

7 Ways to Support Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

Elizabeth Whitney Barnes, JD
Assistant Director
Permanency Planning for Children Department
National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges



The author and her son, Alex

Domestic violence puts millions of women and their families at risk each year and is one of the single greatest social ills impacting the nation (see ncjfcj.org). Children to whom a CASA volunteer is assigned have very possibly been exposed to domestic violence. The advocate needs to be aware of characteristics of family violence and the local services available to address it. Domestic violence can manifest not only as physical abuse but also as intimidation, threats, economic control and even rape. Most commonly, men commit acts of family violence against women, although some women do commit such acts against men. A CASA volunteer can help the children to whom he or she is assigned by remembering the following:

1. Be very careful not to blame the victim for the abuse.

Only the batterer is responsible for engaging in abusive behavior. (See K.J. Wilson's *When Violence Begins at Home: A Comprehensive Guide to Understanding and Ending Domestic Abuse*, Hunter House Books, 1997). Domestic violence is about a pattern of control and domination of the victim by the abuser as shown by the "Power and Control Wheel" available from the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project at theduluthmodel.org/wheelgallery.php.

2. The abuser can be very charming and seem more confident and truthful than the victim.

In contrast, the victim can seem angry and uncooperative. To put these behaviors into perspective, under-

stand that when a victim is leaving an abusive relationship, it can be the most dangerous time for the victim and children.

3. If you see or suspect abuse or an abusive relationship, seek out a domestic violence advocacy center.

Or ask a local domestic violence resource for guidance on appropriate services to make the victim and child safe.

4. Be aware of signals of domestic violence.

Domestic violence can take place in a "conspiracy of silence"—no one talks about the violence, fear or threats. If the victim does not implicate the spouse, be alert to unexplained injuries. The child may allude to incidents of violence, but depending on the age of the child, discussions may range from fully informed knowledge of an incidence of abuse to vague stories of "daddy hurting mommy." The latter will require further exploration. It is important to distinguish domestic violence from a single incident of anger as well as to appropriately tailor your advocacy and service recommendations.


5. If you suspect or know of a domestic violence history, you may want to suggest to the court and stakeholders that precautions be in place in the courthouse so that the victim can safely attend his or her child's hearing.

Safeguards may include heightening courtroom security, making arrangements for separate and secure entry and exit options for the victim, providing separate seating in the courtroom and avoiding situations where the victim and the abuser are face-to-face.

6. Be aware of any current protective orders and other pending court cases involving the family, including actions related to divorce, paternity, custody, visitation and child support.

These case types are frequently public record in many jurisdictions and would require you to go to the clerk's office to review the files. Where files are not public record, you may need to request the court's permission to view them. Consult with your volunteer supervisor about how to do that and under what circumstances. The purpose of obtaining this information is to appropriately tailor your advocacy and service recommendations.

7. Review the *National CASA Volunteer Manual (2007 revision)* section on domestic violence (chapter 4, unit 6) for more information.

You can also contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-SAFE. Court-based materials related to domestic violence can be found on the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges website, ncjfcj.org. 

Elizabeth Whitney Barnes, JD, works with courts handling child abuse and neglect cases nationwide, providing technical assistance, consultation, research and evaluation services. Barnes is author of the technical assistance brief Back to Basics: Fundamental Application of the Resource Guidelines and the Adoption and Permanency Guidelines in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases. She served as a CASA volunteer for the Washoe County, NV, CASA program for four years.