

# **Engage to Protect: Foundations for Supervised Visitation and Exchange**

## **Engaging with Battered Women in Supervised Visitation Centers**

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Under this principle, safety of children and adult victims is a center's highest priority. Paying equal regard requires building a comprehensive understanding of the nature, dynamics, and impact of battering into all aspects of center services. The needs of adult victims are visible and acknowledged in all center practices. A center that has equal regard for adult and child victims recognizes its unique position in protecting them from actual violence or from a batterer's attempts to use the center to continue the abuse. The principle of equal regard challenges the longstanding assumption of neutrality as the only standpoint for a visitation center. Neutrality in effect reinforces battering and abuse by not taking a clear stand against the coercion, control, and harm.<sup>4</sup>

- The Guiding Principle of “respectful and fair interaction”

Treating all family members with respect and fairness does not mean that the center is neutral toward the violence perpetuated by a batterer or that the center will overlook controlling or threatening behavior. Because of the power imbalance inherent in a relationship where one partner has been violent and coercive to the other, fairness cannot be achieved through simplistic notions of sameness or impartiality. Centralizing fairness and respect requires that visitation centers not favor one side over the other, while permitting centers to protect one or more parties from another.

A visitation center that has equal regard for a battered woman's safety will be fair and respectful to the father of her children. However, it will not act as though nothing has happened in his violence towards her. It will provide a valuable neutral *space* for visitation or exchange while taking a clear stand against violence and abuse. It will take care to submit factual reports that make visible any safety concerns, in clear terms related to the safety needs of each person. The visitation center will better fulfill its potential to use its relationships with court and community interveners, and its unique relationship with each family member, to help lessen the harm caused by the violence and maximize the possibility that each family member can live without ongoing fear, intimidation, or violence.

- A visitation center's role in contributing to safety for adult and child victims over time

*Safety* is the protection of children and adult victims of battering from continued physical, sexual, and emotional harm, coercion, and threats.<sup>5</sup> A visitation center can have a distinctive place in promoting and influencing safety over three distinct time periods: the two hours a family is physically present in the facility, the two years over which separation unfolds, and the twenty-plus years of ongoing parenting until early adulthood. “2 hours – 2 years – 20 years” are not precise periods of time, but symbolic, and a useful cue to remembering that safety changes over time and circumstances.

A safe visit or exchange is undeniably critical and important to everyone involved and visitation centers have historically been organized to pay attention to safety exclusively in this context. Through the work of the Supervised Visitation Program, many centers have

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<sup>4</sup> The issue of neutrality in supervised visitation is far more complex than this brief statement. See “On Safety's Side – Protecting Those Vulnerable to Violence: Challenges to Notions of Neutrality in Supervised Visitation Centers,” Martha McMahon and Ellen Pence, Praxis International, 2008 (available at [www.praxisinternational.org](http://www.praxisinternational.org)).

<sup>5</sup> The articulation of safety over time reflects the work of the Michigan and California sites of OVW's Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Exchange Grant Program – Demonstration Initiative.

recognized that they can also have a unique connection with each family member over the period that separation, divorce, custody, and visitation issues are being resolved. A center can help a batterer get through the volatile period of separation and help weaken his opportunity and inclination to abuse. Whether by legal decree and/or the reality of having children in common, most battered women end up having to navigate parenting around their former partner until children reach adulthood, regardless of the severity of abuse they experienced. A visitation center can help support safety over this time period by the relationships it builds, regardless of whether it is part of a family's life for six months or several years. In addition, beyond its role with any one family, a visitation center contributes to ending battering and domestic violence by its ongoing participation in a wider community response and its links with domestic violence advocacy programs, the courts, and other collaborating partners.

### **Defining “engaged”**

To be “engaged” means to be involved and connected in an intentional, thoughtful way (to advocate means “to plead the cause of another”).

We can all think of a time that we have used a service that had a big influence on our well-being. It could be access to health care or a certain kind of medical treatment. It could be making an insurance claim after a traffic accident or securing day care tuition assistance or unemployment compensation or financial aid. What did you have to do to receive that service? What was most important to that agency about your experience? How were you welcomed and introduced to that service and what was required of you? What was positive and helpful? What was negative and discouraging? Were you connected with someone who clearly explained the expectations and consequences of different actions and decisions? Were you treated ‘like a name’ or ‘like a number’? Was the agency engaged with you or were you processed in and out as though you were interchangeable with the next body in line?

A visitation center that encourages an engaged practice is one that is active in building meaningful relationships with people in an intentional, thoughtful way. **To engage with battered women is a process that is different in approach and skills than that used to engage with the men who batter them, although both practices share a core definition.**

In the domestic violence field, it has long been recognized that protecting battered women and their children requires active engagement with women around their specific circumstances and needs. Visitation centers are in the unique position of working with the whole family, whereas most agencies and organizations responding to domestic violence intervene with one parent or the other. Centers have a valuable opportunity to go beyond guarding women and children. They can engage with women around safety and they also have an opportunity to engage with men around safety and change.



## The Framework

This discussion presents a framework for working with mothers who have been battered. The framework is summarized in Appendix 1. Meeting the goals rests on the approach, as made possible by workers' knowledge and skills in key areas.

### Goals

#### 1. Foster safety for mothers and their children

The primary goal is safety: her safety and her children's safety. A visitation center can create an environment that does not allow the battering to continue and that makes it possible to de-escalate or diffuse risk to her or the children. This attention to safety is both immediate, during the specific time period of a visit or exchange, and over the period of separation and ongoing contact with the center. This attention to safety also provides a foundation for ongoing safety. The center's consistent message to battered women, whether a custodial mother or not, is that it will act with her to keep her and children safe, rather than acting on her "case."

To foster safety, visitation centers must ensure that their interventions do not strengthen his power and control over her and the children or reinforce his denial of the abuse or blaming of her for his actions. To "engage to protect" means that a visitation center creates an environment that counters her experience with battering.

#### 2. Counteract the experience of battering

To counteract the experience of battering requires that a visitation center anchor its programs and services in recognition of and understanding battering and its impact on women. From this essential foundation it can develop the approaches and necessary skills in workers to respond safely in ways that do not reinforce the coercion, intimidation, and control that characterize battering.

"My job was to make her ugly." That statement, made by a participant in a batterers' intervention program, speaks to one of the most potent impacts of battering on women. A batterer wants interveners – whether police, prosecutors, judges, or visitation center workers – to see her as flawed, incompetent, "crazy," or whatever negative qualities will most influence them to see him as the victim and the one entitled to their attention and support.

*Living with a batterer means that a woman is rarely free to speak.* She is continually being told what to think and what to say. He often defines things for her. There is little dialogue and rarely an exchange of ideas or opinions where her standing has as much validity as his. Many battered women have had the experience of being severely abused – physically, emotionally, or sexually – when they have spoken up at the wrong time, i.e., a time that they were not permitted to speak. To counteract the pervasive domination and coercion of battering, visitation centers can create an environment that allows women to speak freely, supports dialogue, and listens to them. Listening to battered women does not mean agreeing with everything they say or following every request. It means supporting a battered woman's



voice and her right to speak up without belittlement or punishment. This is essential if a visitation center is to meet the goal of fostering safety. In order to mitigate any ongoing abuse the center must know what is happening to her and her children. Her information and knowledge is central to figuring out what is the best and safest course of action.

*Living with a batterer means that a woman can never live up to his expectations.* She cannot count on being quiet enough, quick enough, or capable enough. The children are rarely quiet enough, the house is rarely clean enough, the food hot enough or cold enough. Whatever the focus of his expectations, she can only occasionally meet them and never adequately meet them, regardless of how hard she tries. Whether and when she can meet his expectations is unpredictable. To help counteract this constant erosion of her self-worth and trust in her capabilities, visitation centers can examine their expectations of battered women and the purpose and assumptions behind them. Is she expected to be quiet, calm, agreeable, and easy to work with? Is she expected to always present the children on time and cheerful and clean? Is she expected to appreciate the center? Is she expected to be “motherly” enough if she is a visiting parent? Contrite enough for “losing” her children? This is not to say that a visitation center cannot have expectations for women using its services. It is to say that a center must step back and examine such expectations. Are the expectations necessary to foster safety? Do the expectations account for how each woman’s social standing and life experience impacts her ability to meet those expectations? Are the expectations rooted in assumptions about domestic violence and about what makes a “good mother”? When a worker believes “I would never let a man do that to me” or “she should have gotten those children out of there a long time ago,” those are powerful expectations that are difficult to live up to.

*Living with battering means that a mother’s relationship and authority with her children is constantly undermined* (Appendix 2). Among the most intimate connections and relationships in a woman’s life are those with her children. Because a batterer cuts his partner’s ties to all relationships outside of her relationship with him and cannot allow her to have any interest stronger than her interest in him, he persistently attacks and erodes her relationship with her children. He does this by:

- 1) Using excessive and coercive discipline and demanding that his partner discipline the children in the same way. E.g., refusing to feed a child who has disobeyed an order or who forgot to do a chore.
- 2) Undermining the relationship between the children and their mother. E.g., telling the children their mother is stupid and mocking her in front of them.
- 3) Isolating the children from their mother and the mother from her children. E.g., playing favorites; physically isolating children from their mother by successfully obtaining joint or sole custody.
- 4) Using the children to control his partner. E.g., telling her, “if you don’t do what I say, this kid is going to get it.”
- 5) Using the children to hurt his partner. E.g., encouraging the children to disparage their mother or call her names; allowing or encouraging the children to physically attack their mother.
- 6) Hurting the children to hurt his partner. E.g., beating or humiliating the children; or, in a final exercise of this tactic, killing the children, but not their mother.





Once the center is involved in the separation process – and it is very much involved once the court issues a visitation or exchange order – a batterer is likely to try and manipulate all circumstances to his advantage and to make her appear to be the less cooperative parent. As decisions are made by courts about “parenting time” or “co-parenting” arrangements, a batterer wants those decision-makers to see her as the parent who lies, is late, is taking his parenting time, not following the rules, acting out, and not considering his rights. The visitation center needs to make sure that its interventions – from its reactions to her to its documenting and reporting practices – do not strengthen his efforts to undermine her relationship and authority with her children.

Visitation centers working with non-custodial battered mothers often encounter the following situation: knowing that the mother is planning to have dinner or lunch or celebrate something with the children, the father feeds them before the visit so that the children will be full and uninterested in what she has planned. It is mean, controlling, and manipulative. He is sending a message to her that he can control her relationship with the children even when the visitation center is involved. He is sending a message to the children that he can easily override what their mother has planned. He is deliberately undermining her parenting authority. Such actions are a continuation of the abuse and control that characterize the battering.

When their mother is being battered, children have complex relationships with her and there is much that needs to be done to undo the harm caused by their father’s actions. **At a minimum, a visitation center should not cause further harm.** Ideally, a center would be in a position to support each mother to repair the harm and explore what that means for her and her children. The damage caused to the mother-child relationship plays out in visitation centers in many ways, such as when children do not want to visit the non-custodial parent; when mothers and children disagree about something related to the visit or exchange, such as bringing home a certain toy or staying longer with their father; when children say or do something about the mother, e.g., refuse to interact with a visiting mother or criticize her. In these moments, centers are in a position to proactively strengthen and support a mother and children’s resilience. A center can counteract the erosion of the mother-child relationship by developing a safety-oriented partnership with her and preparing workers to help her talk with and restore her relationship with her children.

All professionals who work with battered women are encouraged to do safety planning with women. Whether that professional is a public health nurse, a child protection worker, a probation officer or a school social worker, helping women think through their safety needs and measures is becoming a standard protocol. Visitation center workers should introduce the notion of safety planning at the beginning of their work with women and then as an ongoing process helping women address specific situations or changes that might pose increased risk as they use the center. Remember: risk is not static and the period of time people use visitation services can be volatile, with safety needs changing very rapidly. The domestic violence partner in the collaboration can help a center establish safety planning practices. Centers are encouraged to read *Safety Planning for Battered Women* by Jill Davies to understand its application in different contexts. Centers are also encouraged to provide women with resources such as the Family Violence Prevention Fund’s *Supervised Visitation Programs: Information for Mothers Who Have Experienced Abuse*<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> *Safety Planning with Battered Women: Complex Lives/Difficult Choices*, Jill Davies, Eleanor Lyon, and Diane Monti-Catania, Sage Publications, 1998. The Family Violence Prevention Fund’s publication is available through its website, [www.endabuse.org](http://www.endabuse.org).

## Approach

- **Continually gauge and account for the risk of harm to a mother and her children.**

A visitation center needs to create the center's safety plan, meaning what the center is going to do to keep each individual battered woman and her children as safe as possible. This requires paying attention to her unique safety concerns and what needs to be in place before, during, and after each visitation or exchange. Has he made threats or attempts to abduct the children? Has he ever tried to kill her? Did the violence and abuse increase in frequency and/or severity before the separation that led to visitation or exchange? Does she have a safe and reliable way to get to the center? Has he enlisted other family members or friends to watch her or intimidate her?

Circumstances, risks, and safety needs change over time. A static plan based on information gathered at a family's first appointments will not support safety over time. A safety "plan" cannot be words that get written down on a form and put in a file. It must be a living plan that shifts and changes over time as needs and risks change. Continually gauging risk requires paying attention in an intentional, thoughtful way, from the first contact and orientation. It requires building a relationship with each mother that maximizes communication. It requires frequent "check-ins" about how the visits or exchanges are going and about how things are going in general in her life. Has she filed for divorce after a period of separation? Is a final divorce action scheduled? Has she lost her job? Has he lost his job? Has he been arrested? Is he talking about moving away or leaving the country? Has he been trying to contact her in between scheduled visitations? Is he refusing to discuss adjusting the visitation or exchange schedule to a day or time that works better for her and the children? Is he saying things such as, "you'll never get the kids" or "you'll pay for this"? It requires a loop of checking in pre- and post-visit or exchange and adjusting and revising the center's services and safety plan according to changing needs.

- **Develop a problem-solving, safety-oriented partnership with her.**

Acting from a framework of engagement, the center's message to battered women is "We will act *with* you to keep you and your children safe; you will not be just another case we act on. Our goal is to help you and your children stay safe and help you restore well-being."

A safety-oriented partnership runs counter to the batterer's intent: "My job was to make her ugly." Partnership acknowledges her right to speak, contribute, and shape solutions. To help counter the ways women have experienced battering, partnership cannot be in name only. Partnership must be genuine, nonjudgmental, and compassionate in order to counter a batterer's efforts to continue the abuse through the visitation center. It requires that a visitation center consider a woman's actions, concerns, and feelings in the context of the battering she has experienced and is experiencing. It requires preparing workers to act with battered women in ways that encourage and help them to best support safety for themselves and their children, not by telling them what to do or how to do it, but via choices, information, resources, and acting with them to develop the center's plan for their safety. A problem-solving, safety-oriented partnership will not leave a woman saying "they didn't listen" or "I felt like I was a bother to them" or "they don't spend any time with me; my job is to just deliver the kids." At the same time, this partnership does not mean providing







































