Children & Youth Advocate Manual
Section 4: Abuse Effects on Protective Caregiver's Parenting

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Introduction & Importance

The protective caregiver's parenting is often compromised as safety concerns force them to prioritize the demands of the abuser. Perpetrators of abuse may use tactics to control the children and harm the child-protective caregiver relationship. Knowledge of these dynamics will help advocates better understand the families they serve. It is essential to remember that the abuser may be someone that the child loves and cares about. 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.

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Effects of Abuse on the Protective Caregiver's Parenting

Those who use power and control tactics may cause the following experiences for protective caregivers:

The protective caregiver believes they are inadequate.

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

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

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

The protective caregiver may change their parenting style in response to the abusive behaviors.

- Protective caregiver tries to modify their own behavior to minimize and mitigate abuse.
- Protective caregivers feel guilty about the abuse effects on their children.
- Protective caregivers believe the abuse is caused by alcohol, stress, or another outside factor/force.
- Protective caregivers believe the abuse is culturally or religiously appropriate.
- Protective caregivers believe 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.

- Protective caregivers may become...
    - Authoritarian, seen as strict to try to keep children's behaviors from annoying the abuser.
    - Permissive, seen as push over in response to the authoritarian parenting of the abuser.
- The protective caregiver may make age-inappropriate or unreasonable demands on children to calm the abuser.
- Protective caregivers may be afraid to use discipline because the children have been through so much.
- Protective caregivers were made or left to do all the demanding parts of parenting.

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

- Protective caregivers capacity to care for children and provide for their daily needs is compromised.
- Protective caregivers increased depression, anxiety, poor sleep, etc. may be additional barriers to providing their daily needs.
- Protective caregivers denied the right to use birth control may result in many children being born close together.
- Protective caregivers denied financial support may prevent a protective caregiver from meeting children's basic needs for food, etc.
- Protective caregivers respond to crises rather than preventing problems in the future.

The protective caregiver continue to use survival strategies that may cause negative effects.The bond between the child and protective caregiver may be compromised.

- Children may be angry at the protective caregiver for failing to protect them or leave the abuser.
- Protective caregivers were prevented from comforting the distressed child.
- Children assume the parental role for the protective caregiver.
- Children anticipate 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.

- May use alcohol or other substances.
- May continue to be over-authoritarian and maltreat children physically or verbally.
- May continue to be over-permissive and neglect children.
- May avoid being at home or shelter.

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.

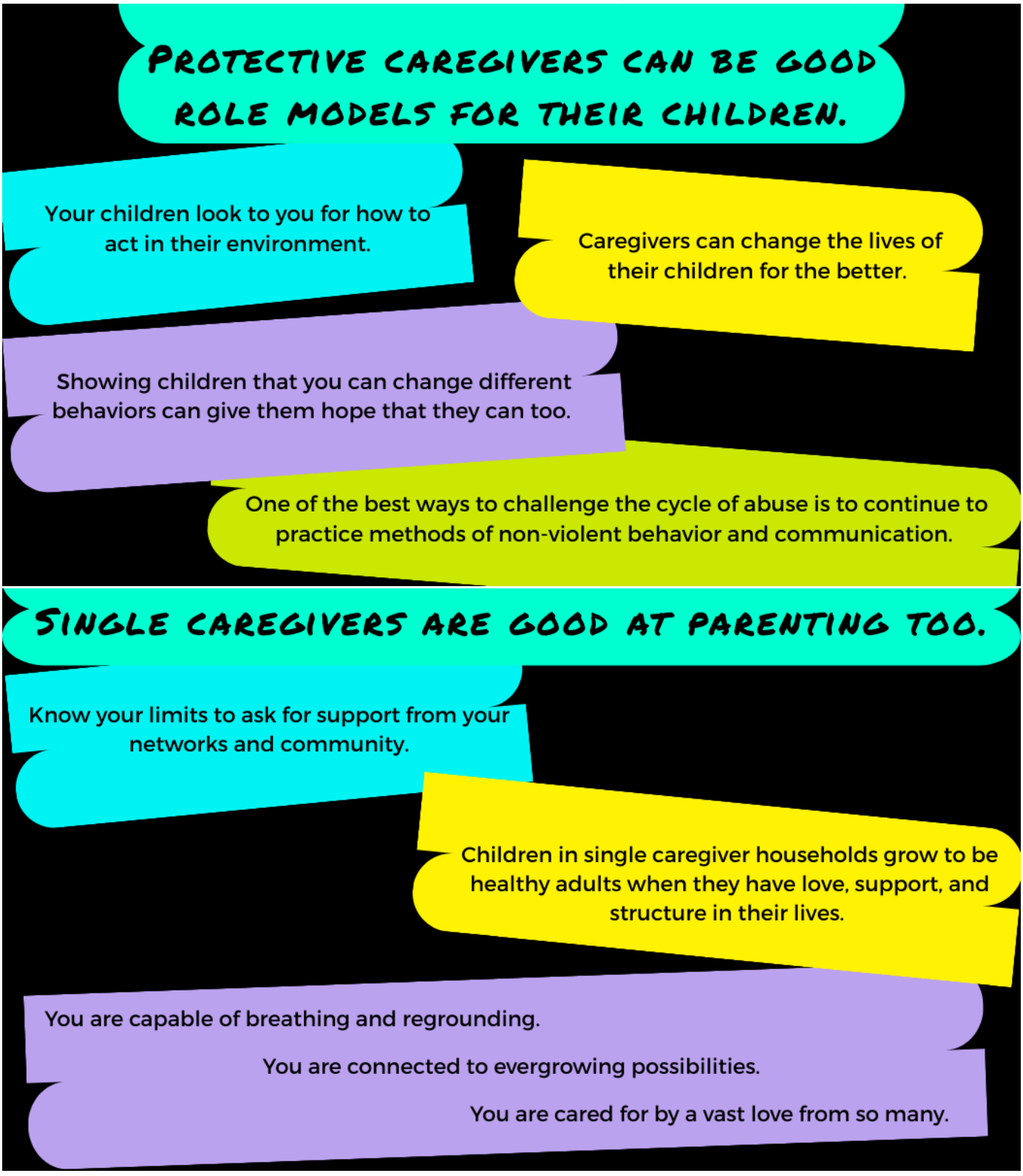
This chart is purposefully not completed and may need to be adapted based on the people you are working with.

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 respect for 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 in parenting.
You are never alone on your journey to heal.
Sometimes we need to give ourselves actual grace and a break.
THERE ARE WAYS TO ACCESS SUPPORTS IF YOU NEED IT.
Asking for help can be hard, but we will support you in your decisions to help your family as capable as we can.
We are here for you and your family as a resource and support, especially in times when everything seems hopeless.


PROTECTIVE CAREGIVERS CAN BE GOOD ROLE MODELS FOR THEIR CHILDREN.
Your children look to you for how to act in their environment.
Caregivers can change the lives of their children for the better.
Showing children that you can change different behaviors can give them hope that they can too.
One of the best ways to challenge the cycle of abuse is to continue to practice methods of non-violent behavior and communication.
SINGLE CAREGIVERS ARE GOOD AT PARENTING TOO.
Know your limits to ask for support from your networks and community.
Children in single caregiver households grow to be healthy adults when they have love, support, and structure in their lives.
You are capable of breathing and regrounding.
You are connected to evergrowing possibilities.
You are cared for by a vast love from so many.

REMEMBER: *Try to stay out of a* ***"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.*

Five for Families has identified why strength matters for families in five areas. Click on the previous link to learn more!

1. Feelings Matter | Helping kids understand feelings
2. Thoughtful Parenting | Parenting as children grow
3. Strong Connections | Connecting with others
4. Inner Strength |Building inner strength
5. Practical Help |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 | 3-Crisis Counseling & Safety Planning. *You will need a login to get this information.*

Remembering Protective Caregivers Humanity

- 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 past experiences within systems.
- May have coped with domestic violence by avoiding recognition of the impact of 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 parenting techniques.

What Protective Caregivers May Need

1. Restoration of the respect for their caregiving that the abuser 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.

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 with the family's current needs.

How Advocates Can Connect with and Support Protective Caregivers

- Help identify local resources they may need to support their children.
    - Talk with protective caregivers and their children together from the very beginning.
    - Build safety planning for the whole family into your first conversations with them.
    - 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 out of curiosity about their style of parenting or caregiving.
    - Find out what's important to them as a caregiver.
    - Identify and reinforce their strengths and successes as a caregiver.
    - Ask the protective caregiver to help you understand their family dynamics.
    - Connect with the protective caregiver around their own concerns about their children.
- Approach each protective caregiver with an open mind and heart to support them in doing the same with their children.
    - Find at least one thing about the protective caregiver that you respect and use that to build your relationship with them.
    - Support their authority as a caregiver.
    - Offer ways to support protective caregivers to 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 practicing calm and compassionate problem solving.
    - Offer alternative parenting/caregiving techniques.
    - Give choices, praise successes, and learn from failures.
    - Share information about the effects of domestic violence that may help them feel less guilty and alone as a caregiver.

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 their children. 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 caregivers 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 some intentional time to choose something they enjoy doing.

Once a protective caregiver is ready to start being more mindful about their well-being, 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 learning something fun 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.

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; 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 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.

Please notify the LGBTQ & Youth Program Director, Cody Warner, if ANY links are no longer working.