


**WHO ARE WE PROTECTING AT
SUPERVISED VISITATION
CENTERS?
A CLOSER LOOK**


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History of Visitation Centers Serving Families That Experienced Domestic Violence

- o Began in the 1990s
- o Courts were encouraged to address safety needs of domestic violence victims and their children through use of visitation centers
- o Monitoring approach
- o Generally, domestic violence victims presented as the custodial parent; domestic violence offender as non-custodial parent



History of Visitation Centers Serving Families That Experienced Domestic Violence Continued

- o Over time, more women that experience domestic violence victimization have become non-custodial or visiting parents
- o Many centers have mothers or visiting parents at rates between 40-50%
- o What changes have occurred?




Intersection of Multiple Factors Impacting This Change

- Offending fathers petition for custody of their children at twice the rate of non-offending fathers
 - continue power/control tactics
 - avoid paying child support
 - retaliation against children's mother

- Parental Alienation Syndrome is frequently used against mothers by custody evaluators/attorneys in court



Intersection of Multiple Factors Impacting This Change Continued

- Prevailing belief that a domestic violence offender can be a good father
 - Between 55-70% of domestic violence offending men also perpetrate child abuse

- In many states, misdemeanor domestic violence convictions are not weighted heavily in custody disputes; the vast majority of domestic violence convictions are misdemeanors

- Orders of protection with domestic violence victim mothers as the petitioner are often consent agreements with no finding of domestic violence



Intersection of Multiple Factors Impacting This Change Continued

- Pro-arrest-type policies have become more prevalent and many more women are arrested for domestic violence (criminal history)

- Domestic violence victims lack financial resources for custody disputes, putting them at a significant disadvantage

- Domestic violence victims often continue experiencing victimization by the children's father throughout custody battle – diminishing her capacity to prevail



Common Structure and Practices of Visitation Centers



- 15 minute wait period before and after visit for non-custodial parent designed to increase physical/psychological safety for domestic violence victims and their children
 - presents substantial risk for a domestic violence victim that is the noncustodial/visiting parent
 - presents substantial risk for children
 - offender has opportunity to wait for victim and gather information and/or follow her, intimidate her, and other power/control tactics



Common Structure and Practices of Visitation Centers Continued

- Separate entrances for non-custodial parent and custodial parent and their children are often in place
 - lack of separate entrances for victim and offender increases victim risk
- Documentation of child/parent interaction, non-custodial parent's behavior, etc.
- Fees generally charged of noncustodial/visiting parent
 - domestic violence victim required to pay for service



Common Structure and Practices of Visitation Centers Continued

- Numerous rules intended to promote safety of child such as rules around topics of conversation that is allowed/not allowed; physical contact between non-custodial parent and children; items that can be brought in, etc.
 - rules often unnecessarily restrict domestic violence victim/noncustodial parent even when she poses no threat to her children



Common Structure and Practices of Visitation Centers Continued

- Structure, rules and practices implicitly and explicitly categorize non-custodial parent as requiring monitoring, redirection, rules and the like
- Hierarchy between staff and non-custodial parent
- Structure and practices are designed for non-custodial parents that may pose a threat (i.e. domestic violence offenders)



Framework Needed to Understand Mothers That Have Lost Custody

- Mothers often present as other people present when they perceive a miscarriage of justice: angry, hostile, difficult, resistant (to center practices/rules), distressed, and the like
- Mothers have been traumatized by domestic violence in the past
- Mother's presentation can lead to pathologizing and/or blaming her




Framework Needed to Understand Mothers That Have Lost Custody Continued

- Many visitation staff and others want to believe that the world is just and that correct decisions are made (e.g., in court)
 - How does this impact our view of mothers that have lost custody of their children?
- What else might the structure include?




Cognitive/Emotional Consequences of Mother Losing Custody To Domestic Violence Offender

- Stigma
- Has been traumatized by domestic violence offender
- Perceives batterer as legally abusive and able to win through power/control tactics such as obfuscation, threats




Cognitive/Emotional Consequences of Mother Losing Custody To Domestic Violence Offender Continued

- Feels disempowered, voiceless, and angry. May feel further victimized by the court (she expected to be believed, heard, etc.)
- Feels that the world is not just and loses trust, particularly of professionals
- Increased ongoing anxiety/fear regarding children's physical and psychological safety



Cognitive/Emotional Consequences of Mother Losing Custody To Domestic Violence Offender Continued

- Anxiety that children may believe she chose to leave; misses children
- Loses voice in decision-making regarding children
- Her relationship and her authority with her child has been undermined
- May be experiencing ongoing domestic violence and trauma by children's father



Trauma-Informed Services Needed for Domestic Violence Victim Mothers

- Must understand trauma and the process in the brain that underlines trauma response that includes hypervigilance regarding children, difficulty remembering (like rules), agitation, depression, anger, etc.
- Recognize that domestic violence victim must feel safe at the center
 - physical
 - psychological
 - moral



Trauma-Informed Services Needed for Domestic Violence Victim Mothers Continued

- What is safe for her?
 - Her answer to this question is paramount to ensuring her safety and should guide center staff interaction and supervision of visits
- Recognize that domestic violence victim must feel that children are safe as above
- Reduce hierarchical structure between center and victim



Trauma-Informed Services Needed for Domestic Violence Victim Mothers Continued

- Set time and space for interaction and dialogue with domestic violence victim regarding her safety concerns
- Assess her safety/lethality (Danger Assessment) throughout her utilization of the center



Trauma-Informed Services Needed for Domestic Violence Victim Mothers Continued

- Ensure safety planning and advocacy are in place for her
 - advocacy is a core component of domestic violence victims and their children's safety
 - if center staff cannot provide advocacy, collaborative referrals should be utilized
- Encourage her input regarding her visits



Trauma-Informed Services Needed for Domestic Violence Victim Mothers Continued

- If it is clear that she poses no threat to her children, consider relaxing rules around appropriate conversation with her children
- Consistently engage domestic violence victim with empathy – understanding and validating her concerns, affective state
- Provide education on the effects of domestic violence on both her and her children



Trauma-Informed Services Needed for Domestic Violence Victim Mothers Continued

- Reverse wait period such that there is no wait for domestic violence victims regardless of custodial status as a proactive programmatic measure to increase victim safety
- Documentation considerations cautions:
 - are there safety concerns for the domestic violence victim and/or her children in center records?
 - what are the pros and cons of subjective documentation?



Trauma-Informed Services Are Needed For Children That Have Experienced Domestic Violence In Their Home

- Recognize that the child must feel safe at the center
 - physical
 - psychological
 - moral
- Understand the effects of domestic violence and possible trauma that the child has experienced-child may be experiencing ongoing trauma in the home



Trauma-Informed Services Are Needed For Children That Have Experienced Domestic Violence In Their Home Continued

- Consistently engage the child with empathy and compassion regardless of presenting behavior-child may need referral for counseling
- Consider confusing message child is receiving





Holding Domestic Violence Offending Fathers Accountable

- Regardless of the custodial status of a father that is a domestic violence offender, accountability is paramount
- Domestic violence offenders must always be required to be violence-free with both their partners and children
- Visitation centers must have policies that ensure accountability even when father is custodial parent




Limitations/Difficulty in Implementing Changes at Supervised Visitation Centers

- Resources needed
 - increased individualized staff time with noncustodial mom
 - building changes
 - funding
- Financial responsibility of domestic violence victims – no fees?



Limitations/Difficulty in Implementing Changes at Supervised Visitation Centers Continued

- Agreement from courts and with advocates/providers
- Skill level of staff – are staff able to
 - assess risk?
 - safety plan?
 - dialogue with mom?
 - assist in facilitating positive mother-child relationship?



Limitations/Difficulty in Implementing Changes at Supervised Visitation Centers Continued

- Training needs:
 - complexities of domestic violence
 - unique framework needed for working with domestic violence victims as noncustodial parent
 - trauma-informed services
 - unique needs of children whose mom is both a domestic violence victim and the noncustodial parent

