allow the underlying issue to remain undiagnosed. These organizational and systems issues include lack of training and support to increase

overall confidence working with men as parents; low expectations of workers around male engagement and responsibility; lack of training related to work with domestic violence perpetrators; organizational practices that fail to create clear policy and procedures for addressing safety concerns that would arise in domestic violence cases; and an overall lack of reflective supervision. These gaps make it more likely that safety concerns will be either over- or under-estimated. Both of these outcomes can have serious repercussions for the worker and/or the family.

### 3 factors influencing workers’ assessment of their own safety

In addition to organizational culture, workers’ assessment of their physical and emotional safety can be affected by a variety of other factors. These factors can be grouped into a three cluster areas: a) their personal and professional experiences of violence and abuse; b) workers’ fears for their own psychological safety tied to their fears for the family’s physical safety; and c) fears for their own physical and emotional safety as result of the perpetrator’s actions toward them.

The first area refers to the impact of a worker’s prior experiences with violence which may influence their assessment of safety for themselves (and the family) in a current situation. If a worker has experienced assaultive or aggressive behavior directed toward them on another case or if this perpetrator reminds them of a family member of their own who was assaultive, then they may over or underestimate the danger to themselves in this case.

**“It was difficult to deliver an appropriate service when I was more concerned about my own safety then providing a safeguarding service to a child.”**

*- A child welfare worker talking about the impact their own safety concerns have on keeping children safe.*

## Worker safety factors can be grouped into a three cluster areas



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The second area refers to the fear for the family being hurt by the perpetrator because of action or inaction on the part of the worker. In trainings and consultations, workers regularly expressed their fears that something they did or didn't do might contribute to further harm to the family by the perpetrator. Their assessment of risk to the adult and child survivor was something they experienced very personally and often appeared to impact a workers' sense of well-being. The sense of unsafety related to case decision making can be especially high in agencies where workers fear being blamed for children being hurt or killed.

*"One worker who told me it was my fault she spent the weekend anxious about a family where she had partnered with the survivor to keep the children in their home. Her fear for the physical safety of this mother and her children was something that impacted her sense of psychological safety." (David Mandel)*

Agency policy (or lack thereof) can also impact workers' psychological safety. Workers may be afraid that that information about the perpetrator, received from the survivor, may not be handled safely. This can have a negative impact on how the worker engages the family. Perpetrators may have access, through the court process or other administrative means, to documentation of the survivors' safety plan. Worker, who worry that the redaction process will be managed poorly, may not ask specific questions about her plan, or choose not to write down the specifics. While this may protect the survivor from the perpetrator learning her plan, it may lead to unnecessarily punitive actions taken against the survivor, e.g. losing her children because there is insufficient evidence of her protective capacities. Agency's need clearly defined processes to protect survivors' safety plans from perpetrators. This not helps with managing the physical safety of the adult and child survivors but are also managing workers' psychological fears.

Finally, there is the straightforward fear that the perpetrator may target them for physical and/or emotional abuse. Workers can worry that if they take certain actions the perpetrator will retaliate against them and/or their family for harm. Workers can feel this fear when a client with a history of violence starts asking them questions about their (the worker's) children. These fears can be particularly strong when the worker taking the following actions: helping the adult and child survivors to leave the relationship or the home; the removal of a child from a perpetrator; or directly confronting the perpetrator around his behavior. All of these fears, if left unaddressed, can influence the case trajectory and/or impact the worker's well-being and performance.

## Intersectionalities and worker safety

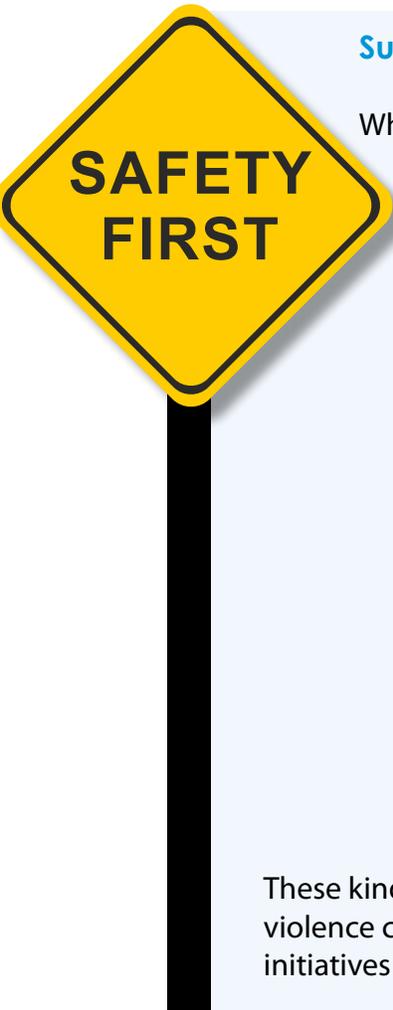
One other very important area to consider when engaging in a discussion related to worker safety is the combination of a domestic violence perpetrator who also has a propensity for violence toward women in general, or people of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientation or religion. Many domestic violence perpetrators are “family violence” only, and refrain from abusive behaviors to others outside the family. But others may have histories of racist statements or action, homophobia, overall misogynistic attitudes toward women or other forms of hate speech and actions. These factors make exacerbate worker safety concerns and cannot be ignored in any discussion of worker safety.

### Supervisory strategies

While there are many strategies needed to address worker safety, reflective supervision is one critical way for agencies to advance their domestic violence practice. The following are some basic questions that supervisors need to ask their workers in all domestic violence cases:

1. What do we know about the perpetrators’ pattern of violence and control as it relates to responding to outside interveners, including:
  - a. his response to any prior child welfare involvement;
  - b. any law enforcement involvement; or
  - c. any interventions by family and friends to help the adult and child survivors?
2. What safety concerns does this information raise for us? Where do we have gaps in our knowledge about his pattern toward outsiders that we need to address to fully assess worker safety in this case?
3. Are there any prior experiences you have had that you think are impacting your sense of safety (for yourself and the family)?
4. How are we partnering with the adult survivor around how our involvement may impact her and the children’s safety?
5. Do we have any concerns about the perpetrator targeting you based on your demographics, e.g. gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, etc.

These kinds of questions should be a standard part of reflective supervision in domestic violence cases. Along with these changes to supervision, the agency can look at wider initiatives to help increase worker safety.



## Wider system change recommendations

Here are some ideas for wider systems change that would support worker safety in domestic violence cases:



- Provide training and supervision to increase your workers' comfort and confidence in working with men as parents. When workers increase their overall knowledge and skills in working with men as parents, in general, they are less likely to over or under-estimate safety concerns with fathers who have engaged in violence.
- Support the development of workers' skill and confidence talking about violence and abuse in non-judgmental, behaviorally focused, fact-based ways. Use of motivational interviewing techniques, and overall practice talking about violent and controlling behavior will increase workers' ability to engage safely with perpetrators.
- Set policy and protocol guidelines that expect workers to identify the perpetrators' pattern, document the perpetrators' pattern and expect assessment to include a worker safety checklist.
- Support a culture of reflection and critical thinking that encourages workers to process their personal history, biases and fears with supervisors, peers and coaches.
- Support a wider culture shift around "fitness for duty" that allows workers to express safety concerns without worrying they will be seen as unwilling and unable to do their job. This ties back to wider efforts some agencies are making to become more trauma-informed.
- Create specific safety steps to be used in all in domestic violence cases including
  - Discussing the perpetrator's potential reactions to being engaged by child welfare with the adult survivor. This can include follow-up check-ins with the survivor after the meeting with him to learn about any fallout she and children might face.
  - Determine the safest place to interview him (home, public, office, police department, prison).
  - Develop a safety plan for the interview using questions like:
    - What is the plan if he becomes belligerent?
    - Do you need someone in the interview with you?
    - Review and update any wider worker safety protocols to ensure they are consistent with knowledge about domestic violence cases. Consider managing worker safety using existing teams for high risk cases. Multi-disciplinary teams that include outside agencies, such as law enforcement, may be especially useful when domestic violence intersects with other criminal behavior, e.g. gang involvement.
    - Consider implementing criteria for deciding when it is not safe at all to meet with the perpetrator.
    - Ensure that discussions around safety are grounded in behavioral assessment of perpetrators, so they are less likely to fall prey to bias against men from historically oppressed groups (who are often stereotyped as more dangerous).
    - Ensure that workers who may be more likely to be targeted by perpetrators based on gender, race or other demographic factors are supported to discuss intersectionalities as it relates to safety.

Implementing these organizational changes can help an agency move toward its goal of being domestic violence-informed.

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**OUR MISSION** is to create, nurture and sustain a global network of domestic violence-informed child welfare professionals, communities and systems. At Safe & Together, we use a perpetrator pattern-based framework that is informed by a gender analysis that informs every aspect of our work. Safe & Together makes sure you have the tools and practical skills to bring on transformational change in the lives you touch. Practical, how-to skills and focused trainings are grounded in real-world scenarios and experience.

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With over almost 30 years' experience in the domestic violence field, David's international training and consulting focuses on improving systems' responses to domestic violence when children are involved. Through years of work with child welfare systems, David has developed the Safe & Together™ Model to improve case practice and cross system collaboration in domestic violence cases involving children. He has also identified how a perpetrator pattern-based approach can improve our ability to help families and promote the development of domestic violence-informed child welfare systems.



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