

MODEL PROTOCOL

On Working with Battered Women and Their Teenage Boys in Shelter



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**The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence
is a statewide non-profit organization committed to ending
domestic violence through advocacy and action for social change.**

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MODEL PROTOCOL ON WORKING WITH BATTERED WOMEN AND THEIR TEENAGE BOYS IN SHELTER

INTRODUCTION¹

Domestic violence shelters were established to provide a sanctuary for women and children who were subject to violence from their partners in their homes. A primary objective of shelters is to provide a safe and secure environment for the women and children who live and work in the shelters. Shelters develop policies and practices to accomplish this objective. One of the policies that has historically been put in place in many domestic violence shelters is an age limitation on male children in shelter. The primary reason for establishing this separate standard for sheltering teenage boys is a concern for the safety of women, children, staff and volunteers in the shelter. There are several compelling reasons for establishing age limits for male children in shelters.

Teenage male children can pose a threat for a number of reasons: they are frequently physically large and stronger than most of the people living or working in shelters; they may be sexually active and present the threat of sexual assault for women and children in the shelter; and they may have learned and adapted the batterer's behaviors and tactics of control. Privacy issues are another reason for establishing separate standards. Shelters are group living situations where it is seldom possible to provide private rooms for individuals or even families. While two women with young children can comfortably share a bedroom, it may not be appropriate for a 16- or 17-year-old boy to share that bedroom as well.

A third and more complex reason for imposing age limits for male children is the dynamic that can be created when a teenage male is introduced into the shelter environment. While shelters are not designed around providing therapy, they *are* designed to create what could be referred to a therapeutic environment. Shelters offer many women their first opportunity to explore their own thoughts, feelings and needs. This exploration can be difficult and frightening. The environment of mutual support that is offered by shelters is one in which women frequently struggle at first because the batterer is no longer present. Women in shelter can safely express both their pain and their hopes and have the opportunity to take a hard look at themselves. Over and over again they are surprised by what they see – capable, strong people. This environment can be a catalyst for tremendous change.

Male teenagers living in shelter fundamentally change this environment. Rather than providing a catalyst for change, the environment can become a reproduction of home life. This may be a result of male teenagers trying out behaviors they have witnessed. It may also be a result of women in shelter having difficulty testing new behaviors when there

¹ This introduction is excerpted and adapted with permission from the Virginians Against Domestic Violence discussion paper on policy and service issues surrounding male children over the age of 12, written by Kristi VanAudenhove, VADV Co-Director, February 1995.

are “men” present. An environment that does not include adult or adolescent males offers an opportunity for women to interact differently.

However, there are equally compelling reasons for *not* establishing age limits for male children in shelters. Domestic violence programs share a strong commitment to making services available to *all* battered women and their children. Policies that discriminate on the basis of age and sex are antithetical to the philosophies of most programs. Domestic violence programs face a continuous challenge: to examine their policies and practices to insure that they are consistent with their very complex missions.

Balancing ethics and safety, most programs offer an option of sheltering male victims and women with teenage male children in motels. But this may not be a secure option for many battered women. Motel rooms are often isolated, with no one available to intervene or call law enforcement should the batterer arrive. Motel operators and guests have no reason to protect the confidentiality of families staying there, and may actually assist the batterer in locating his victims. Women are then faced with the choices of leaving a child behind, and possibly in danger, remaining with their batterer until they can find other sanctuary, or a temporary stay in an isolated motel room where they may receive little support and may still be in danger.

Safety issues can be addressed in several ways. Shelter workers can and should be trained to screen for potentially abusive individuals of any age or gender prior to admitting families to shelter or at the time of intake. When developing a safety plan that includes an adolescent male, critical information such as a history of violent behaviors, a history of having been sexually abused, or a history of ignoring consequences will assist the advocate in supporting the battered woman and her children. Shelter workers need to have working conditions that allow them the time and the secure space to conduct lengthy face-to-face interviews with adolescents, as well as others coming into shelter.

Training, screening and guidelines can work together to minimize the risk of allowing abusive individuals into the shelter. They provide clear expectations for individual behaviors and support the battered woman and her children. Consequences for abusive behaviors by teenagers may include taking legal action or asking a teenager to leave while the rest of the family remains in shelter.

Privacy and therapeutic environment issues can be addressed in the daily operation of the shelter once safety has been addressed. Times and places for the adult women in the shelter to gather and talk in both structured and unstructured ways can be created and protected. Room and bed arrangements can be made to offer privacy to both the teenager and the other women in the shelter. Staff can work together to monitor behaviors and activities so that issues can be addressed as they arise, and any changes that do not pose a safety risk can be used as educational tools in support groups. For example, if staff members notice that women stop talking about their batterers in front of the teenage male, but not in front of other children, a discussion about why this happens can lead to a productive exploration of some of the social supports for battering.

If shelters choose to impose age limits and families may be screened as too risky to bring into shelter, domestic violence programs must have “back-up” options. Motels are one option, but budget constraints may make it difficult for some agencies to use this option. Also, in rural areas, motels are just not available. Services can be developed to meet this

need without significantly adding to program cost. Another option is to develop a contract with a nearby shelter that is able to provide services to the family. A written agreement developed in advance can provide a clear protocol for staff when it is needed. This agreement may also specify how costs to the shelter will be reimbursed. A religious community or civic group can then be asked to assist with this particular expense.

In conclusion, male children over the age of twelve clearly present a unique set of service needs, but they do not necessarily present a unique threat to the safety and security of shelter residents and staff. While the research on domestic violence tells us that battering behaviors can be “passed down” from father to son, the more significant finding is that often it is not. Male teenagers can choose nonviolence. They can be capable of healthy, respectful relationships. Domestic violence programs can provide a source of support and encouragement for those choices, and at the same time model clear consequences that serve to protect all of us.

RECOMMENDED POLICY

[Name of agency] shall work to ensure access and services for all battered women and their minor children, including teenage boys. Comprehensive plans to meet the needs of battered women and their teenage sons should consider the following:

1. Developing policies and procedures for identifying and assessing the needs of program participants and their teenage sons.²
2. Providing teenage boys with a range of age-appropriate service options and activities.
3. Providing program participants and their teenage sons with age-appropriate domestic violence written materials.
4. Developing a budget plan to implement comprehensive support services and activities relevant to program participants with teenage sons.
5. Periodic training of staff for working with teenage boys and related issues.
6. Monitoring of the policy and program implementation.

² These policies and procedures may apply to teenage girls as well.

RECOMMENDED PROCEDURES

An advocate's first contact with a battered woman, whether on a crisis line, during an in-person interview, or during intake for the shelter, is a critical opportunity to provide information and support to both the battered woman and her teenage son.

During the initial contact with the battered woman and her teenage son, advocates should:

1. Communicate the agency policy and procedures for sheltering battered women with teenage sons.
2. Inform the program participant that advocates are legally mandated to report child abuse. Describe what types of behavior are legally defined as child abuse, and the process for reporting to Child Protective Services (CPS).
3. Ask the program participant to describe any abusive behavior that the teenage boy has engaged in, and assess if [name of agency] can provide services while maintaining the safety of all program participants and staff.

In the Shelter

This can be a very confusing and intimidating time for battered women and their teenage sons. The teenage boy may feel an incredible amount of stress and mistrust. He and his mother were very likely controlled by the abuser, and the shelter rules may feel like another form of control. In addition, the teenage boy may have been forced to leave behind things that were very important to him such as his school, personal belongings, friends, relatives and pets. At the same time, he might see the shelter as a safer environment than the one he was in before, resulting in a variety of emotions such as grief, anger, anxiety or relief. It is important that the advocate explain to him the purpose of the shelter rules, safety and confidentiality issues, as well as the support that he and his family will receive.

Advocates should:

1. Inform the program participant about services provided to victims of domestic violence and their teenage sons.
2. Provide the program participant with information that explains the behaviors advocates and/or the agency are mandated to report to CPS.
3. Complete the intake with the program participant without the presence of her teenage son. The advocate should discuss with the program participant the ways the abuser's behavior has impacted her parenting. If needed, the advocate should make a plan with her to support her parenting issues.
4. Have the program participant sign a confidentiality agreement and explain to her and her teenage son the purpose of maintaining confidentiality. Additionally, the advocate should make a verbal confidentiality agreement with the teenage boy.
5. Discuss the shelter's non-violence policy with the program participant and her teenage son. Explain the importance and purpose of this policy.

6. Work jointly with the program participant and her teenage son to create a safety plan. At a minimum, the safety plan should include the activities the teen boy participates in outside of school or independent from his mother.
7. When appropriate, work separately with the program participant on an additional safety plan that responds to potentially abusive or difficult behavior by the teenage boy.
8. Inform the program participant that she is responsible for the discipline and supervision of her teenage son.
9. Inform the program participant and her teenage son that he is expected to participate in maintaining a clean environment.
10. Discuss with the program participant and her teenage son the importance of privacy, both for themselves and for other residents.
11. Meet separately with the program participant and the teenage boy to assess what support and services they each need.
12. Inform the teenage boy of support groups, activities and other services available to him, describe their purpose, and encourage his participation.
13. Discuss dynamics of domestic violence with the teenage boy and offer age-appropriate written materials.
14. Discuss the strategies the program participant's teenage son used or can use to cope with domestic violence.
15. Explore the program participant's relationship with her teenage son and ask what support she might need.
16. Provide the program participant and her teenage son with appropriate referrals to community resources for additional support. Make available age-appropriate books and other educational materials addressing youth.
17. Review the content of the agency's adult support group to include accurate and appropriate information about the impact of domestic violence on parenting and on the development of teenagers.

Program Activities for Teens

Issues of trust, age and cultural differences, among others, play a significant role in the challenges advocates face in relating with a teenage boy. Allowing enough time to communicate and to learn about the teenage boy's interests can make an enormous difference in the quality of the relationship. If staffing resources allow, separate the dual concerns of building trust and reinforcing house rules with teen residents. For example, encourage one advocate or volunteer to work on building trust with the teen resident while asking a different staff member to monitor the teenage boy's cooperation with the house rules of communal living. By providing a variety of age-appropriate activities, the agency will support teenage boys around the domestic violence they have witnessed or directly experienced.

These activities should include:

- Recreational activities such as field trips, watching educational movies, art projects, drama or theater classes, book clubs or creating writing
- Peer support activities such as mixed-gender peer support groups for teens offering discussion about domestic violence tactics, coping strategies, anger, and grief
- Individual support such as additional face-to-face meetings with staff or volunteers who have additional training and experience working with youth

Community Collaboration

In order to provide the appropriate referrals both to the program participant and to the teenage boy, it is essential that the agency needs to build or have established relationships with the different agencies in the community that offer appropriate services for youth.

Opportunities for community collaboration may be problematic, especially in rural areas, because of limited resources.

Training

Training that focuses on domestic violence-related issues that impact teenagers is essential for staff and volunteers. Training gives staff and volunteers the opportunity to enhance their skills and understanding of teen issues. Training should include:

- Impact of domestic violence on children/youth/teens
- Emotional, cognitive and physical development of adolescents
- Child abuse related to domestic violence
- Coping strategies teenagers use when facing or responding to domestic violence
- Supporting the adult victim parent of a teenager around domestic violence issues
- Learning about the use of screening tools for potentially abusive individuals of any age or gender
- Dealing with conflicts involving teenagers in the shelter or other agency programs
- Ways to support the adult victim parent when the teenage boy is using abusive behavior
- How to respond to teenage boys if they are using abusive behavior
- Safety planning with teenage boys in and outside the shelter

Confidentiality and Safety Planning

Confidentiality and safety planning can be especially confusing for the teenage boy. He might want to continue to have close contact with friends and family. Additionally, he may need to continue activities separate from his mother, like visiting friends and family, attending social engagements and after-school activities. These situations could present different levels of danger, not only for the teenager but for the family and other residents at the shelter. It is important to support the teenage boy in planning how to address situations that he may face in activities outside of the shelter without endangering himself or others. Exploring with him all the possibilities to continue his life in a safer way will help the teenage boy better understand the need for both confidentiality and safety planning.

APPENDIX

1. “How to Respond When Your Teen Becomes Violent” (Step-Up Program)
2. “Behavior Checklist Follow-up – Parent” (Step-Up Program)
3. Teen Resource List (New Beginnings)

NOTE: The appendices are currently available in hard copy only, so they are not included with this .pdf file. Please contact Christine at WSCADV (206-389-2515 x100) if you would like the attachments faxed to you.