

intentional relationships

“ ...there was a growing realization that one of the most effective ways to keep adult and child victims safe was to build respectful and fair relationships with each person coming to the center. ”



Intentional Relationships

Exploring and establishing intentional, purposeful relationships in many settings became a hallmark of the Demonstration Initiative: relationships with children, mothers, and fathers; with victims of battering and batterers; with courts, advocates, and consulting committees. The partners recognized that visitation centers are thrown or pulled into many accidental or institutional relationships and they had the opportunity to examine how this could work in more deliberate ways. The Supervised Visitation Program's expectation of local system collaboration and the emerging principle of equal regard for adult victims and children also raised an obligation to ask questions about the nature of the relationships between a visitation program and the individuals and agencies it interacted with.

Hearing directly from women, children, and men using supervised visitation and safe exchange was critical to shifts in thinking and practice across the Demonstration Initiative. This happened via focus groups conducted as part of the Safety Audits, discussion panels at training institutes, “checking in” with parents as they used visitation services in the demonstration site centers, and information gleaned from the Demonstration Initiative local and national evaluations.


centers & families

Obviously, some kind of relationship is involved as soon as a connection is made between a person and a center. These are the institution-driven relationships established by the center's role and the person's obligation to meet the conditions of the order or referral. These are not relationships that start by asking what a person needs from the center in order to be safe and protected or to interact with a child in ways that are healing and non-coercive.

The demonstration sites stepped back and asked what the relationships between a center and those using its services could look like, instead of assuming a particular relationship between “monitors” and “custodial parents.” How might those relationships look if the center's role shifted to one of paying equal regard to adult victims and children and accounting for battering? As one center director put it, “building relationships with people was the best security measure we've ever taken.”

As the demonstration sites began to examine what those relationships looked like, and could look like, there was a growing realization that one of the most effective ways to keep adult and child victims safe was to build respectful and fair relationships with each person coming to the center. For many adult and child victims of battering, the center could be one setting where they need not fear judgment or repercussions for having been victimized. For many batterers, respectful treatment can go a long way toward diminishing their hostility and resentment and helping them focus on making the most of their time with their children.

Holding this goal does not mean pretending that it is necessarily a smooth process. The demonstration site centers are the first to acknowledge that building relationships in the context of domestic violence is challenging. A center often faces competing needs and expectations from families, the courts, probation, advocates, and others. It is in many ways much easier to take a generic approach that says, in effect, “We're not interested in the particulars of your life or why you're here or how you get here. Show up on Tuesday at 6:00 p.m. for one hour. We'll sit and watch you and your children and make sure nothing ‘inappropriate’ happens. At the end of one hour you wait fifteen minutes and then you can leave. You'll repeat the routine again next week.” This kind of relationship is simple; the center does not have to pay much if any attention to the life experiences of people or the following sorts of realities in their lives.



An adult victim might arrive at supervised visitation exhausted by the work of trying to stay safe and trying to escape. She might feel that the visitation order itself shows the batterer's power in getting courts and other systems to act on his behalf. She will not necessarily trust that her experience at the center will be any different. She might be frightened, angry, and suspicious of the center. She might come across as “crazy,” particularly if she is a visiting parent who has found the batterer's threat come true: “if you leave me, I'll take the kids.” Just getting to the center at a certain day and time might require negotiating work schedules, bus schedules and children's schedules, or depend on her car staying in good repair. Her children might not want to be anywhere near their father, or they may be eager to see him and blame her for their separation from him. They may be annoyed that their routines with friends, sports, and after-school activities are interrupted by visitation. They may be afraid for their mother or angry at her or both. They may have many conflicting feelings about what has happened in their lives and what this new routine known as visitation or exchange will demand of them.

A batterer might arrive at supervised visitation outwardly hostile or outwardly calm. He might be resentful and angry about having to spend time with his children under the confines of the center. He might be good-humored, friendly, and pleasant to talk with. He might have successfully shifted custody to himself and come through the door as a custodial parent. He might have begun to examine the harm he has caused or resist all opportunities for self-reflection and change. He may welcome the time he spends with his children, however short, and attempt to make their time together as meaningful as possible, or insistently complain that it is too short. He may have started to accept the separation and be less focused on his former partner; or, be even more obsessed and jealous than he has ever been.

Via ongoing examination and critique of their own practices, the demonstration sites concluded that visitation centers can build relationships that account for the complex impact of battering and people's lived experiences with oppression, but the effort must be proactive and well prepared. It cannot be haphazard, and there are many impediments, including professional roles and training, the ways in which forms and other required documentation shape interactions, and fear of batterers.

Assumptions and Forms Get in the Way

Helping professions such as social work, child welfare, or increasingly advocacy in a domestic violence agency, are structured to reinforce certain experiences, education, and expertise. This professional standing positions staff members as more knowledgeable and therefore more powerful in relation to those who need help. This “professionalizing” feature of institutions is very compelling. It makes it easy for frameworks and assumptions related to that training to get in the way of building meaningful relationships: *custodial parent, noncustodial parent, appropriate parenting, classic battered woman, high-conflict relationship, cycle of violence, anger management problem*. It makes it easy to see people in terms of a category, and to respond according to assumptions and expectations about that category. It makes it difficult to remain humane, open, flexible, and responsive to what families need and want from supervised visitation and safe exchange.

The Demonstration Initiative centers found that they used a variety of forms in their work of providing services to families, such as those related to conducting intakes with parents, obtaining consent for release of information, observing visits, explaining rules, and authorizing services. At the beginning of their work together the forms looked very much the same across the centers. In many cases, they had used a sample provided by another agency elsewhere in the country or the community, which in turn reflected prevailing practices of supervised visitation and its emphasis on child welfare, parental access to children, and a neutral stance in the relationship between the parents. Yet there is no such thing as a “neutral” form. Forms tell practitioners what to do as workers, whether as visitation center staff or bank tellers. Forms are very good at doing what they do best: namely, to **direct** workers to pay attention to certain things and ignore the rest; to take or avoid certain actions; and to determine whether someone will be accepted as an official “case,” regardless of their unique and particular needs. When interaction with someone is directed by a form, filling out the form will most likely prevail, in spite of good intentions to have a two-way conversation that pays attention to the needs of the person and to establish a helpful relationship.

Forms are framed by theories, language, and categories, although these assumptions are largely invisible, particularly to workers in their own field. Forms reflect the ideology and language carried by a discipline such as social work, law, or psychology. They reflect the terms through which practitioners speak to one another, such as best interests of the child or appropriate parenting or parentified child or the

custodial. Forms construct policies and processes and frame something as acceptable for official action. Forms help professionals filter someone's real, complex experience into categories that oversimplify that experience and distort their needs.

Questioning and examining the ways in which the standard intake process and form shaped the relationships between a center and those using its services led the demonstration sites to suggest new approaches to how each family member is welcomed and introduced to supervised visitation and safe exchange, as discussed later in this paper. This new approach – orientation – seeks to build a relationship with each family member using the center, build a foundation for safety, and recognize and meet families' unique needs.¹³

Fear Gets in the Way

In candid discussions across the demonstration sites and other grantees, workers readily acknowledged the challenges, frustrations, and fears in working with batterers. They spoke of fear as a significant obstacle to building relationships that balance engagement with safety, that avoid a punitive or excessively policed environment while acknowledging the very real dangers that battered women and their children face. “How do you connect at a human level when you know what a batterer has done to a woman and her kids?” was how one visitation worker described the dilemma. They spoke of fear of colluding with batterers and sometimes of fear for themselves and the center. They spoke of fear of making dangerous decisions, of doing harm, and making things worse for victims of battering and their children.

The demonstration sites recognized that this fear could too readily push aside aspects of basic courtesy and respect. One center director described the impact of this fear, and the changes they began to make in this way:

“There was no message that we were glad to see the fathers, glad that they were at our center; there was little acknowledgement of them as people. We started there, with welcoming, shaking hands, having conversations, making time, and checking in about their whole lives. ‘Do you have food, a place to sleep, work?’ We started there and that allowed us to build a more authentic interaction and conversations about why a father was there, why something happened in a visit, and calling them on their behavior.”

13. The work of the Demonstration Initiative contributed greatly to developing this new approach, as summarized in two products developed by Praxis International: 1) a think piece written by Jane Sadusky, *New Perspectives on Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange: Orientation* (2008), and 2) *Building the Practice of Orientation: A Trainer's Guide*, (2008), a training curriculum for supervised visitation centers. Both products are available from Praxis International, www.praxisinternational.org.

Dialogue with batterers was sometimes restricted by staff discomfort in working with, talking, and “being alone” with the person. Most center staff had received little if any training or mentored practice related to working with batterers. There was often a misperception that batterers will attack staff at any moment and the only way to control this situation was to ensure that all of the rules were followed under all circumstances. Under these conditions, respectful conversation can get lost and every question seen as a challenge, when some questions are genuinely efforts to clarify or understand some aspect of visitation. At the same time, as every center acknowledged, the reality and tricky ground is that batterers are indeed often actively trying to intimidate the center and draw it into colluding with the abuse.

Being vigilant regarding the safety of a victim and her children while also establishing and maintaining a respectful relationship with a batterer that acknowledges him as a person is a skill that has to be acquired in order to provide the safest practice. Those who provide batterer intervention services emphasize that changing violent, coercive, and controlling behavior requires taking responsibility and accounting for that behavior and the harm it has caused. Supervised visitation centers do not have the same role as a batterer intervention program, however. Working with batterers in the context of visiting their children is a new area of development with much that remains to be learned. It is particularly challenging when a batterer who has evaded wider community accountability is using the center as the custodial parent.

The Demonstration Initiative came to recognize that visitation centers could not interact effectively with batterers without learning how to do so within the setting of visitation and exchange. This did not mean turning staff into facilitators for a batterer intervention group, but developing the skill to see and respond with respectful, effective boundaries. Conversation can be as protective as pulling out the rules and canceling a visit. It can lessen hostility, divert a batterer’s attention from his children’s mother, and open a window to change.

Ideally, visitation centers should be able to look to batterer intervention programs to help develop the necessary skills. The experience across the demonstration sites, however, was that it was a difficult connection to establish. It was often poorly developed in the wider community response and existing batterer intervention programs did not recognize supervised visitation and safe exchange as aspects of long-term safety planning. One demonstration site interviewed batterer intervention staff and discovered that no one could recall ever having regular discussions with men about visitation with their children, or recall having men in their groups who were using a visitation center. Another site was more encouraging about the experience of bringing representation from the abuser program into its local collaboration and the impact of that participation in changing how the program addressed issues related to supervised visitation and the impact of battering on children and their fathers and mothers.



Strategies... working with batterers


- ✓ Prepare staff to understand and recognize battering beliefs and behaviors, acknowledge their fears, and *practice* talking and interacting with batterers
- ✓ Send staff to the training that domestic violence program staff and volunteers complete
- ✓ Invite the batterer intervention program to conduct an in-service training series on the tactics of battering
- ✓ Make the center a welcome place to go each week (e.g., “we want it to be a welcome place to be with their children, distinct from other aspects of a court order, such as an urinalysis, BIP, and drug treatment”)
- ✓ Be clear and up-front about the center and its purpose (e.g., “We acknowledge that everyone is there because of a domestic violence allegation or finding and provide a sample of the observation forms that we use and an explanation of how we use them”)
- ✓ Never lumping “batterers” together under a single category, but determining individual circumstances and needs around danger and safety
- ✓ Ensure that voices of adult victims and children inform the approach and decisions when working with every father coming to the visitation center
- ✓ Begin relationships with clear expectations and boundaries



Strategies...

working with batterers, continued...

- ✓ Help prepare men for services; i.e., talking about how it will feel to come to the center, how their children might greet them, what will happen when they are there, activities to do with their children, questions their children might have and how to answer them
- ✓ Develop a strong and consistent community response to battering and acknowledge and agree that it may not be safe for all batterers to use a visitation center or to have access to their children
- ✓ Provide opportunities for change and healing, but make certain that the safety of victims and children is the first priority
- ✓ Explore staff attitudes and beliefs about working with men who have used violence and provide support and training to address it in an on-going way



All of the demonstration sites conducted focus groups with mothers and fathers using the participating centers. In their discussions with mothers, they were surprised to learn that many victims of battering did not necessarily see the center as a resource for them. They saw visitation centers as primarily a point of access between a father and his children, not as a place that paid attention to their safety. Few battered women sought out the visitation center as part of an intentional safety planning process. A woman might not know the center existed until a court order directed her to the doorstep. Once inside, she had relatively little contact with staff and few conversations; she brought the children, picked them up, and had fifteen minutes to leave, knowing that center staff spent many hours with her children's father. "We started off assuming that women would tell us what we needed to know about their safety," observed one director, "then realized that it takes time for them to be comfortable with us, or they thought we were part of the court and didn't know that we're independent and here to protect them." Some women resented that the abusers still had access to the children, in spite of the abuse they and their children had lived with, and often under personal hardship or inconvenience. A victim who was essentially the sole caregiver during the relationship was often particularly resentful that despite his lack of previous involvement, the center would now assist him in having a kind of artificial parenting.



Strategies...

shaping safety-oriented relationships with adult victims of battering

14. One example is a pamphlet written by Jill Davies, *Supervised Visitation Programs: Information for Mothers Who Have Experienced Abuse*, Family Violence Prevention Fund (2007). The pamphlet is available at www.endabuse.org.

- ✓ Fit visitation services to individual circumstances and account for and revise according to changing safety needs
- ✓ Ask women, for example:
 - “Here’s what the center can do. How does that work for you?”
 - “What do you need for you and your children to feel safe here?”
 - “What’s changed since you filed the divorce papers?”
 - “What do we need to do differently for your safety now that you’ve moved out of the shelter?”
- ✓ Develop or provide a guide for battered women about what to know about supervised visitation and exchange and how to request or object to it¹⁴
- ✓ Provide a check-in time with each parent at the end of a visit or at another time
 - E.g., Have a brief phone call the next day with a mother who had to get young, tired children into car seats – or get everyone home via bus – at the end of a day of work and school or day care, capped by visitation
- ✓ Conduct periodic check-in phone calls with adult victims
- ✓ Link battered women with community-based advocates
- ✓ Encourage victims of battering to think about and communicate concerns about transitions to less supervised access to their advocates or attorneys
- ✓ Support safety planning that accounts for culture and identity (including the possibility that cultural beliefs, practices, and expectations might be used as tactics of abuse)

centers & collaborating partners

The Supervised Visitation Program funding in many ways forced the issue of collaboration between visitation centers, courts, and domestic violence advocacy agencies. Each of the demonstration sites was required to establish specific working relationships with the courts and domestic violence advocacy agencies in their communities.

For almost every center these were new relationships. There had been little connection or direct communication between centers, courts, and advocates, particularly around the substantive questions of their respective roles and purposes in the context of safety for adult and child victims of battering. Building these relationships was among the most challenging of the tasks set before the demonstration sites. Part of it occurred across the national work of the demonstration sites and the larger Supervised Visitation Program, via audio-conference sessions and think tanks that brought together various combinations of visitation center staff, community-based advocates, and judicial officers and other court personnel. Part of it occurred at a very local level within each demonstration site.

Advocates

One center director was blunt in describing the challenge of bringing advocates into the Demonstration Initiative: “The Safe Havens centers seemed to come out of nowhere and the advocates’ reaction was ‘Who do you think you are?’ We’ve been doing all of this work in advocacy and suddenly you appear, and you get money as well.” The governmental agencies that received grant funds were required to collaborate with domestic violence advocates, but they typically did not and could not distribute grant funds in ways that fully supported that collaboration; the overall program was not structured to provide proportionate funding for advocacy partners.

Others cited advocates’ wariness about the role of supervised visitation in protecting battered women and their children. They could describe situations where batterers had used visitation services to manipulate decision makers and gain a level of custody and access that did not account for the extent and impact of their abuse and the ongoing risks to adult victims and children. For some advocates, the very existence of the center was a form of collusion by promoting a batterer’s access to children and ultimately access to their mother. As one center director described the tension, “domestic violence programs are very skeptical about what visitation centers are doing with women. Advocates are representing battered women; they don’t see how a visitation center

is going to address women's needs. They think that supervised visitation centers provide services only to batterers and don't see how they will help women."

Centers that had developed out of or were affiliated with domestic violence organizations did not necessarily experience less challenge in forging a more collaborative relationship around visitation and exchange. Early on in the Demonstration Initiative, in particular, there was little sense of a common mission in building safety for battered women and their children. Coming under the umbrella of a domestic violence agency in some ways pressured centers to present themselves as more rigidly neutral to the reality of the violence than as they actually functioned on a daily basis. The advocacy program and the visitation center were "silos," as one center director put it, standing alongside one another, but with no real integration or communication, in spite of being within the same organization.

In discussions about advocacy and the role of a visitation center, the demonstration sites were clear that the center's role was not to act as an advocate for individual adult victims, but to understand individuals' needs, participate in the wider community response, and build relationships with those providing advocacy services in ways that supported meaningful referrals, such as providing a link to a specific practitioner.

One center director described the shift in this way: "Advocates are now calling us to bring women through the center and see what we do. I don't think they're seeing the center as a way for him to get to her, but as a way for her to comply with the court order," in ways that keep her out of trouble with the court and contribute to her ongoing safety.

The Demonstration Initiative emphasized the mutual responsibilities and roles that domestic violence advocacy programs and supervised visitation programs have to ensure that the environment created around visitation and exchange is one that supports victims of battering in ways that are culturally relevant and not blaming or re-victimizing. The participating centers recognized that they needed to be part of the larger community response to domestic violence. They needed to build and demonstrate an understanding of battering that would reassure advocates that visitation services would be genuinely protective and useful as an element of post-separation safety planning. Being at the table as part of the wider response helped close the gap between visitation centers and advocates, increase their willingness to learn from each other, diminish defensiveness, improve communication, and build trust.



Strategies...

strengthening relationships with domestic violence advocacy programs

- ✓ Invite advocates to tour the center
- ✓ Hold a monthly brown-bag lunch meeting or similar regular event
- ✓ Invite advocates to participate in the demonstration site's Safety Audit
- ✓ Review center policies and procedures with advocates
- ✓ Collaborate to develop an understanding of the limits and parameters of confidentiality, protocols that support communication between centers and advocates, and a clear understanding of when communication about a person cannot occur
- ✓ Invite advocates to participate in a mock intake or orientation
- ✓ Send visitation center staff to training conducted by domestic violence advocates
- ✓ Review case scenarios together to talk about how to best approach visitation and post-separation advocacy
- ✓ Initiate joint discussions about the role of supervised visitation and exchange in post-separation advocacy and safety planning
- ✓ Invite advocates to Supervised Visitation Program forums, conferences, and other activities, and use that opportunity to talk about their work together in a more informal social setting, framed by the atmosphere and tone of the larger national discussion
- ✓ Organize and/or participate in cross-training whenever possible, such as training on custody and visitation laws and practices as they relate to domestic violence cases
- ✓ Engage in partnerships that equally engage and support each partner financially

Courts

As the Demonstration Initiative got underway, most centers had little direct contact and few conversations with judges and other court officials, even though most families arrived at the centers via a court order of some kind. As the demonstration site work progressed, it was clear that centers had been making assumptions about courts, and vice versa. Overall, there was little structure in place for a center to articulate to a court what it needed to effectively work with a family, or for the court to articulate what it needed to make decisions about ongoing safety.

It was a common experience across most of the centers to receive referrals – i.e., a parent (and by extension a family) ordered to supervised visitation or exchange – with little information about why any particular family member or child needed the protective setting of the center. Referrals were largely generic, presenting every person as equally appropriate for visitation, frequently with the same wording and directions to each parent, regardless of who was at risk. A center often first learned that it had been named in a court order when a noncustodial parent called to set up visits; parents routinely arrived with little information about the center's role and services.

Centers were concerned, based on past experience in specific cases, that if they rejected a referral when they saw visitation or exchange as inappropriate because it was too dangerous, the court response would be to grant unsupervised access or supervised access that was uninformed by an understanding of domestic violence, rather than question parental access itself. Courts, in turn, often assumed that centers knew that decision makers wanted to know about any information relevant to someone's safety, including adult victims as well as children. There was a hesitancy to engage in debate or dialogue about the relationship between a visitation center and the court. "Before we started meeting with the courts we had many assumptions, and the biggest was if we turned down a visitation referral as too dangerous, unsupervised exchange at McDonald's would be the response."

As they began to reach out to their court partners, several centers experienced a shift in assumptions similar to this: "My belief that the courts might consider us 'just another agency,' was unfounded when we became more interactive, particularly with the judges and prosecuting attorney. It was surprising that they wanted to be highly active and involved with Safe Havens... they were willing to have extra meetings and were strongly supportive in our daily operations." Once the demonstration sites began having conversations with judges, they saw that it was often less a matter of courts resisting the connection between protecting adult victims and protecting children and more a matter of the question going unasked and the connection going unexplored.



Strategies...

building relationships with court partners

- ✓ Invite judges and court personnel to tour the center
- ✓ Develop relationships with key personnel that judicial decision makers rely upon in making custody and visitation decisions, such as family court services and custody evaluators
- ✓ Develop and revamp court referral forms to be specific to domestic violence referrals
- ✓ Host local training for judges and court personnel with nationally recognized practitioners and researchers on the impact of battering on child and adult victims
- ✓ Hold discussions with court partners about “tough” cases and aspects of decision-making, such as:
 - Cases where use of the center and visitation itself seemed too dangerous for children, a parent, or staff
 - Cases where children are reluctant or refuse to visit
 - Cases where the center had concerns about someone’s safety in the transition to less protective access, such as a jump from supervised visitation to unrestricted access
- ✓ Examine the referral process and questions related to the kinds of information courts should gather regarding danger and safety (e.g., police reports, sentencing recommendations, order for protection affidavits, and child welfare records), what should be shared with a visitation centers, and how a center should receive that information



Strategies...

building relationships with court partners, continued...

- ✓ Invite judges and court personnel to Supervised Visitation Program forums, conferences, and other activities, and using that opportunity to talk about their work together in a more informal social setting, within the atmosphere and tone of the larger national discussion
- ✓ Engage the court and judicial officers in providing training to visitation center staff about
 - [1] how the court works;
 - [2] the types and function of court orders; and,
 - [3] the kinds of decisions courts make related to the work of a visitation center
- ✓ Develop improved working relationships and open communication between center and court staff
- ✓ Avoid interacting with the courts and judicial officers solely via court and center documents; develop face-to-face relationships
- ✓ Anticipate, plan, and be informed when new court and judicial officers are elected or rotated in
- ✓ Provide courts with updated program information (i.e., referral process, hours of operation, security features, reasons why visitation services would be used, and overview of staff training)


Across the demonstration sites, there was a frank assessment that courts would not necessarily have pursued these discussions without the requirement of collaboration in the Demonstration Initiative. Even with that expectation there was the reality of a court's power and authority within a community that could work against a truly collaborative relationship. "There seems to be a certain amount of intimidation from the bench that has to be more clearly raised," was one program director's assessment. The concept of judicial autonomy can trump collaboration, leaving forty-four individual judges, as one demonstration site noted, with forty-four agendas, definitions, and assumptions in hearing custody and visitation-related cases.

centers & communities

Culture and Identity

Centers across the four demonstration sites struggled with questions of how to recognize, acknowledge, and account for people's diverse cultures and identities in providing visitation and exchange services. There was unanimous acknowledgment that much thinking and attention is still required to define what supervised visitation should look like if it is to welcome and meet the needs of diverse communities and individuals. It was difficult in discussions to get beyond equating culture with race and difficult to get beyond the physical space of "a center" to imagine protective ways of one parent to spend time with children in ways that would not harm the children or the other parent. As one of the initiative partners posed the question: "How do we organize ourselves to be flexible, to sit with people, to converse, to find out how they are, to find out what they need?" Would it even look like what has come to be known as a supervised visitation center?

Building from discussions generated by the Chicago partners, in particular, the demonstration sites emphasized the intentional, deliberate examination of their work and engaging those who use or might use their centers in shaping what they will look like. All aspects of center practices and assumptions must be considered: concepts of timeliness, showing emotion, language, food, parenting styles, religion, holidays, extended families... race, class, gender, sexual orientation. And all considered within the context of safety for adult victims of battering and their children. One project director summed up the challenge in this way: "Because the issue of culture is so complicated, it can stop us from doing anything! We don't know exactly what to do and we're afraid that we'll make mistakes and someone will be harmed."



Complicated, but critical to figure out, and not impossible, was the consensus in the Demonstration Initiative discussions. For example, begin with a conversation, as many of the centers emphasized. “One thing that has helped is asking what we should watch for, asking her what she’s afraid of and how we can help. With him, we ask similar questions. What are you worried about in using the center?” Another center director elaborated on this kind of starting point, flexibility, and challenge to assumptions.

Engaging in a conversation about how you would like to spend your time: whether around food, relatives and who comes, and why they want them to come and what that means culturally. Being willing to talk with the family about those options, while always keeping the needs of battered women and safety up front. Acknowledging your own parenting preferences and your background; responding as opposed to reacting, not making assumptions on how to intervene as far as “appropriate parenting.” Responding rather than coming in with preconceived ideas. When a family comes through the door they have their own sense of what they need and staff needs to be informed about broader information of the culture, but you need to individualize that person. Asking: How should it (the visit) look for you? We assume a lot — we need to take that out of the equation to be more culturally relevant, more human.



Strategies... accounting for diverse cultures and identities

Caution: Safety and adult victims and their children must remain at the forefront; culture does not trump safety. The goal is to build safety in ways that also acknowledge and support people's cultures and identities. Each of the following strategies should be read as concluding with the following cautionary phrase: in the context of safety for adult victims and children.

- ✓ Invite diverse community organizations to walk through the center's space and procedures and provide a critique
- ✓ Use staff meetings, ad hoc work groups, community members, and parents to help examine every aspect of the center's design and the implied and explicit messages about who is welcome and how they are valued
- ✓ Pay careful attention to recognizing and addressing peoples' different experiences with legal systems and the court
- ✓ Structure time and flexibility into all interactions with children and parents
- ✓ Build processes to understand and acknowledge families' experiences with the courts, police, welfare, health care, and other intervening institutions, both individually and historically
- ✓ Account for battering and the safety of mothers and children without demonizing fathers
- ✓ Prepare staff to accommodate and switch back and forth between someone's first language and English
- ✓ Recruit bilingual and bicultural staff and volunteers



Strategies...

accounting for diverse cultures and identities, continued...


- ✓ Plan for and meet needs for language interpretation
 - Screen and obtain personal recommendations for interpreters
 - Be clear about center's expectations and interpreter's role in visitation setting
 - Use less-invasive microphone and headset system
- ✓ Provide opportunities for extended family to be involved and recognize people's broad definitions of who is included as "family"
- ✓ Hold all-center gatherings (within the context of safety, the specifics of court orders, and adequate supervision)
- ✓ Support food and music traditions
- ✓ Minimize note-taking during visits
- ✓ Engage in an organization self-assessment to determine:
 - [1] the impact of the systems you represent on different communities;
 - [2] the role your system or organization has played in the oppression, exclusions, or isolation of specific communities; and,
 - [3] how culturally responsive your partners, staff, and governing boards have been
- ✓ Ask different communities to assess:
 - [1] how the community views your organization;
 - [2] if you are a trusted resource in the community; and,
 - [3] whether you are seen as part of the community or as an outsider or not inclusive

The experience of the Demonstration Initiative raised many questions about how and whether people from certain communities or ethnicities were being excluded, rejecting the service, using family members to monitor visits, being seen as more or less dangerous, or being seen as more or less deserving of protection. For example, Michigan found that African Americans were underrepresented in supervised visitation services, in contrast to their overrepresentation in the child welfare and criminal legal systems. Chicago had a different experience, however, with African American families utilizing supervised visitation services far beyond their representation in the overall population. Whether or not that reflects disparities in how courts make decisions about visitation in cases of domestic violence is unknown. It may, for example, reflect a visitation center that was affiliated with an organization that is known for its services to African American residents of the city and therefore carries the kind of credibility and trust that draws parents to it, as was suggested in the focus group discussions. Across the sites there were similar examples of over- and under-representation of different races and ethnicities in proportion to their population in the community. There was no single pattern or trend, however, but significant variability across the sites, which suggests a need for more inquiry into how and under what circumstances people reach supervised visitation services.

Coordinated Community Response

Supervised visitation has developed historically in isolation from other service providers and community organizations. Along with its emphasis on centralizing safety for adult victims and their children, integrating supervised visitation and safe exchange into the larger community response to battering and other forms of domestic violence was among the many changes encouraged by the Supervised Visitation Program and the Demonstration Initiative. In addition to their discussions among their own local collaborating partners, the demonstration sites shared the questions and thinking that emerged over the course of this work with one another, as well as with OVW, the technical assistance partners, and other grantees.

“Being in isolation is ineffective,” offered one center director in discussing the importance of linking to the wider community response to domestic violence, “and locating visitation in this larger work needs to be seen as part of the response.” In return, courts and domestic violence partners have a responsibility to be knowledgeable about visitation and make referrals to safe visitation.



While the core partners in the Demonstration Initiative included visitation centers, domestic violence advocates, and the courts, each site was required to establish a consulting committee that represented a broader sweep of intervening agencies and interested persons. The distinction between partners and the consulting committee was not always clear, in part because consulting committees also tended to include representation from the core partner agencies. There was agreement across the project directors that holding back and establishing the consulting committee later in the project's development would have been more useful. "We didn't do well choosing the right members in the beginning," was a common sentiment, as well as the view that consulting committees often lacked a good balance between those in key decision-making positions and those with the perspective of front-line, everyday work with people, as well as a good balance between those who were engaged in the questions raised through the Demonstration Initiative and those with limited interest.

The demonstration sites shared the view that collaboration between visitation centers and other practitioners and intervening agencies is essential, as is integrating supervised visitation and exchange within the larger community response to domestic violence. Whether that comes via establishing a separate advisory type of committee or via bringing visitation into an existing coordinated community response structure, or both, is unclear. Planning, implementing, and sustaining a supervised visitation program require different skills, information, and abilities, often best met by small, active groups. The perspective of the visitation center, and acknowledgement of its unique role in its relationships with each family member, can get lost in a larger structure.



Strategies...

engaging community
partners and the
wider community

- ✓ Bring center representation into the coordinated community response, not as just another seat at the table, but linked to larger systems advocacy and change
- ✓ Integrate supervised visitation and safe exchange into the larger community systems work and existing collaborations
- ✓ “Keep the discussion up front,” meaning encourage deeper discussion and attention to issues of post-separation advocacy
- ✓ Bring a redacted case file to interveners from different fields and read it together, asking “Where and how did we help or hurt this victim of battering and her children? Where and how did we help or hurt this batterer to acknowledge and begin to repair the harm?”
- ✓ Participate in community activities and projects, such as projects addressing racial disparities or support for immigrant communities, resource fairs
- ✓ Contribute to formal and informal networks across the community, such as sitting on a domestic violence task force or attending neighborhood fairs or the battered women’s shelter annual fundraising event
- ✓ Spend time in the “life” of the community via attending arts and sports events, shopping, dining
- ✓ Engage diverse community members in providing training and staff development

orientation



“ *Orientation sets the tone and begins the process of engagement with women, men, and children using the center’s services.* ”

Orientation

At the beginning of their work together, the nine established visitation centers welcomed and introduced people to the center in very much the same way.¹⁵ Their processes and forms were largely interchangeable, using a standard “intake” process that was centered on completing a form that recorded name, age, and race; contact information; referral source; children’s names, ages, and schools; employer and income; medical and emergency information; vehicle description and license plate number; custody status; days of the week and times available for visitation; and, whether there was a current restraining order or history of domestic violence. The center reviewed its rules, offered a tour of the facility, and obtained signatures on a variety of notices and releases.

While there was some variation in how the intake form was completed – some centers asked parents to complete it beforehand and reviewed it during the appointment while others filled in the form during an interview – the information and focus was the same. The process was oriented toward meeting the center’s administrative and operational needs. Is this family eligible for visitation or exchange? Who is “the custodial”? Who is “the noncustodial”? Who will pay for the services? When is the visiting parent available? How does the center contact each parent? Who will bring children to the center? What is the vehicle description and plate in case of abduction?

15. Kent, WA and Muskegon, MI designed and opened centers as part of the Demonstration Initiative.

When the demonstration sites stepped back and examined this intake process more critically they discovered that it was inadequate in paying equal regard for safety, accounting for safety over time, acknowledging culture and identity, and building meaningful relationships with people using the center. It was not at all a matter of workers who were uncaring or unconcerned, but the ways in which the prevailing intake process was organized limited the approach.

The degree to which a victim of battering is able to and comfortable with completing an intake form influences how much of the picture she or he provides. If a mother does not trust that the information is going to be kept safe, or does not have a clear understanding of what the visitation center needs to know about her experience, she is unlikely to volunteer it. While some intake forms included questions about current restraining orders or history of domestic violence, they tended to be yes or no questions or two to five lines in length, as if to say ‘tell us this much and nothing more.’ In reviewing completed intake forms, for example, there was sketchy information about the kind of battering tactics that might have been used or were currently being used. It was not uncommon to find a woman write something like “he was violent with me during pregnancy” on those two lines, but to have no indication of any conversation with the visitation center worker that would establish the severity and frequency of the violence.


Circumstances of literacy and language influence how a form gets completed and questions get understood and answered. There was little in the intake process to guide visitation center staff toward dialogue with a parent in ways that would add to an understanding of how to best recognize parents and children’s cultural identities. Questions such as these routinely went unexplored: Who are you close to? Who is considered family? Where do you get support? What holidays, customs, and foods are important to you and your children? If an immigrant or refugee, under what circumstances did you and your children come to this community? What is it like to talk about the divorce in your community? What is it like to talk about the abuse you have experienced? What is it like to talk about why you must visit your children at this center? The design of the prevailing intake process required center staff to consciously step outside the form in order to connect with parents and children in ways that account for culture and identity.

Via their observation and critique of this intake process, the demonstration sites saw that center staff assigned the task of completing it usually had an hour or less to do so. They had no time or flexibility to consciously step outside of the form. Their role was clearly to review the rules and procedures, obtain needed signatures, arrange payments, and develop a visitation or exchange schedule. They could not ask or answer questions such as: What are you concerned about? What are you afraid of? What do you need? How might your partner use the center to get at you, to threaten or scare you?

Words carry weight and meaning, concepts and philosophy. A new word can stand in for a new way of thinking and help signal intended changes. The Demonstration Initiative settled on “orientation” as the word to represent the shift in thinking that repositions supervised visitation to pay equal regard to adult victims of battering, account for safety over time, and build relationships. Orientation is distinguished from intake in part by where it positions the person who is coming through the door. Orientation represents a deliberate, thoughtful effort to fit the **center to the person**, rather than fit the person to the center. It represents an intention to keep the unique needs of each family member as the primary focus, rather than the business needs of the center.

The demonstration sites in no way ignored or abandoned the importance of certain identifying, logistical, and referral information to a visitation center’s day-to-day operations. Clearly a center must know about names, ages, addresses, medical allergies, court orders, parents’ work schedules, etc., but under the practice of orientation, obtaining this information is no longer the centerpiece of welcoming and introducing family members to the center. Conversation and building a relationship come first; meeting the administrative needs of the center comes second. Orientation accomplishes both, but clearly and deliberately puts the person first and emphasizes conversation, dialogue, and relationship over filling in the blanks on an intake form.¹⁶

16. The work of the Demonstration Initiative contributed greatly to developing this new approach, as summarized in two products developed by Praxis International: 1) a think piece written by Jane Sadusky, *New Perspectives on Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange: Orientation* (2008), and 2) *Building the Practice of Orientation: A Trainer’s Guide*, (2008), a training curriculum for supervised visitation centers. Both products are available from Praxis International, www.praxisinternational.org.



The shift from intake to orientation requires new administrative practices around how people are introduced and welcomed to the center, such as the timing, procedures, and forms used to gather and record information necessary for the center's operation and scheduling. New practices related to orientation involve changes in resources, training, and how workers are linked within the visitation center, as well as in relation to other community interveners and, most importantly, how they are linked with families using the center.

Orientation sets the tone and begins the process of engagement with women, men, and children using the center's services. It is the linchpin in visitation center practices that build safety and help repair the harm caused by battering.



Strategies... orientation

Moving from the largely static, center-oriented perspective of “intake” to the more dynamic, person-centered process of orientation requires intention and planning to develop the necessary base of knowledge and skills that prepare a visitation center and its workers to:

- ✓ Pay equal regard for the safety of child and adult victims
- ✓ Recognize and account for batterers’ use of post-separation tactics of power and control
- ✓ Acknowledge and value families unique identities and needs
- ✓ Carry respectful and fair intentions throughout all aspects of a center’s relationships with family members
- ✓ Participate in community collaborations to address domestic violence
- ✓ Link child and adult victims with advocacy

Strategies for welcoming and introducing mothers, fathers, and children to supervised visitation and safe exchange are addressed in detail in the following publications developed by and available from Praxis International:

- ✓ New Perspectives on Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange: Orientation
- ✓ Building the Practice of Orientation: A Trainer’s Guide

documentation



“ *It’s the ongoing struggle between too much information and not enough information.* ”


— as one center director described the intertwined subjects of documentation and confidentiality



Documentation

“It’s the ongoing struggle between too much information and not enough information,” as one center director described the intertwined subjects of documentation and confidentiality. Documentation has remained a persistent focus of deliberation within the Demonstration Initiative. What kind of documentation of history and danger should accompany a referral? What should a center write down? Who should have access to a center’s records, and under what circumstances? How should a center communicate with the courts about specific cases? Do we share with advocates, but not with the courts? What should a center shield and what should it share? What documentation practices will make the best contribution to the safety of children and adult victims?

Each demonstration site took a critical look at its documentation practices, both as a component of its Safety Audit and part of the ongoing, cross-site discussions. This work contributed to the re-examination of intake practices and the shift to orientation, as described previously. In keeping with the shift in perspective to person-centered practices, some centers started taking more care to provide a sample of observation notes for parents, to be clear about what they would be paying attention to and reinforcing that there are no surprises about the center’s attention to domestic violence.



It also raised many questions about the creation and use of observation notes and the ways in which voluminous case files were often constructed around a family. As one director put it, “our files were either so overstuffed with information that it was hard to tell what was important and what wasn’t important,” or contained little or no explanation of the reason for and safety issues related to visitation or exchange for a particular family.

The historic and prevailing child welfare orientation of supervised visitation led to detailed and often lengthy accounts of parent-child interactions and descriptions of what children ate and wore and how they played, without any consideration of parenting in the context of battering. The following excerpt from a longer set of mock observation notes, using quotations from a variety of files across multiple centers, illustrates this approach.

VISIT #1 VP says hi to the children as they walk into the room... VP asks if they want McDonald’s next time. Both games end. VP asks if they want chicken nuggets. Child 1 plays with the sand. VP and Child 2 put the Stratego game away...

VISIT #4 VP arrived on time for visit...VP and children greeted each other with hugs and kisses...VP encouraged children to eat a balanced lunch, but they ended up eating a brownie and macaroni salad. They drank soda, but each only drank half a small mug...

VISIT #9 Children walk into room and say hello to VP. VP says hello and asks children how they are doing...All engage in appropriate conversation about beef jerky...All engage in appropriate conversation about family heritage...

Collections of such observations produced records of “good visits,” which many centers shared with courts. While such accounts may be warranted when there are specific concerns about someone’s ability to care for and interact with children, they have no bearing on visitation in the context of battering and risks to children and adult victims. The demonstration sites found numerous examples of observation notes and reports that read “good visit” or “exchange went well,” but where further digging through those overstuffed files showed that at the same time there was stalking-like behavior outside of the center and fearful victims. When a string of such observations becomes the basis of a report to the court, it becomes a potent recommendation, whether or not intended as such.

A closer look at observations notes across the Demonstration Initiative centers revealed that they carried many terms such as “realistic expectation” or “normal play” or “natural affection” or “appropriate.” These terms are easily read in ways that impose a specific cultural point of view. Across the demonstration sites, observation or visit forms were structured around assumptions that “appropriate” parenting meant a parent who was interacting and always in motion, with education games, reading, writing, and coloring readily available. How parents talk with children, express love, expect them to contribute to the family, and define and correct misbehavior all have cultural design and meaning. In one setting, a father who sits quietly with his daughter and says little as she leans against him may be described as an uninvolved, detached, and perhaps inappropriate parent who has had a “bad” visit. In another setting, where the monitor understands that this is a much-valued time and way of communicating between a father and daughter at the end of a day, it will be a “good” visit.


As the Demonstration Initiative came to a close, most of the participating visitation centers had shifted to a more restrained approach to observation notes, moving away from detailed attention to parent-child interactions and toward a record of who attended and any interruptions or interventions related to safety and security. Others have stayed closer to the video-like approach that includes an almost minute-by-minute account of the events and activities of the visit. There was a shift among several centers to include the reason for the referral in specific terms at the top of any reports or notes: *e.g., Domestic violence referral. Visitation ordered as part of a protection order which described four assaults against Ms. Smith in the six months prior to the visitation order. Coinciding with the visitation order, Mr. Smith was arrested and charged with misdemeanor battery against Ms. Smith and burglary of her residence.* In addition, any observation reports that are released in response to a subpoena or shared under a release of information carry a disclaimer: *Any behavior described in this document has occurred in an artificial, supervised setting and should in no way be used to infer what would happen in an unsupervised setting.*

“As little as possible” has become the watchword for documentation for many of the visitation centers in the Demonstration Initiative. With the recognition that there is no guarantee of confidentiality – and, anything written down about a victim’s fears, her plans to relocate, or a child’s reluctance to participate in a visit or exchange could be available to a battering partner – centers have gravitated toward a leaner approach to documentation. Nor are centers rushing to provide a steady stream of information to the courts. In their changing relationship with the courts and opportunities for discussion, some centers were surprised to learn that judges did not necessarily want a lengthy reconstruction of everything that

happened in a visit, but only that information that was pertinent to making a decision about someone's safety. One center director had a similar reason for not providing any kind of routine report on the referral to the court: "I want a report from our center to mean something, namely, 'this is dangerous behavior, pay attention'." Yet this approach also requires a court that understands the tactics of battering and is able to put seemingly innocuous behaviors, such as repeatedly arriving too early or too late, coming to the wrong door, or wearing particular cologne, into that deeper context. It connects back to the center's collaboration with the courts and wider community response.

Building in frequent staff discussions and case reviews have come to be seen as having as much to do with documentation as writing things down in this more spare approach to documentation. There is a practical need for staff to share information with one another, particularly to encourage consistent recognition of aspects of safety that are important in protecting individual victims. The pattern of writing everything down that the demonstration sites discovered in their case analysis grew in part as a response to this need for cross-staff communication. It serves a contrary purpose, however, when it becomes so detailed and voluminous that it cannot be quickly read or deciphered. Better to keep an ongoing general communication log, meet every two or three weeks to review every case and summarize aspects pertinent to safety, such as "walking CP to her car," and then eliminate the log.





Extensive cross-site work among the four sites and their technical assistance partners characterized the Demonstration Initiative’s exploration of confidentiality, record keeping, and information sharing practices. It involved numerous cross-site and individual site conversations, along with consultations with attorneys and court representatives. It is a still-evolving discussion, shaped by the following questions:

- Do visitation centers have any legal protections in holding information as confidential?
- What is the impact of legislation and legal requirements such as HIPPA and mandated child abuse reporting?
- From whom and where does a visitation center gather information? Why and with whom does it share information?
- What is the legal impact of utilizing electronic databases and other information, video and audio recordings, and photos?
- What is a “client file” and to whom and under what conditions can a center release information from it?
- What are the implications of different organizational structures for visitation services (i.e., free-standing agency, under an umbrella organization, or government entity) on how information is shared and protected? What should be the policy and practice when an employee in the same organization has two different roles (such as domestic violence victim advocate and visitation facilitator) and therefore has access to information that is not normally available or accessible to someone working in only one of the programs?

The Demonstration Initiative’s exploration of documentation practices has been much like an ever-changing puzzle. One new approach only raises more questions. For example, what should a center document when it adds regular safety check-ins and other contacts with victims of battering?



Strategies...

engaging community partners and the wider community

- ✓ Conduct a guided reading of several case files and ask these questions of each document and related process:
 - Who needs protection and what kind of protection?
 - Why complete this form or report? What is its purpose? How is it used?
 - Why is this question asked?
 - Who benefits from this information?
 - How can this information be used to harm those in need of protection?
 - Where does this form or report go from here and how is it used?
 - How is the information collected here related to protection and safety of child and adult victims of battering?
- ✓ Conduct a complete review of the legal parameters of confidential communication and documentation operating in the local jurisdiction
- ✓ Develop a clear, legally-sound policy around record keeping practices and the limits of confidentiality
- ✓ Define what and how information can be released, and who can receive it
- ✓ Develop a release of information process and document that allows the person granting it to determine:
 - [1] an expiration date and explanation of how to terminate the release before that date and how to extend it beyond that date;
 - [2] clear indication of to whom information can be released;
 - [3] what information can be released; and,
 - [4] how information can be released, such as phone, fax, personal delivery, or mail

- ✓ Develop a procedure to address the long-term security of information, including what records will be maintained at the conclusion of services and for how long, and what will be destroyed
- ✓ Address safety and other considerations around data storage (paper and electronic formats)
- ✓ Review and address how families are informed of the center's record-keeping practices and limitations of the protections in place
- ✓ Convene a panel of survivors and advocates and review the forms, brochures, and other documents that family members complete and that explain visitation services
 - Pay particular attention to how these documents are understood or misunderstood
 - Explore ways in which presentation or completion of the material addresses culture and identity
 - Discuss what the center should know about a survivor's experience and the best ways to gather that information



Strategies...
engaging community
partners and the
wider community,
continued...