

# Children & Youth Advocate Manual

## Section 4: Abuse Effects on Protective Caregiver’s Parenting



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### Introduction & Importance

Perpetrators of abuse may use children and harm the relationship between the child and protective caregiver in order to control their partner and the entire household. The protective caregiver’s parenting is often compromised as safety concerns force them to prioritize the demands of the abuser. Knowledge of these dynamics will help advocates better understand the families they serve. It is also very important to remember that the abuser may be someone that the child loves. Make sure that you are not giving your opinion of the abuser to the child. Remember to refer to the abuser by their name or by the relation to the child.

### Effects on Caregiver's Parenting

Power and control tactics used by abusers may cause the following experiences for caregivers:

*The protective caregiver believes they are an inadequate caregiver.*

- Protective caregiver portrayed as unfit by the abuser because of children's deficits.
- Fears having children taken away from them.
- Frustrated in attempts to create structure or be consistent.
- Children's problems reflect their belief that they are a bad caregiver.

*The protective caregiver may lose the respect of some or all their children.*

- Some children see the caregiver as the target of abuse.
- Children disregard the caregiver's parental authority - don't follow the protective caregiver's rules.
- Children may grow to devalue or be ashamed of caregiver.

*The protective caregiver may believe the abuser's excuses for their abusive behavior.*

- Caregiver believes abuse is their fault and tries to modify their own behavior.
- Feels guilty about the abuse effects on children.
- Believes abuse is caused by alcohol or stress.
- Believes abuse is culturally or religiously appropriate.
- Believes men and boys should have more privileges and power in the family.

*The protective caregiver may change their parenting style in response to the abuser.*

- Too permissive or authoritarian.
- Permissive, in response to authoritarian parenting of abuser.
- Authoritarian, to try and keep children from annoying abuser.
- Makes age-inappropriate or unreasonable demands on children to calm abuser.
- Afraid to use discipline because the children have been through so much.
- Left to do all the demanding parts of parenting while abuser engages in fun parts.

*The protective caregiver's capacity to manage and cope from the abuse is prevented or overwhelmed.*

- Compromised caregiver's capacity to care for children and provide for their daily needs.
- Depression, anxiety, poor sleeping, etc. may compromise ability to provide for their daily needs.
- Denied right to use of birth control may result in many children born close together.
- Denied financial support may prevent from meeting children's basic needs for food etc.
- Reactive rather than proactive parenting, i.e., responding to crises rather than preventing problems.

*The protective caregiver may use survival strategies with negative effects.*

- May use alcohol or use other substances.
- May maltreat children physically or verbally.
- May neglect children by leaving them with inadequate caretakers to get a break.
- May avoid being at home or work double shifts.

*The bond between the child and protective caregiver may be compromised.*

- Children may be angry at caregiver for failing to protect them or evict abuser.
- Caregiver prevented by abuser from comforting distressed child.
- A child assumes parental role for caregiver.
- Children anticipating their own OR their caregiver's deportation or leaving may make the child anxious or may cause emotional disengagement to protect themselves from impending loss.

*The protective caregiver may become trapped in competition for children's loyalties.*

- Abuser may force children into choosing sides.
- Abuser may prevent communication between children and protective caregiver.
- Abuser shapes child's view of abuser as good, while portraying caregiver as bad.
- Abuser may be seen as the fun caregiver who has no rules.
- After separation, abuser may entice children to support the abuser's bid for custody with promises of a great life at their house.
- Abuser may have more money to offer more material goods and a nicer home.

### Suggested Child-Related Needs

Start by reviewing and filling in the [Potential Needs Chart](#) with the information of the agency and the contacts of specific people for each box. Then when you are working with the family and they identify a need you will have information ready and available for them.

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*This chart is purposefully not completed and may need to be adapted based on the people you are working with.*

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The Potential Needs Chart can also be a way to do a warm referral if the person you are working with is uncomfortable calling the service provider on the phone or going to that agency. This resource can also help advocates start to look for and know which resources are available within their communities. (Refer to the [New Advocate Manual: Know Your Community](#). You will need a login for this information and scroll down the page for MEMBER-ONLY Resources)

### Positive Messages for Caregivers

Parenting is all too often compromised within abusive relationships. These effects on parenting result in a low capacity to provide care the way the protective caregiver sees fit, often leading to judgment and criticism from the outside world. As advocates it is our job to maintain the respect of the protective caregiver's wishes. Below are positive parenting messages to remind caregivers of their capacity to provide care for their children.

*There are no perfect caregivers.*

- Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses as a caregiver. Sometimes we need a break.

*Caregivers can change the lives of their children for the better.*

- Although there may be times where everything seems hopeless, I am here for you and your family as a resource and as support.

*Single caregivers can be good caregivers too.*

- Children growing up in single caregiver households grow up to be healthy adults when they have love, support, and structure in their lives.

*Protective Caregivers can be good role models for their children.*

- Your children look to you for how to act in their environment. Showing them that you can change different behaviors can give them hope that they can, too.

*Learning effective parenting ways is a life-long process.*

- As your child grows through different developmental stages you will also have to grow your parenting in this ever-changing world.

*There are people to help if you need it.*

- Asking for help can be hard, but we will support you in your decisions to help your family as capably as we can.

*You can model and teach non-violent behaviors.*

- The best way to challenge the cycle of abuse is to continue to teach these methods of non-violent behavior and communication.

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**REMEMBER:** Try to stay out of a this is **"my framework"** mentality meaning I'll accept you based on my own value system. There is no ONE right way to provide care to a child. Advocates are here to provide support, not judgment.

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Five for Families has identified why strength matters for families in five areas:

1. Helping kids understand feelings
2. Parenting as children grow
3. Connecting with others
4. Building inner strength
5. Knowing how to find help

### Working with Protective Caregivers in Crisis

Working with protective caregivers and their families can be challenging given the various dynamics and temperaments within each family. Caregivers may have biases regarding their children, be defensive about their style of caregiving, and have opportunities to be better caregivers. We all know how it feels to be misunderstood, to have difficulty admitting our shortcomings, to have engaged in behaviors that we knew we should have changed, and to have been a difficult person at some time. As advocates, it is crucial to keep the following in mind. (Refer to the [New Advocate Manual Crisis Counseling and Safety Planning](#). You will need a login to get this information)

In the [Enhancing the Protective Caregiver-Child Bond](#) document you will find possible strategies for enhancing the family bond paired with their intended purpose or outcome. It is most important to be mindful of how you deliver your message when talking with caregivers. Spend time building a connection and relationship with the family instead of focusing on getting through the programmatic work. Families know when advocates are trying to check a box off their to do list rather than trying to get to know them. Understand that even when we are advocating our best, sometimes it just does not work for the family.

### Protective Caregivers

- Are trauma survivors.
- Love their children.
- Can be stressed and overburdened by too many responsibilities and too few resources.
- Are behaving in ways that helped them survive their experiences.
- May be forced to defer their children's needs out of necessity.
- Have had their sense of competence and self-worth eroded by their abusers.
- Have had their caregiving compromised by the abuser.
- Have had their relationship with their children damaged by the abuser.
- May be resistant or defensive to services because of their experiences.
- May have coped with domestic violence by avoiding recognition of the impact of the abuse on their children.
- May be afraid or uncomfortable talking to their children about the abuse.
- May feel guilty about exposing their children to domestic violence.
- May feel conflicted about the abuser's role in their children's lives.
- May have experienced poor caregiving or abuse themselves as a child.
- Will not always give care the way they do when they are in crisis.
- Need time to cope with their experiences and to learn and relearn techniques.

### What Protective Caregivers May Need

1. Restoration of the respect for their caregiving that the batterer has denied
2. Recognition of their efforts to support and protect their children.
3. Opportunities to heal from their own trauma.
4. Opportunities to feel good about their relationship with their children.
5. Support for challenging the values that their children have learned from the abuser.

### How Advocates Can Connect with and Support Protective Caregivers

- Ask the protective caregiver to help you understand their family dynamics
- Ask the protective caregiver what resources they may need to support their children.
- Find out about their previous experiences with professionals regarding their children by asking about what worked, what didn't, and what they'd like you to do differently.
- Ask questions about their style of parenting or caregiving.
- Find at least one thing about the protective caregiver that you respect and use that to build your relationship with them.
- Find out what's important to them as a caregiver.
- Connect with the protective caregiver around their own concerns about their children.
- Share information about effects of domestic violence that may help them feel less guilty and alone as a caregiver.
- Identify and reinforce their strengths and successes as a caregiver.
- Support their authority as a caregiver.
- Help protective caregivers talk with their children about their experiences and feelings.
  - Conversations should be age-appropriate with no negative talk about the other caregiver.
- Be a role model for positive interactions with children by modeling active & reflective listening and practice calm and compassionate problem solving.
- Talk with protective caregivers and their children together from the very beginning.
- Offer alternative parenting/caregiving techniques.
- Build safety planning for the whole family into your first conversations with them.
- Give choices, praise success and failures.
- Approach each protective caregiver with an open mind and heart and help them do the same with their children.

### [Self-care and Mindfulness Techniques for Protective Caregivers](#)

Taking care of children can be stressful and emotionally draining for protective caregivers. When protective caregivers do not take care of themselves, it can have physical and emotional effects on their bodies, which can have effects on the children and youth. It can be helpful for advocates to provide protective caregivers with tips on how to be mindful and aware of self-care techniques.

The first step for advocates may be to define what good self-care looks like, and how protective caregivers can bring that into their daily lives. One way to do this is to have protective caregivers think about how much they do for their children each day and compare that to how much they do for themselves every day. It can be very easy for parents to dismiss their own basic needs in favor of spending time on their children, so a good place to start on self-care with protective caregivers could be setting aside time each day to choose something they enjoy doing.

Once a protective caregiver is ready to start being more mindful about their self-care, it may be important for advocates to remind them that it is okay to give themselves permission to need something and/or ask for help in order to make time for their self-care. It could also be helpful for the advocate to give the protective caregiver ideas on some self-care techniques such as eating healthy meals, getting exercise or enough sleep, time away from electronics, spending time with family and expressing their emotions.

The National Traumatic Child Stress Network and Futures Without Violence have created a [Parent's Self-Care and Self-Reflection](#) fact sheet that can be filled out and completed with the protective caregiver or on their own.

The North American Council on Adoptable Children have a post about [Self-Care: Barriers and Basics for Foster/Adoptive Parents](#). included in the post is a section on the *Road to Good Self-Care*, which may offer options for the protective caregiver's own self-care.

Stop Child Abuse Now (SCAN) of Northern Virginia has a section on their website specifically on [Self Care for Parents](#). This resource goes through what self-care is, where to start, how self-care will help their children, and offers more resources.

### Lessons for Advocates

There are many good ways to care for children. How protective caregivers love their children differently does not mean they love them less. Remember, there is no one right way to be a caregiver.

#### Understand that

- Protective caregivers are the best experts on their own families.
- We cannot expect more of protective caregivers than they are capable of at the present time.
- We cannot help a protective caregiver if we cannot find a way to respect them.
- If you want a protective caregiver to nurture their children, look for ways to nurture the protective caregiver.
- Positive change can mean different things for each family.
- There are cultural differences in parenting and find the positives within their parenting style.
- Protective caregivers have many different educational backgrounds.

#### Remember

- Protective caregivers come to domestic violence and sexual assault programs for safety and support regarding battering, not to get caregiving advice.
- Feeling unable to change is not the same as not caring.
- When a protective caregiver is in crisis, it can be difficult to be the best caregiver they can be.
- Protective caregivers may have good reasons for doing what they do, reasons that we may not be able to understand.
- Things change, especially for families in crisis. The change you want to see now may happen over time. Plant the seeds and be patient.
- Avoid creating toxic interactions and oversharing with other staff.

### Resources

[A Parent's Self-Care and Self-Reflection](#) is tip sheet number 10 in the National Child Traumatic Stress Network's tip sheet series. This one focusing on the importance of the caregiver taking care of themselves.

[Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board](#) mobilizes research and practices to prevent child abuse and neglect in Wisconsin and uses the [Strengthening Families™ Protective Factors Framework](#) to guide its own work and the efforts it supports. The Protective Factors Framework helps to identify and build upon the strengths, assets, and needs of families to simultaneously enhance the well-being of children while reducing the risk of child maltreatment. It is an approach and not a program and is designed to be incorporated into the everyday actions of those who work with families.

[Don't Forget the Families: The Missing Piece in America's Effort to Help All Children Succeed](#) is a research report that outlines the importance of family relationships in developing resilience.

[Five for Families](#) is a statewide public awareness campaign developed as a universal prevention strategy. The primary goal of the campaign is to increase knowledge of the Protective Factors Framework, an evidence-informed, strengths-based approach to child maltreatment prevention and family well-being promotion created by the Center for the Study of Social Policy.

[Helping Children Thrive: Supporting Woman Abuse Survivors as Mothers](#) (pg. 26-29) was written for service providers assisting protective caregivers who have survived abuse. Material addresses the needs of abused protective caregivers, how abusers parent, how abusers affect family dynamics, effects of power and control tactics on protective caregivers, impact of abuse on children of different ages, guidance on parenting children exposed to violence, and strategies used by young people to cope with violence in their homes.

[Helping My Child: A Guide to Supporting Children Exposed to Domestic Violence](#) (pg. 12-14) is a guide for protective caregivers who are targets of violence in a relationship. The goal of this resource is to support the protective caregiver so that they can support their children. Although there are some references to teens, the guide is directed to children 12 years and younger.

[The Needs of Children in Domestic Violence Shelters](#) (pg. 25) is a toolkit to assist Domestic Violence agencies and other service providers to identify and respond to children exposed to domestic abuse.

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*Please notify the LGBTQ & Youth Program Director, [Cody Warner](#), if ANY links are no longer working.*

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