

# FATHERING AFTER VIOLENCE



Working  
with  
Abusive Fathers  
in Supervised  
Visitation

Family Violence  
Prevention

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# **FATHERING AFTER VIOLENCE: Working with Abusive Fathers in Supervised Visitation**

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**Family Violence  
Prevention Fund**

This project is supported by grant #2004-WT-AX-K046 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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## I. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPPF) is extremely grateful to the many people who made this publication possible. In particular, we extend our deepest gratitude to the Safe Havens Supervised Visitation Program Fathering After Violence “Learning Communities,” who took a chance and partnered with us to explore new paths of engagement and service delivery with men who have used violence in their families. Staff from the Advocates for Family Peace in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, the City of Kent Supervised Visitation Center in Washington State, the San Mateo County Family Visitation Center in California, the Walnut Avenue Women’s Center in Santa Cruz, California, and the YWCA Visitation Centers in Springfield and Northampton, Massachusetts, made great contributions to this emerging field of work. Special thanks go to Dee O’Brien, Ramón Sandoval, Bruce Hopson, John Downing, Jackie Hunt, Nancy Chang, Barbara Loh, Brenda Douglas, and Chris O’Connor.

This guide is truly a collaboration of thought and effort. Several authors came together to produce a practical document that pulls from both research and practice wisdom. Fernando Mederos generously offered his thinking and conceptualization on the accountability and connection approach to working with abusive fathers, and also developed an important framework for approaching the delicate topic of assessment. Tracee Parker, Beth McNamara, Jennifer Rose, Melissa Scaia, and Laura Connelly—all leaders in the field of supervised visitation and domestic violence—worked tirelessly to develop and test ideas at their centers and offered their “on the ground” expertise. This project would not have happened without their leadership.

Recognition also goes to Ricardo Carillo, Rosario Navarrete, and Jerry Tello for generously sharing their talent, skills, and experience to support the work of the California sites.

We also want to thank the many additional national advisors and reviewers who helped shape our work over the last five years and synthesize the learnings for production of this document: Maren Hansen, Jeremy Nevilles-Sorell, Johnny Rice II, Jeffrey Edleson, Oliver Williams, Derek Gordon, David Pate, John Badalament, Carmen Del Rosario, Barbara Hart,

Betsy Groves, the Honorable Bill Jones, David Mathews, Shelia Hankins, Anne Menard, Maureen Sheeran, Sandra Stith, and Chris Sullivan.

Lastly, the FVPEF extends deep appreciation to our partners and funders at the Office on Violence Against Women. Special thanks go to Michelle Dodge, Krista Blakeney-Mitchell, Corrin Ferber, Regina Madison, Nadine Neufville, and Neelam Patel.

Lonna Davis and Juan Carlos Areán  
Project Directors

## II. INTRODUCTION

This guide is intended to assist the grantees of the Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program (Supervised Visitation Program or SVP) that want to enhance the safety and well-being of women and children by working more deliberately with abusive fathers who use the centers to visit their children. Although fathers are not always the visiting parents and, in fact, in some centers mothers make up almost half of the visiting caseload, this document was designed to target in particular visiting fathers who have been violent with their intimate partners.

This publication takes as a point of departure the minimum practice standards outlined in the Guiding Principles of the Supervised Visitation Program (Guiding Principles or GP)<sup>1</sup> and builds upon that document to propose a continuum of more advanced interventions for the engagement of abusive fathers in visitation centers. These interventions are based on the learnings from the Fathering After Violence Initiative,<sup>2</sup> developed by the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPPF) and five current and past SVP grantees with funding from the Office of Violence Against Women (OVW).

Fathering After Violence is a national initiative that aims to help end violence against women by motivating men to renounce their abuse and become better fathers (or father figures) and more supportive parenting partners using fatherhood as a leading approach.

***Men who use violence can be held accountable for their behavior and simultaneously be encouraged to change it; and women and children can benefit from this approach.***

The work described in this guide is grounded on two key premises: Men who use violence can be held accountable for their behavior and simultaneously be encouraged to change it; and women and children can benefit from this approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Office on Violence Against Women, US Department of Justice. *Guiding Principles. Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program* (2007). Washington, DC.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see <http://www.endabuse.org/programs/display.php3?DocID=342>.

### **What is accountability in supervised visitation?**

*Accountability* is a concept frequently used in the domestic violence field, and yet there is a dearth of definitions in the literature. One noteworthy definition by Brenda Hill appears in *Domestic Violence Awareness: Actions for Social Change*:

*Batterers' accountability means that perpetrators take responsibility for violence in all its forms. This requires honest self-examination, and directly, openly owning violent behaviors. It includes acknowledging the impact their violence has on partners or other victims, children and other relatives. True accountability requires accepting the consequences of their behavior, and making significant changes in their belief systems and behaviors based upon non-violence and respect for women and all other relatives.*<sup>3</sup>

In the context of the criminal justice system, accountability often means being subjected to the consequences imposed by the system, such as arrest, imprisonment, probation, compliance with mandated treatment, and restitution to the victims.

Although supervised visitation is not directly related to systemic accountability relative to criminal justice, it can be a clear consequence for someone's abusive behavior and visitation centers must hold abusive parents accountable to the program's policies and procedures and the court order. Perpetrators need to know in no uncertain terms that if the center's rules or the court order are broken, they might lose the right to see their children.

However, it is not a prerequisite to start or continue supervised visitation that abusive parents take responsibility for their past behavior, acknowledge the impact of their violence on their families, or even take steps to change outside the visiting time.

For this reason, it is imperative that visitation centers work not in isolation, but as part of a larger system that holds abusive men accountable and guarantees safety for the children and adult victims. Supervised visitation centers that are part of a functional coordinated community response have much greater means to achieve these goals.

Due to the limitations that visitation centers have in creating a traditional framework of accountability, developing significant relationships with the visiting fathers can enable staff to clearly communicate the legal and non-legal consequences that continued abusive behavior can produce.

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<sup>3</sup> Domestic Violence Awareness Project (2005). *Domestic Violence Awareness: Actions for Social Change*. Harrisburg, PA: National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, p. 79. Retrieved February 23, 2007, from [http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc\\_Files\\_VAWnet/ActionForSocialChange.pdf](http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/ActionForSocialChange.pdf).

### III. PROJECT BACKGROUND

Supervised visitation centers have traditionally served the function of providing a safe space for children who have experienced physical or sexual abuse from their parents and/or have witnessed domestic violence (DV). Under close observation, the visiting parent can see, interact, and play with the children in a way that minimizes the possibility of creating further harm.

According to Campbell, Gordon, and McAlister-Groves<sup>4</sup>, the first supervised visitation program in the United States was founded in Denver in 1970 to provide “services for families involved with child protection cases.” Other programs with the same goals appeared across the country in the 1970s and ’80s. But it was not until the last decade of the twentieth century that supervised visitation centers started to proliferate, “due in large part to custody and visitation issues between separated parents.”<sup>5</sup>

“In the early 1990s, attention shifted to the development of supervised visitation for families in which there had been domestic violence. This happened in conjunction with increased pressure on the courts and other providers to gain a better understanding of the unique safety needs to be considered in these cases in order to keep mothers and their children safe.”<sup>6</sup>

In 2000, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA 2000) directed the Office of Violence Against Women to establish the Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program, which “provides an opportunity for communities to support supervised visitation and safe exchange of children, by and between parents, in situations involving domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault, or stalking.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Campbell, J., Gordon, D. and McAlister-Groves, B. (2007) *Beyond Observation: Considerations for Advancing Practice in Domestic Violence Supervised Visitation Centers*. San Francisco, CA: Family Violence Prevention Fund.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Office of Violence Against Women, United States Department of Justice. *Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program*. Retrieved September 29, 2006, from [http://www.usdoj.gov/ovw/safehaven\\_desc.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/ovw/safehaven_desc.htm).



From 2002 to date, the Supervised Visitation Program has funded more than one hundred grantee communities, with the central goal of helping the SV centers make their highest priority the safety of “*both* the children and the adult victim.”<sup>8</sup>

The Supervised Visitation Program has created a series of guiding principles, developed in consultation with a National Steering Committee comprising recognized leaders in the field, SVP grantees, and technical assistance providers. The guiding principles include, among others, the above-mentioned equal regard for the safety of children and adult victims; valuing multiculturalism and diversity; and respectful and fair interaction with everyone using the center.

***“...responses to battering behavior need to be accomplished in a manner that does not dehumanize the batterer.”***

When working with abusive fathers, part of the latter principle is based on the idea that “responses to battering behavior need to be accomplished in a manner that does not dehumanize the batterer. If a batterer has a positive reaction to using the visitation center, safety for child(ren) and adult victims may be enhanced.”<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the Steering Committee recommended practices that include working with visiting fathers to help them prepare for the visits and, when safe and appropriate, supporting conversations between the visiting parent and the children about what brought them to the center.

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<sup>8</sup> See supra note 1, p. V.

<sup>9</sup> See supra note 1, p. 19.

### **What about neutrality?**

According to the *Standards for Supervised Visitation Practice* developed by the Supervised Visitation Network, “neutrality as used in the context of supervised visitation means maintaining an unbiased, objective, and balanced environment, and when providing the service, not taking a position between the parents in providing the service.” The Standards add that “[b]eing neutral does not mean providers disregard behaviors such as abuse or violence of any kind.”<sup>10</sup>

The expansion of safeguards to include adult victims and the deeper understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence require further examination of the concept of neutrality. The Safe Havens Supervised Visitation Program has established that grantees should treat all parties with “fairness and respect,” with the recognition that the perpetrator is the only person responsible for the violence. SVP centers can create a neutral “environment” for parents to visit with their children, but they cannot remain neutral toward the actual violence, whether it is perpetrated against children or adult victims.

### **The Safe Havens Supervised Visitation Program Learning Communities**

The FVVPF received two grants from OVW to look at the possible application of the Fathering After Violence framework in the context of supervised visitation and to provide targeted technical assistance (TA) to four SVP visitation centers across the United States. The four sites chosen were Advocates for Family Peace in Grand Rapids, Minnesota; the City of Kent Supervised Visitation Center in Washington State; the San Mateo County Family Visitation Center in California; and the Walnut Avenue Women’s Center in Santa Cruz, California. The YWCA Visitation Centers in Springfield and Northampton, Massachusetts, were originally part of the collaborative and contributed important lessons to this project.

The goal of the TA has been to enhance the safety of victims of DV and their children by developing strategies for working with non-custodial fathers who use the centers.

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<sup>10</sup> Supervised Visitation Network (2006). *Standards for Supervised Visitation Practice*. Retrieved February 23, 2007, from <http://www.svnetwork.net/Standards.html>.

Many abusive fathers who use visitation centers have neither been involved with the criminal justice system nor attended a batterers intervention program (BIP). Therefore, visitation centers might be the only institutions available to begin a process of accountability for their behavior and offer them the possibility to renounce their abuse. By focusing on the fathers' abuse and its impact on their children, the centers can create opportunities to assess their violence and control, as well as their potential for change. Giving abusive fathers (and all men) more opportunities for change and healing is an essential component of ending violence against women and children.

In the last three years, in collaboration with our partners, we have been able to design, redesign, and test innovative implementation plans for working with fathers, including the use of universal messages, orientation sessions, nonviolence groups, and a multicultural mentoring project.

***By focusing on the fathers' abuse and its impact on their children, the centers can create opportunities to assess their violence and control, as well as their potential for change.***

Some of the main lessons that have emerged include the importance of always keeping the safety of victims and accountability of perpetrators in the forefront; the significance of supporting mothers who use the centers; the need to understand organizational readiness to carry out this work; the consequence of using effective assessment tools for families; the relevance of having a solid domestic violence and cultural analysis; and the value of undertaking community mapping and creating true collaborations with other providers.

### **Guiding Principles of the Fathering After Violence Initiative**

The working collaborative behind the Fathering After Violence Initiative developed the following guiding principles to inform its work:

- The safety of women and children is always our first priority;
- This initiative must be continually informed and guided by the experiences of battered women and their children;































































































