

A Perspective on Collaboration between Child Protection and Domestic Violence Agencies

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Child Welfare

I was trained as a school social worker, but early in my career I also began to work with adult men who were violent towards their intimate partners. The intersection of my interests in both child well-being and preventing violence against women inevitably led me to working with both child protection workers and battered women's advocates. What I learned along the way was that working together produced much better outcomes for mothers and their children than when we worked in parallel, without coordination, and sometimes even in conflict. While I refer primarily to women as victims of domestic violence, men may also be victims of violence and such violence also occurs in same-sex relationships.

Back in 1999, I co-authored with the late Susan Schechter what came to be known as *The Greenbook* but was officially titled *Effective Intervention in Woman Battering and Child Maltreatment Cases: Guidelines for Policy and Practice* (Schechter & Edleson, 1999). *The Greenbook* called for collaboration between child welfare, domestic violence agencies, and family courts. It was both endorsed and published by the National Council of Juvenile

and Family Court Judges. The resulting 67 recommendations were the result of over two years of meetings between national child protection, domestic violence prevention, and family court leaders. A quarter century after *The Greenbook* was first published, I still strongly believe many of the lessons we learned together continue to apply to our work with families in both the child protection and domestic violence prevention systems.

The four key principles that I've learned in my close collaborations with both child protection workers and women's advocates and elaborated in *The Greenbook* are the following:

- 1 We share a common goal of safety, stability, and well-being for all family members;
- 2 It is best for children to remain in the care of a non-offending parent;
- 3 Families should have many points of entry into a coordinated care system; and
- 4 Different families have different service needs that should be recognized and planned.



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I'll elaborate on each of these in the remainder of the article.

Safety, stability, and well-being

When we started work on *The Greenbook* there was a lot of tension in the room as the meaning of terms used by child protection workers and domestic violence agency staff raised suspicion among each group. For example, family preservation was seen as a noble goal among child protection workers, but among the domestic violence advocates it raised suspicions that children and women would be encouraged to remain in homes with abusive male partners. It took a lot of talking through these points of tension before everyone in the room concluded that what we were all seeking was a living situation that would ensure the safest,



most stable environment in which all family members could thrive. That shared goal became the foundation on which we built trust and a national, federally-funded effort to increase collaboration between these systems.

Ultimately, it shifted the responsibility onto the mother to restrain a violent perpetrator when it should be our society that intervenes more forcefully to stop the partner's violence and protect both the mother and her children from the violence.

Children remaining with a non-abusive caregiver

Back in 1999, it was a noteworthy event to have a major national judicial organization endorse the goal of keeping children with their battered mothers. Mothers had often been held responsible for the violence committed against them in the presence of their children. Here, the judges, child protection workers, and women's advocates were arguing together that battered mothers could be a major protective factor in children's lives and that our goal should be to shield both the mother and her children from a perpetrator's violence. This principle evolved in our work together on *The Greenbook* and subsequent national demonstrations funded by the federal government. It focused on holding violent perpetrators accountable for their behavior and not punishing the victims who were most often taking many steps to keep themselves and their children safe despite their male partner's violence. In my travels around the country, I had heard a number of child protection workers, guardians ad litem, and judges say, "she's gone to a shelter numerous times and had protection orders, but she can't keep this child safe". Beliefs like these minimize the numerous safety strategies mothers use daily to protect themselves and their children. Ultimately, it shifted the responsibility onto the mother to restrain a violent perpetrator when it should be our society that intervenes more forcefully to stop the partner's violence and protect both the mother and her children from the violence.

Many points of entry

Examining caseloads in various jurisdictions clarified that families enter our social service systems through many different gateways.

Unfortunately, this often leads to fragmentation and duplication of services. Acknowledging these different entry points and coordinating services to families could make our services more efficient and the experience of families in them less fragmented. *The Greenbook* process led most of us to believe that we need a family safety system that was much more closely coordinated and collaborative. One that even co-located various service providers under one

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roof. Some of these exist and their numbers have grown in the past two decades. These include family justice centers, family service centers, and some expanded child advocacy centers. Other models include contracting with battered women's advocates to be present in child welfare agencies or family courts as well as integrating them into these systems as employees (Rosewater, 2008).

Different families have different needs

This final principle is one that has been widely adopted in child protection systems: that there should be differential responses to families at different levels of risk. Not all children who have been exposed to adult domestic violence

in their homes necessarily require the full force of our under-resourced child protection systems (Edleson et al., 2006). Children's exposure to domestic violence varies and so should our social service responses (Edleson, 2006). Many would benefit from more voluntary, community-based services. These models of differential response exist but there are not enough nationwide, especially ones with a focus on domestic violence (Sawyer & Lohrbach, 2005).

Conclusion

Our services to families experiencing domestic violence and child maltreatment are too fragmented and, sometimes, even in conflict. Collaboration and coordination in service of safety, stability, and well-being of all family members should be our guiding light in services seeking to prevent all forms of abuse and maltreatment. Families benefit when we work together. We need to collaborate with protective mothers who are victims and

survivors of violence to ensure the safety of them and their children. We also need to collaborate with each other to both hold perpetrators of violence accountable and help them change. Ultimately, we need a cohesive system supporting safety, stability, and well-being for all members of the families.

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