

# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CHILD ABUSE: TEN LESSONS LEARNED IN RURAL ALASKA

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**Abstract:** Focuses on the impact of domestic violence on child witnesses in Alaska. Connection between domestic violence and child abuse; Recommendations for domestic violence screening in pediatric health care settings; Integration of programs serving domestic violence victims and child protection agencies; Details on Alaska Family Violence Prevention Project.

Each year, millions of children grow up in violent households. The impact of domestic violence on child witnesses can be devastating, and these children are at much greater risk for child abuse.

In Alaska, a retrospective review of 475 families who had been reported for abuse or neglect six or more times in the past three years indicated that 59 percent of these families experienced domestic violence (Demer, 1997). This statistic is likely to be a gross underestimate, however, because the review was conducted prior to legislation in Alaska that now mandates routine screening for domestic violence during child maltreatment investigations.

The application of recent technology to early brain development has improved our understanding of the broad range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects of domestic violence on children (Perry, 1997). Child witnesses are more likely to experience numerous health problems, which has led to recommendations for domestic violence screening in pediatric health care settings. Changes to Alaska's child protection laws in 1998 acknowledged the risk of mental injury and includes children exposed to domestic violence and implemented mandatory reporting for child witnesses.

While many service providers are acutely aware of the connection between domestic violence and child abuse, funding limitations and policies often separate these types of programs into different agencies in which interventions must focus on one form of abuse. Funding and policy development have done little to promote collaboration between programs serving victims of domestic violence and child protection agencies, a move that would lead to integrated service delivery. Unfortunately, the failure to develop a multidisciplinary, coordinated approach to addressing domestic violence and child abuse has led to myopic policies that do not promote the safety of victimized parents and their

children simultaneously. These system deficiencies have helped to widen the gap between domestic violence advocates and child protection workers.

In 1996, the Alaska Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault was awarded funding from the U.S. Department of Justice to conduct a rural initiative on domestic violence and child abuse. The first phase of the grant focused on interagency planning to develop partnerships and policies that would promote an integrated approach. The second phase culminated in a statewide educational initiative to bring different types of service providers together and help rural communities develop a coordinated response to domestic violence and child abuse. The Alaska Family Violence Prevention Project (AFVPP) was selected to lead the training initiative and to coordinate 12 regional, two-day workshops during 1998-99.

Two decisions were made at the onset that became defining features of these workshops. A multidisciplinary steering committee decided that a local planning committee would be established for each regional workshop. This strategy provided the opportunity for local control while creating a cooperative atmosphere for grassroots networking. The planning committees drew on the expertise of local leadership who knew how to design the workshop to best serve their communities and encourage participation. Planning committees reviewed a sample agenda of recommended topics developed by the Steering Committee and then customized the agenda so it was relevant to local needs and concerns.

The second decision was to reverse the usual flow of travel in which rural providers come to an urban area for training. Instead, the workshops were held in rural communities and urban-based service providers who served each respective region traveled to the rural workshop site. This became known as the "Take It to the Village" strategy and created the opportunity for service providers, who frequently have tightly scheduled visits to rural locations during an assignment or crisis, to spend more time in the community. A concerted effort was made to select workshop sites that were culturally and geographically diverse. Several of these locations were remote villages without road access, that presented significant logistical challenges in terms of travel and available services. In the final analysis, the decision to "take it to the village" was an affirmation to rural communities that they count and that regional service providers were willing to spend the time to learn more about local residents' lives and issues.

The grant designated which types of service providers would receive financial assistance to attend regional workshops. Travel and per diem expenses were provided for representatives from the Attorney General's office, civil and criminal prosecutors, child protection and social workers, domestic violence advocates, Indian Child Welfare Act workers, Alaska state troopers, local law enforcement officers, probation officers, and youth counselors. Local planning committees quickly identified glaring omissions such as educators, day care workers, health care providers, substance abuse counselors, mental health professionals, foster parents, clergy, and community elders. As a result, AFVPP stretched its budget, encouraged agencies to sponsor their personnel, and solicited donations to broaden participation. The number of workshops was increased from 12 to 15 to accommodate the growing interest of communities. As word traveled about the workshops, the list of people who wanted to participate expanded to the point where we

reached the maximum capacity at some of the facilities. In some communities where the size of the facility was not a limitation, people signed in as "parent" and "concerned citizen." It is our belief that the most effective impetus for change comes from within the community, and we saw this level of local participation as planting the seed for community action.

The workshops led to enlightening and sometimes painful dialogue among the many different types of service providers who attended. The interactive and multidisciplinary nature of these workshops provided a beginning to a communication process that needs to happen if communities are going to address the big picture of family violence. Listed below are 10 lessons we learned while coordinating these workshops. Some of the lessons seem so simple they hardly warrant mention. Yet, we were often so embroiled in the complexities of family violence and interagency collaboration that it would have been easy to overlook the obvious.

### **Make sure your goals and objectives are honest in acknowledging the past and looking to the future.**

There is a long history of misunderstanding and potentially conflicting goals between domestic violence and child abuse. Domestic violence advocates, child protection workers, and other agency personnel addressing family violence have different philosophical foundations that sometimes appear at odds with one another. Child protection workers have been perceived as focusing on the welfare of the child without adequate consideration of concurrent domestic violence and the safety of the victimized parent. Domestic violence advocates have been accused of emphasizing an adult victim's safety. In reality, child protection workers and domestic violence advocates struggle for a delicate balance between helping victimized parents and protecting vulnerable children. There can be no trade-off because if the mother is not safe, neither are the children. The starting point for these workshops was an honest appraisal and acknowledgment of past mistakes, problems, and conflicting goals. The appraisal provided the foundation for participants to find common ground and make the commitment to work together toward a shared vision of the safety and welfare of parents and their children.

### **Be prepared for conflict.**

Acknowledging conflict meant that many of these workshops started from a point of contention. Witnessing the conflict and dissension as a conference coordinator and trainer was stressful at best and under other circumstances may have been perceived as a problem. We had to remind ourselves of how important it was for each community to work through its own history. These workshops provided the opportunity for participants to "get past the past" by allocating time to clear the air and process painful memories before people can move on and be collaboratively productive.

It is important to help agency representatives and speakers be prepared for potential conflict and emotions that may be directed at them. An assistant attorney general, who did a presentation on recent changes to Alaska's child protection laws and how these changes interfaced with our domestic violence legislation, was surprised by how emotionally charged the discussion became about the law and his agency. Fortunately, he

knew not to take any criticism personally and he let people speak their peace while addressing their issues without appearing defensive or confrontational. We learned that it was important to debrief speakers after the workshops and give them feedback from the workshop evaluations. In the case of this particular workshop, evaluations revealed that what appeared negative in content was considered beneficial by many participants--the opportunity to say what was on their minds and move forward.

### **Be flexible and support a community-initiated approach.**

Do it the way communities want to do it. We conducted a series of interviews in each region to identify issues, concerns, and priorities. The qualitative data for each region was summarized and provided to the local planning committees. Conducting these interviews and sharing the data sent a message to communities that their values and opinions would shape the workshop for their region. Conducting preworkshop needs assessments not only informed us about local issues, they also were a great vehicle for raising community awareness and garnering support.

While the steering committee made recommendations on core topics for the workshop agenda, there was tremendous latitude in how each local planning committee designed its workshop. In the end, each workshop included all the core topics, but the process of how that was done varied greatly.

Other topics included teen violence, substance abuse and family violence, assessment techniques, self-care for service providers, and the relationship between family violence and animal abuse.

The AFVPP connected to planning committee meetings via teleconferencing to understand local perspectives firsthand and offer whatever assistance was needed to customize the workshop for the particular region. One planning committee scheduled its workshop on a school holiday to maximize the number of teachers who could attend. This required cooperation and flexibility on the part of other agencies so their personnel were available on a holiday. Another planning committee decided they could not cover the recommended core topics and topics requested by its community in a two-day workshop. AFVPP worked with the planning committee to obtain the necessary resources and commitments to expand the workshop to three days in their region.

### **Be inclusive.**

One of the greatest challenges of this training initiative was that funding for travel expenses was limited to certain types of service providers. Agencies that did not receive travel reimbursement for their personnel were included on the steering committee to acknowledge the importance of their participation. Some community agencies funded the travel of service providers that would have otherwise been excluded due to funding limitations. While there were financial barriers and turf issues concerning widening the circle of participants, the success of a coordinated community response relied on seeing the potential roles for community members at every level of intervention.

### **Do not be surprised that obvious stakeholders do not join in initially.**

While some people who might seem peripheral to the issues of domestic violence and child abuse may want to be part of the process, there are others who clearly should be at the table but decline. Some organizations told us that while they understood the importance of the training initiative, their limited resources and personnel forced them to remain focused on other priorities. We found their absence was noted by other participants and sometimes led to distorted perceptions about why that organization was not part of the process (for example, not being invited or assuming family violence was not acknowledged as an important issue by that organization). Dealing with a topic that is already steeped in strife, AFVPP did not want to employ any negative strategies that would make a missing entity feel guilty or shamed into participation. By keeping the lines of communication open, AFVPP relayed information before, during, and after the workshops. We received so many requests for workshop proceedings and resources from people who had not attended the workshop that we had to budget for additional printings of the workshop manual.

### **Spend time on role clarification and names and faces.**

Even in the smallest of communities, people often are not clear on who does what and how they do it. A service provider may remember how someone else did the job based on past experience and have the same expectation of a different person in that position. We observed on several occasions that participants did not know about the full spectrum of services that were available at domestic violence shelters, such as children's support groups, assistance with transitional housing, safety planning by telephone for clients who cannot come to the shelter, and other nonresidential services.

Out of necessity, people often wear several hats in smaller communities, leading to confusion as well as a frenetic pace in a sparsely populated service area. While many of the service providers have interacted with one another as part of their job duties, many of the workshop participants had never had the time or opportunity to explore these issues together in a learning environment.

### **Be prepared for raw emotions.**

Talking about domestic violence and child abuse triggers many emotions. Talking about the relationship between domestic violence and child abuse often generates tension. Given the prevalence of domestic violence and child abuse, there will be survivors and perpetrators present at a gathering of any size. If there are millions of domestic violence victims, consider the number of adults who witnessed abuse as children. One of the unexpected outcomes at these workshops was the number of women and men in the audience who spoke up about their childhood experiences of witnessing domestic violence.

Workshops on these topics must consider how the information will impact the audience and have advocates and counseling services available. Each regional workshop began with a discussion of workshop guidelines and on-site resources. The guidelines advised participants to be aware of their emotions and to take care of themselves first. Participants were encouraged to take breaks as needed. The importance of respecting confidentiality, and other people's feelings was emphasized.

### **Link new research and science.**

While much of the agenda focused on overviews of domestic violence and child abuse and the impact of recent legislation, these workshops provided a window of opportunity to discuss cutting-edge research and related topics that can help communities see the big picture of family violence. Weaving data and new scientific information into each presentation helped participants understand the correlation between domestic violence and child abuse and the relevancy of the neurobiology of early brain development to children exposed to domestic violence. These topics helped participants identify the urgent need for a coordinated community response and opened the door to discussions about innovative programs such as dual advocacy for adult victims of domestic violence and their children. Landmark programs like the AWAKE Project at Boston Children's Hospital and the Child Trauma Research Project at San Francisco General Hospital were examined within the context of a coordinated response.

### **Be ready to come back; do not start something you cannot finish.**

This is the acid test of evaluating the future potential of these workshops. One of the most frequently noted comments on the evaluation forms was that the workshop started a process and it was critical that there be follow-up opportunities to bring service providers back together in a collaborative environment. Many participants noted that more time was needed for small group discussions and community, action planning sessions. Having planted the seed, we had to ask ourselves how Alaska could continue to support the process. The Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, our nonprofit state coalition, took the lead and obtained another grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to conduct follow-up workshops at the same locations and add new workshop sites.

### **Build in fun.**

Amidst the pain, grief, and frustration that frequently surfaced during these workshops, there was time for celebration and relaxation. In many cases, these events became occasions to honor cultural diversity and local traditions. Potlucks, potlatches, and traditional songs and dances were some of the evening events that brought people together for a different level of networking and sharing. We solicited numerous donations that were used as door prizes and held raffles to offer moments of relief during the workshops. Since our government agency is not allowed to purchase any food for training activities, local nonprofits and volunteers cooked and solicited donations from restaurants, coffee shops, and grocery stores. Coffee breaks and shared meals did a great deal to bring people together and increase the comfort level. As is often the case, it is the little things that can make a big difference to alleviate stress and nurture the channels of communication.

Alaska is on a journey toward a coordinated community response to domestic violence and child abuse. Some communities have created multidisciplinary teams while others have integrated this issue into existing initiatives on family violence. Most important, communities are talking about this urgent need and looking to agencies and organizations for guidance. The potential for a sustainable, coordinated community, response to

domestic violence and child abuse will rely a great deal on the leadership of policymakers who are willing to stretch beyond agency boundaries and standard practices. I know firsthand what this type of visionary leader can accomplish because I approached such a person with the idea of starting a domestic violence training project at a time when health departments and schools of public health were questioning whether domestic violence was a public health issue. Together, we created a data-driven project, the first of its kind in a maternal and child health department, that has become a best practices model and now provides technical assistance to other states and countries.

### **Recommended Core Topics for Workshop Agenda**

Understanding the Dynamics of Domestic Violence

Overview of Child Abuse

The Relationship Between Domestic Violence and Child Abuse

The Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

Understanding Domestic Violence Legislation in Alaska

Defining Child Abuse under the New Child Protection Legislation

The Indian Child Welfare Act and Tribal Jurisdiction

Cultural Issues

Community Teambuilding and Break-Out Sessions to Develop a Coordinated Community Response

DIAGRAM: Blurring Early Childhood Boundaries

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