



PRACTICE TIPS ON PROTECTIVE FACTORS & PATHWAYS TO HEALING

*FOR ADULT AND CHILD SURVIVORS OF
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE*

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OVERVIEW OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS

FOR ADULT AND CHILD SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

“When a flower doesn’t bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.”
- Alexander Den Heijer

Sometimes when children, adults, and families are experiencing challenges or traumatic events, we try to fix them instead of collaborating to fix the conditions, events, or circumstances that contribute to poor outcomes (i.e., risk factors). Intentionally and actively working to address various conditions, events, and circumstances in ways that help to support the well-being of children, adults, and families is what building protective factors is all about.

Protective factors are conditions and characteristics that eliminate or reduce the impact of risk factors AND promote healthy development and well-being. Stated another way, protective factors are conditions and characteristics of individuals, interpersonal relationships, communities, and the larger society that are associated with decreased chances of negative outcomes and increased chances of positive outcomes. **Better outcomes for children, adults, and families will be achieved if protective factors are built in all human domains: individual, interpersonal, community, and societal.**

Helping children, adults, and families build protective factors requires:

- Small but significant changes in practitioners’ everyday actions that focus on individual, family, or community conditions and characteristics.
- Shifts in policies, systems and partnerships that prioritize and promote those changes.

WHY ARE PROTECTIVE FACTORS IMPORTANT FOR ADULT & CHILD SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

As a result of domestic violence (DV), adult and child survivors may become cut off from family and friends, begin to doubt their ability to take care of themselves or their children, and lose hope for a better future. These harmful impacts of DV are exacerbated when survivors are also experiencing poverty, systemic racism, discrimination, food or housing insecurity, and other stressors.

When child welfare staff, DV practitioners, educators, faith leaders, treatment providers, community residents and leaders, and others intentionally and actively focus on building protective factors in addition to reducing risk factors, adult and child survivors are more able to draw upon their personal, family, and community strengths and resources to address the challenges they are experiencing, and to do better in school, work, and life.

DOMAIN	EXAMPLES OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS
Individual	positive self-esteem; problem-solving skills; success at school or work
Interpersonal	responsive and helpful social supports; good friends/peer group
Community	accessibility of resources and services; robust networks within cultural groups
Societal	policies that promote equitable child outcomes; positive media images

WHAT ARE KEY PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR ADULT & CHILD SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

Five protective factors can help to reduce the effects of domestic violence on adult and child survivors, support their personal growth and development, and build a family and community environment that promotes their well-being. The five protective factors for survivors of domestic violence are:

1. Safer and more stable conditions
2. Social, cultural, and spiritual connections
3. Resilience and a growth mindset
4. Nurturing parent-child interactions
5. Social and emotional abilities

HOW DOES BUILDING ONE PROTECTIVE FACTOR HELP TO BUILD ANOTHER PROTECTIVE FACTOR?

The five protective factors for adult and child survivors of domestic violence are interrelated. This means that experiences, interventions, or environments that strengthen one of the protective factors can help to build another protective factor. For example:

- Survivors' strong social connections create opportunities to establish safer and more stable conditions.
- When survivors experience safer and more stable conditions, they have increased opportunity and capacity to manage other aspects of their lives, which strengthens their belief in themselves. This is the basis of resilience.
- Having resilience helps to reduce the stress survivors experience. Less stress can contribute to more nurturing parent-child interactions.
- Nurturing parent-child interactions can strengthen social and emotional abilities in both the parent and the child.

THE FIVE KEY PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR ADULT & CHILD SURVIVORS



**Social and
Emotional Abilities**



**Resilience and a
Growth Mindset**



**Safer and More
Stable Conditions**



**Nurturing Parent-
Child Interactions**



**Social, Cultural, and
Spiritual Connections**



IMPORTANCE OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS

FOR ADULT AND CHILD SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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- Alexander Den Heijer

Protective factors are conditions and characteristics of individuals, interpersonal relationships, communities, and the larger society that eliminate or reduce the impact of risk factors AND promote healthy development and well-being. The five protective factors for adult and child survivors of domestic violence (DV) are interrelated. This means that experiences, interventions, or environments that strengthen one of the protective factors can help to build another protective factor.

SAFER AND MORE STABLE CONDITIONS



Why it’s important: Safer and more stable conditions help to reduce survivors’ risk of physical, sexual and emotional fear and harm, and increase survivors’ sense of control over their lives.

What you can do to build safer and more stable conditions for survivors: Provide resources and advocate to help adult and child survivors secure places to live, learn, work, and play that are predictably consistent, provide positive experiences, and meet

their unique circumstances and needs. (At the same time, hold the person who is harming survivors accountable for their behavior and provide help for them to change.)

SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS



Why it’s important: Healthy social, cultural, and spiritual connections can help reduce isolation and other negative effects of DV because these connections provide emotional support, help, guidance, and concrete resources. Strong, positive connections help adult and child survivors to have feelings of trust, hope, faith, and a belief that they matter.

What you can do to build survivors’ social, cultural, and spiritual connections: Foster adult and child survivors’ connections with caring and dependable family members, friends, neighbors, organizations, or faith communities so they can strengthen or build a healthy support network.

RESILIENCE AND A GROWTH MINDSET



Why it's important: Being resilient and having a growth mindset strengthens survivors' optimism, self-compassion, and belief in their own ability to achieve what they want for themselves and their loved ones; and helps them to heal from the effects of DV.

What you can do to build survivors' resilience and growth mindset: Create conditions that help adult and child survivors call on their inner strength, improve their situations, and manage stressful events.

NURTURING PARENT-CHILD INTERACTIONS



Why it's important: Nurturing parent-child interactions are beneficial for both adult and child survivors of DV because they create a mutual bond of trust, love, affection, and predictability. Warm, caring, and loving parent-child interactions promote a sense of security in children and strengthen parents' belief in their ability to take good care of their children.

What you can do to build nurturing parent-child interactions: Provide what adult survivors need to establish environments that sustain or strengthen their relationship and healthy interactions with their child.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ABILITIES



Why it's important: Social and emotional abilities help adult and child survivors persist even when things are challenging, seek help when they need it, make responsible decisions, and achieve goals. These abilities are essential for success in school, employment, and interpersonal relationships.

What you can do to build survivors' social and emotional abilities: Facilitate experiences and conditions that help adult and child survivors to express and manage their emotions in constructive ways, regulate their own behaviors, make proactive plans, and solve problems.



BUILDING THE 5 PROTECTIVE FACTORS ACROSS MULTIPLE DOMAINS

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Protective factors are conditions and characteristics of individuals, interpersonal relationships, communities, and the larger society that eliminate or reduce the impact of risk factors AND promote healthy development and well-being. What does it mean for child welfare staff, DV practitioners, educators, faith leaders, treatment providers, community residents and leaders, and others to **build protective factors**?

Building protective factors refers to facilitating experiences and conditions that support adult and child survivors of domestic violence in ways that help them to increase their well-being. Actively and intentionally building protective factors must be a primary focus for those interested in helping adult and child survivors of domestic violence.

Better outcomes for children, adults, and families will be achieved if protective factors are addressed in all human domains: societal, community, interpersonal, and individual.

EXAMPLES IN THE SOCIETAL DOMAIN

- Identify to policy-makers and leaders the impact of systemic barriers on adult and child survivors’ well-being (e.g., policies that create barriers for survivors trying to access safer housing, or discipline policies that result in a school-to-prison pipeline for students whose true need is trauma-responsive educational settings).
- Collaborate with community stakeholders to improve availability and access to resources, support, and services for adult and child survivors of domestic violence.

EXAMPLES IN THE COMMUNITY DOMAIN

- Engage a wide range of community collaborators to identify and act on ways that they can build or promote protective factors in the lives of children and families they work with.
- Work with community collaborators to address the ways in which they may be impeding the promotion of protective factors in the lives of children and families in the community.

EXAMPLES IN THE INTERPERSONAL DOMAIN

- Facilitate adult and child survivors’ access to parent support groups, children’s playgroups, legal representation, immigrants’ rights organizations, DV support groups, housing, and other resources and supports that address their self-identified and unique needs.
- Engage family members and friends of adult and child survivors in order to strengthen or create a strong, positive social network.

EXAMPLES IN THE INDIVIDUAL DOMAIN

- Foster a safe, sensitive, and empowering working relationship with survivors that values their voice and enables them to reclaim their autonomy.
- Employ trauma-aware and trauma-competent practices with adult and child survivors.



SAFER AND MORE STABLE CONDITIONS

FOR ADULT AND CHILD SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Safer and more stable conditions help to reduce survivors' risk of physical, sexual and emotional fear and harm, and increase survivors' sense of control over their lives. Housing and economic stability for the family and educational stability for children are particularly important for survivors.

OVERALL ROLE OF PRACTITIONERS

To help build safer and more stable conditions, practitioners can provide resources and advocacy to help adult and child survivors secure places to live, learn, work, and play that are predictably consistent, provide positive experiences, and meet their unique circumstances and needs, whether or not those needs are directly related to domestic violence. (At the same time, practitioners can hold the person who is harming survivors accountable for their behavior and provide help for them to change. Tips for practice in this area are available in the Bridges to Better resource library.)



EXAMPLES OF HOW PRACTITIONERS CAN HELP

1. **Reduce stressors on survivors by helping with immediate needs** such as groceries, car repairs, legal issues, or health care.
 - Provide information, resources, or referrals when survivors' specific needs arise.
 - Provide survivors with a 211 Help Line or free community and online resources.
 - Advocate directly for survivors' access to resources and help them overcome barriers (e.g., language and geographic barriers, racial and gender identity discrimination, etc.)
 - Talk with colleagues and others to generate ideas about new or untapped resources or partners that you could call upon now to help survivors achieve safer and more stable conditions.
2. **Engage collaborators, especially DV practitioners, to help create and support individualized, flexible safety plans with survivors.**
 - Ask survivors about the safest ways and times to contact them.
 - Establish code words with survivors for them to signal that "now is not a safe time to talk" or "send help", and be sure the information is available to others who support safety.
 - Include supportive family and friends as part of safety plans when desired by survivors.
 - Define roles of collaborators in supporting the plan (e.g., identify who will make safe

- provide them a place to stay if needed, provide emotional support, etc.).
 - Look at challenges that keep people from following through on the safety plan as opportunities to revisit, refine, and strengthen strategies as circumstances change and new considerations emerge.
3. Reduce an adult survivor's reliance on and vulnerability to their partner by setting up child care, locating community resources for specific needs, and supporting their educational, employment, or recovery goals.
 4. Advocate with child care centers and schools to maintain consistency and stability in a child's/ youth's environment.
 5. Help survivors to develop skills to effectively advocate for what they need.
 6. Help families experiencing homelessness to understand and assert their rights under the McKinney-Vento Act.¹
 7. Work with community collaborators to safely engage and hold accountable the person using violence and coercive control to help them change their behaviors. (See the Bridges to Better resource library for tips and resources.)
- How do you advocate for yourself to get what you need? How do you advocate for what your child needs?
 - Have you encountered barriers or discrimination trying to get help or to access various resources and services? What can I do to help you get what you need?

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EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS TO ASK SURVIVORS

- What do you need help with as soon as possible?
- What do you need for you and your child to be safer or to have more stability in your lives? How can I help?
- In what ways has your child's sense of routine and normalcy been disrupted by what's happening in your home or in the world? What needs to happen to restore and maintain their sense of routine and normalcy?

¹ The McKinney-Vento Act is a federal law that ensures the rights of students to go to school when they do not have a permanent address. For more information see <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/fysb/mckvenapp20120829.pdf>



SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS

FOR ADULT AND CHILD SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Healthy social, cultural, and spiritual connections can help reduce the isolation and negative effects of domestic violence because they provide survivors with emotional support, help, guidance, and **concrete resources**. Strong, positive connections help adult and child survivors to have feelings of trust, hope, faith, and a belief that they matter.

OVERALL ROLE OF PRACTITIONERS

Practitioners can foster survivors' connections with caring and dependable family members, friends, neighbors, organizations, or faith communities so they can strengthen or build a healthy support network.



EXAMPLES OF HOW PRACTITIONERS CAN HELP

1. Be authentic, compassionate, and respectful to build your own relationship with adult and child survivors.
2. Explore with survivors how they can connect with others to access services, resources, and opportunities (e.g., relatives or friends who can provide child care; social or cultural groups they can turn to for help).
 - Identify a strategy or a trusted person to help a survivor to overcome any internal (e.g., shame, lack of energy) or external (e.g., transportation, financial resources) challenges that prevent them from connecting with others to get what they need.
3. Facilitate survivors' access to DV and parenting support groups, playgroups, recovery groups, and other support services for parents and children, either in the community or online.
 - Provide information about culturally and linguistically responsive groups.
 - Address needs such as internet access to make group participation or individual services possible.
 - Go the extra mile by sitting with a survivor to make a phone call, accompanying them to a first appointment or meeting, or identifying a specific individual at a program with whom they can connect.

4. Foster stable and positive friendships and relationships for children (e.g., placing siblings with a family member if they are removed from the care of their parent; paying for after-school programming; suggesting on-line activities and games for a child with their peers or supportive adults, etc.).
5. Provide survivors' friends and family with information on how to support a loved one experiencing domestic violence and give them information about how they can also care for themselves.
6. Engage community allies – such as faith leaders and school personnel – to provide meaningful support and resources to adult and child survivors.

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EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS TO ASK SURVIVORS

- Who do you turn to when you need help? How do they help you?
- What organizations or groups do you feel connected or close to? What is it about them that makes you feel connected or close to them? How do they help you?
- How can your social network help you to address the challenges you’re faced with? What can I do to help you engage your network?
- What role does spirituality or religion play in your life? How does your spirituality or religion help you?
- In what ways have you separated yourself from people or conditions that have had a negative impact on you or your child? What helped you to do that?



RESILIENCE AND A GROWTH MINDSET

FOR ADULT AND CHILD SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Being resilient and having a growth mindset strengthens survivors' optimism, self-compassion, and belief in their own ability to achieve what they want for themselves and their loved ones. This protective factor also helps them heal from the effects of domestic violence and other forms of oppression.

OVERALL ROLE OF PRACTITIONERS

Practitioners can create conditions that help adult and child survivors call on their inner strength, improve their situations, and manage stressful events.



EXAMPLES OF HOW PRACTITIONERS CAN HELP

1. **Focus on the strengths, potentials, and resourcefulness of adult and child survivors.**
 - Help survivors see their own strengths. For example, ask a teenage survivor "How do you stay positive and hopeful even though you didn't make the team/get the job you wanted?"
 - Help a survivor think about their situation from a different perspective. For example, say to an adult survivor, "I hear that you feel like a failure. If (a loved one) was in this conversation, what would they say about what kind of parent you are/how you help people in this community?"
2. Talk with survivors about significant stressors or worries in their lives.
 - Coach survivors on how to recognize and reduce their and their children's stress and types of stress responses.
 - Help survivors secure resources, services, or opportunities to address identified stressors.
3. Encourage adult survivors and older youth to visualize and describe what their desired future looks like. Explore who can help them achieve that future, and discuss action steps that will help them get there.
4. **Avoid labeling choices as good or bad.** Instead, explore how survivors' choices are aligned with what they want for themselves or their children, and how their choices have been influenced by the actions of their partner, their access to

resources, or obstacles they had to overcome.

5. **Share genuine encouragement** that strengthens survivors' optimism, self-compassion, and proactive behavior.

- “Stay strong. Stay positive. Feel proud of how hard you’ve worked and know you’re doing the best you can.”
- “Remember how people who love you have helped you to accomplish the things you want in your life?”
- “Don’t give up on your recovery. Think of this relapse as an opportunity to grow or learn.”

6. Share grounding techniques that help survivors to stay in the present moment when they begin to experience uncomfortable memories or challenging emotions. For example, encourage survivors to:

- Take 10 slow breaths, focusing on each inhale and exhale.
- Remind themselves of who they are now. Direct them to say, in sequence: their name, age, where they are, what they did today, and what they’ll do next.
- Focus on the space they are in. Ask if they can name 3 things they can see, 3 things they can hear, and then 3 things they can touch.

7. **Affirm for adult and child survivors that the violence in the home is not their fault and that you hold the person using violence responsible for their own behavior.** Explain that alcohol, drugs, oppression, financial pressure, depression, jealousy, etc. are never excuses for violence or coercive control or abuse of any kind. Repeat this whenever survivors suggest that violence is their fault.

EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS TO ASK SURVIVORS

- In what circumstances do you feel strong and capable? What personal strengths do you call upon when you’re faced with challenges or adversity?
- What impact has your experience with domestic violence had on you? On your child? What have you learned from the experience? How do you want things to be different?
- Tell me about a positive change you’ve made in your life. What helped you get there?
- How does your child act when they are experiencing emotional stress? How do you help them ease or overcome it?
- What do you do for yourself to keep your current challenges/trauma experiences from negatively impacting your relationship with your child? How did you learn to do that?
- If in 6 months you were to look back on this and say, “I’m in a much better position than I was 6 months ago,” what would be different for you and your child? What does that future look like? Who do you imagine would help you get there?

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NURTURING PARENT–CHILD INTERACTIONS

FOR ADULT AND CHILD SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Nurturing parent-child interactions are beneficial for both adult and child survivors of domestic violence because they create a mutual bond of trust, love, affection, and predictability. Warm, caring, and loving parent-child interactions promote a sense of security in children and strengthen parents' belief in their ability to take good care of their children.

OVERALL ROLE OF PRACTITIONERS

As a result of domestic violence (DV), adult and Practitioners can provide what adult survivors need to establish environments that sustain or strengthen their relationship and healthy interactions with their child.



EXAMPLES OF HOW PRACTITIONERS CAN HELP

1. **Provide resources and advocacy to create safer and more stable conditions, which can increase a survivor's capacity and opportunity to be the kind of parent they want to be.**
2. **Support adult survivors' efforts to maintain their families' or children's routines and schedules to the extent possible (e.g., having family meals and activities, going to school and playdates, doing homework with siblings).**
3. **Identify and support opportunities for adult and child survivors to have fun together.**
4. **Talk with adult survivors about positive caregiving practices and parent-child interactions.**
 - If survivors have participated in parent coaching or education, support them to practice and reinforce what they have learned.
 - Find humor in parenting missteps and reframe them as learning experiences that all parents go through. Talk about ways parents can correct missteps, e.g., acknowledging the misstep with their child and apologizing
5. **Help adult survivors create age-appropriate and non-shaming narratives for their children about domestic violence and safety planning. Reassure children that the violence is not their fault.**

- A series of tip sheets for parents to help them talk to their children about domestic violence can be found [here](#).
 - Visit the Promising Futures website to learn about [eight healing gestures](#) for parents, families and advocates to connect with children who have experienced trauma (available in English and Spanish).
6. Identify free community and online resources an adult survivor can access for reliable parenting and child development information.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics provides information on topics such as child development, health, safety, and family issues at [healthychildren.org](#).
 - The University of Illinois website [parenting247.org](#) was developed to be a “one-stop” source of news, information, and advice on parenting.
 - Who supports you as a parent?
 - How do you respond when your child does something well or achieves something? When your child does something that you find problematic?

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EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS TO ASK SURVIVORS

- What are your child’s strengths, interests, and abilities? What do you do to support their interests and abilities?
- What do you find most rewarding and most challenging about being a parent?
- How does what’s happening with [the person using violence] affect your ability to be the kind of parent you want to be? Does [the person using violence] undermine you or interfere when you’re dealing with your child? What does that look like, and what effect does it have? What do you say to help your child make sense of what’s happening?
- Of the things you remember about how you were parented as a child, what parts do you want to hang on to, and what parts do you want to let go of?
- Where do you turn to for reliable parenting information or advice?



SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL ABILITIES

FOR ADULT AND CHILD SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Social and emotional abilities help adult and child survivors persist when things are challenging, seek help when they need it, make responsible decisions, and achieve goals. These abilities are essential for success in school, employment, and interpersonal relationships.

OVERALL ROLE OF PRACTITIONERS

Practitioners can facilitate experiences and conditions that help adult and child survivors to understand and express their emotions in a constructive way, regulate their own behaviors, make proactive plans, and solve problems.



EXAMPLES OF HOW PRACTITIONERS CAN HELP

1. **Pace your efforts and match the energy level and needs of survivors whenever possible.** For example, give adult or child survivors the chance to stop and then come back to a conversation or activity if they feel overwhelmed or distracted.
2. Talk directly to a child or sibling group about how they feel, what they worry about, and what they love about their family.
3. **Play a game or engage in another activity with a child. Ask about their interests, then find ways to support those interests.**
4. Encourage adult and child survivors to identify their feelings and thoughts about the violence in their home.
 - Explore what an adult survivor does to help their child to make sense of what's happening and to help them heal. (Visit the Promising Futures website to learn about eight healing gestures for parents, families and advocates to connect with children who have experienced trauma – available in English and Spanish.)
 - Ask an adult survivor about ways their child's behavior, emotions, or attitudes have been affected by violence in the home.
5. **Work with adult survivors to prioritize personal and family goals,** break down goals into small and achievable steps, identify the skills and resources necessary to reach each

6. Help survivors learn strategies for regulating their behavior and for teaching their children how to regulate their behavior and emotions, such as:
 - Take a pause between feeling and responding.
 - Create a plan for handling problem situations.
 - Forgive yourself for mistakes.
 - Create a 5-point scale to help gauge how upset, stressed, or worried you and/or your child are.
 7. Talk with adult survivors about the characteristics of effective decision making, such as:
 - Taking into account the opinions and advice of trusted people.
 - Having clear priorities and values that help to define the path to success.
 - Considering and being realistic about the potential outcomes of different choices.
- Tell me about a time when you helped your child solve a problem and they felt really good about how they solved it.
 - If you were helping a friend who was navigating [a system], what advice would you give them and why?
 - What do you do for yourself to try to stay healthy physically and emotionally?

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EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS TO ASK SURVIVORS

- What do you love about your family? What are your worries?
- How are you or other people helping your child to deal with any worries, anxieties, or fears about what’s happening with your partner?
- How do you think about your [addiction, depression, or other challenges] and whether/ how they’re connected to the violence or abuse?
- What’s your number one goal for yourself for the next 3 to 6 months? What’s your top goal that will take longer than 6 months?
- How does your child respond to their peers and siblings when conflict occurs, and how do you help them navigate conflict?



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