

Child Advocacy Services Enhancement (CASE) Project

Serving Children Exposed to Domestic Violence: Summative Report #2

December 2012

Written by:

Kris Macomber, PhD, Evaluation Specialist

Trishana Jones, MSW, Children and Youth Specialist

The North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence

INTRODUCTION

NCCADV recognizes the importance of incorporating survivors' insights and experiences into efforts to enhance services for children exposed to domestic violence in North Carolina. To this end, NCCADV wanted to learn what services for children survivors identified as helpful and critical, and also what service gaps currently exist. The findings and analysis in this summative report are based on data collected from two focus groups with survivors of domestic violence, and two in-depth interviews with survivors of childhood exposure to domestic violence and/or adult survivors of domestic violence. A total of 11 survivors were included in this part of the CASE environmental scan.

Critical Services and Resources Identified by Survivors

Court Advocacy

Survivors with children noted how helpful **court advocates** were throughout their court process. Several survivors mentioned that without court advocates, they wouldn't have known what to do throughout the court process.

Local Church

One survivor, Angela¹, credited her **church** and one pastor in particular for helping initiate her healing as a survivor. She said, "My turning point as an adult was the church. That's what caused me to realize that this was not normal. That's what caused me to speak about it. I had internalized it but I found a good church that helped me." When

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

prompted about what specifically within the church helped her, Angela said it was a female pastor who “created an environment for me where I could talk about it and it was not going to be a hostile environment. Having support and someone who was a good listener and did not judge me but listened to what I have to say...She got me to open up like a flower.”

Supervised Visitation

Sandy stressed the importance of supervised visitations and credited **Harmony House** (which lost funding and no longer operates), with helping set up supervised visitations between her four children and their father. Harmony House was a non-profit that provided a place for supervised visitation in contentious child custody cases. Sandy explained the importance of supervised visitation for her and her children:

I don't know what we would have done had it not been for the Harmony House. Harmony House was a supervised visitation program that you could bring the kids to. We were in the program two years. We were the longest in Guilford County that was in the program. Had it not been for that, I honestly don't know what we would have done. Harmony House was the only service provided by Family Services that we knew of.”

Gaps in Services and Obstacles

To learn about what gaps in services currently exist, survivors were asked, “What do you wish you had access to (that you didn't) to help you and your children?” Survivors' responses ranged from broad level gaps in services, to program-level gaps. In the section the follows, the gaps in services that survivors identified are outlined. One of

the most consistently identified gaps in services was the lack of healthy relationship education for children in schools. There was general agreement that since children spend so much time in schools, schools are a perfect place to reach kids. For Angela, who was exposed to frequent domestic violence as a child, and who then was in abusive relationship as an adult, she emphasized how helpful it would have been to her if she had learned that “violence is not healthy and not normal.” She continued,

If I just knew that this was not normal because someone was educating me that this is not healthy. If I had that knowledge, I would have been able to know better when I was an adult. If I had some kind of program I would have known that this was an unhealthy environment that I was growing up in as a child.

Angela stressed that particularly for children like her, who grew up in communities where violence is commonplace (in her words, “domestic violence was a spectator sport”), children should receive education about healthy relationships as early as possible.

Similarly, Tonya added, “You have to start while they’re young. We have to reach out to school aged children. If my great, great grandfather was taught not to abuse, and if my great grandfather was taught not to abuse, then my grandfather might not have abused my father. And things might have been different for me and my family. We need to get to children in schools.” There was strong belief among both DVSP’s and survivors that healthy relationship education in schools is critical for helping children learn that there are alternatives to violence.

Institutional Obstacles

Frustrations with the Department of Social Services: How it Effects Children

There was one consistent system that survivors identified as an obstacle to responding to the needs of children exposed to domestic violence: The Department of Social Services (DSS). There was general consensus among the survivors who engaged with DSS that the system was difficult to navigate and caused great frustration on the part of survivors. As one participant noted, “DSS re-victimizes you.” Three different survivors who had engaged with DSS for different reasons referred to DSS as “dehumanizing.” Elsa noted that she was not only denied services, but was personally insulted, hurt, and offended by how she was treated. Elsa had difficulty accessing economic aid for her grandchildren, whom she had custody of after her daughter was murdered by her husband. Her negative experiences with DSS reflect an important barrier for serving children, which is providing economic support for children directly impacted by domestic violence. As she explained, “They asked me, “Don’t you have a job? And they said, in front of the kids, “Why did she stay with him in the first place? In front of the kids!” ... I refuse to deal with them anymore. I refuse.” This woman’s frustration with DSS generated conversation about the need for additional training for DSS workers on displaying sensitivity to survivors’ needs. Another survivor, who now works at a domestic violence agency, echoed Elsa’s sentiment. She said, “We refer clients to DSS for the services they need, and then they get mad at us because they were treated so badly.” This is an important nuance, as it suggests that the relationship between DVSP’s and DSS needs to be strengthened to reduce client apprehension toward accessing DSS services.

Local law enforcement's failure to keep children safe

In Sandy's case, she explained how local law enforcement failed to respond appropriately to her husband's abuse. She detailed:

The judge awarded [custody to him] every other weekend. Well the first weekend, physical abuse took place. I wasn't even there. The people that lived in, and managed, the apartment complex called the police. They had the child locked in their rental office. And the police came and zero charges. Bloody nose, scraped faced, scraped chest. Redness at the neck. Never charged because he was 14. They said that due to his age they were nor pressing charges against their father because they considered it rebellious. And the younger three girls were left in his care for the rest of the stay. That happened on a Saturday morning and they were made to stay, by the police department, until Monday.

Although the husband was inflicting abuse on the children, law enforcement did not press charges, which impacted the custody case. If it were not for Harmony House setting up supervised visitation, it is likely that these children would have continued to be abused.

Program-level Gaps*Lack of Age-Specific Services*

Something that resonated in both the DVSP focus groups and the survivor focus groups was the lack of services for the ***wide ranging age of children and youth*** exposed to domestic violence. As Tina, an adult survivor with two children shared, "At the

program that tried to help me, there wasn't enough support for my kids who were teenagers at the time. For teenagers specifically, if you don't find the right thing for them, you're gonna lose them. Both of my kids were straight "A" students, but once we got out the situation, neither one of them graduated."

Not Appropriate Housing for Children

Tina's experience with the local DVSP was partly positive and partly negative. On the one hand, she said they were really helpful by providing Christmas gifts for her children. On the other hand, she said was extremely dissatisfied with the housing arrangements provided for her and her children. Tina described the housing the DVSP set her up with as "total chaos." When we asked her to describe it she said, "Drugs, gangs, fighting in the neighborhood. I had no idea what kind of kids my kids would be getting involved with." She said, "even some awareness about the environment we would be living in would have helped, but they told us nothing."

Shelter-life is not Teenage Friendly

While residing in shelter may be a good option for a mother with small children, it may be less appealing for mothers with teenage children. Tina said, "They are going from one isolating situation to another isolating situation. They have to be in by 9:00 on a weekend night? I understand you have to have rules and guidelines, but that's an issue for teenagers who want to go out and do things on the weekends." Survivors and DVSP staff alike mentioned how teenagers, especially teen males, are often not comfortable with the shelter arrangement and that the mothers try to find alternative housing.

Unwanted Pressure to Stay in Shelter/Not listening to Survivors' Needs

Tina also described the pressure she was confronted with to stay in the domestic violence shelter. She said, "I didn't want to go to the shelter but they were really pressing me on it. They kept saying, 'You need to come here. You need to come here.' I had more options and I didn't need to go to the shelter. But, they put me under a lot of pressure to stay in the shelter." This unwanted pressure may reflect a disconnect between the survivors' wants and needs and what the DVPS thought she needed. It is important that DVSP's inform survivors of their options and support survivors' needs, without telling them "what they need."

Counseling services were in inconvenient locations

Two survivors, Tina and Shirley, discussed how difficult it was to get their children to their therapists. They both lived in small, rural communities and considered the limited amount of mental health choices, and the locations of the therapist an obstacle to getting their children the help they needed.

Failure of School System to Serve as Resource

Sandy identified a missed opportunity with the local school system in Guilford County. She said that because her children and her family were already involved in the court system, school administrators instructed teachers not to report visible signs of child abuse on her children. Sandy expressed great frustration with the failure of the school system to get involved, because more reports of abuse could/would have been helpful for her custody case. She said, "We had a school that refused to report it. They said they didn't report it because we were already going through the court system so they didn't

report it.” Based on her experiences, she believes that more outreach to local schools about domestic violence would be beneficial. She explained:

I think it would be great to have a group to reach out to the county teachers because I know they do seminars all the time. Or have some materials written up for them. Because that’s where these kids are going. They all go to school. And for them to know that you can call anonymously. You don’t have to give your name. I do know that in our particular situation, this particular teacher was told by administration not to call. And that’s wrong. Teachers need to know about the effects. And they should know the warning signs. Awareness in schools would be awesome.

For Sandy, the school system was a hindrance, rather than a help to her children as they were caught in the middle of a custody battle and were experiencing child abuse. If school administrators were better informed about the dynamics of domestic violence and were ‘in-tune’ with what children going through domestic violence related court cases, they could take a more active role in serving as allies to children and youth.

Broader Cultural Obstacle

Culture of silence around domestic violence

A challenge that impacts the services that children receive is the broader culture of silence around domestic violence. According to Angela’s experiences, organizations and programs providing services to children exposed to domestic violence are working against a culture of silence that children are expected to contribute to. When she was a childhood

survivor of witnessing domestic violence, her parents told her not to talk about what goes on in the home. She explained how this impacted her inability to talk about it:

It was like, whatever happens in your home stays in your home. My mother was very, very private. I remember one time; my father threw a flower pot at her hand. It cut her very severely, and he was taking her to the hospital. She said, "Never mind, turn around, I don't want to go." My mom had various scars that had not been attended to because she did not want others to get involved. So, then I learned to also be afraid to talk about it. I wanted to tell my second grade teacher. She was so kind and loving and I wanted to tell her so badly. But, I was afraid that my mom would find out.

The culture of silence about domestic violence can be detrimental to children, because they end up feeling alone in their experience. As Angela said, "You feel like this is exclusively happening to you. I got into an abusive relationship that I attribute to my childhood. If I had someone I could confide in, I could have gotten help faster." Therefore, efforts to respond to the needs to children exposed to domestic violence should focus on dismantling this culture of silence.

Departure between DVSP's and Survivor Experiences

In the focus groups with DVSP's, there was agreement among participants that living in a small town, in a rural community, can facilitate service provision to children exposed to domestic violence. Small towns have smaller networks of connections and can be, as one participant noted, "easier to navigate the system, than in larger cities."

However, in the focus group with survivors, participants stressed how difficult it was to navigate the system, particularly the Department of Social Services in small towns. As one participant noted, “Everyone knows everyone, and it’s still a good ol’ boy system in many ways. But, this small town doesn’t want to talk about this.” Therefore, while those working at the program level experience the small town as a benefit for their work, individual survivors may experience it as a barrier.

CONCLUSION

The focus groups and interviews provided great insight into survivors’ experiences accessing children’s services (either as child survivors or as adult survivors with children). Although the eleven survivors included here are not representative of all survivors’ in North Carolina, this part of the CASE Project is an important catalyst for future efforts to, first, assess the services available to children exposed to domestic violence, and, second, expand and enhance these services. The data collected from these focus groups and interviews provides a foundational body of knowledge necessary to develop a graduated system of support throughout North Carolina so that children and youth exposed to domestic violence have evidence-based practices accessible to them. In concluding this report, we summarize identified strengths in current services, as well as the identified challenges and gaps in services. We end with a list of recommendations for future efforts to enhance services to children and youth exposed to domestic violence.

Identified Strengths

1. Court advocacy provides critical assistance through court process
2. Access to supervised visitation so that children's safety is ensured during contentious child custody cases

Identified Challenges and Gaps in Services

1. Insufficient outreach from local domestic violence service providers (Survivors shared the common sentiment, "We wish we knew about the help that existed")
2. Significant difficulty and frustration in securing services and resources from Department of Social Services.
3. Lack of services for older teens; older teens (ages 13-17) have hard time fitting into shelter life.
4. Inaccessibility of mental health services (lack of transportation, distance)

Recommendations

1. Increase healthy relationship education in local schools
2. Improve the availability and accessibility of mental health services for children and their families
3. Increase training for critical staff who interact with children exposed to domestic violence and their families, including DSS workers, CPS workers, law enforcement, magistrates, and judges.
4. Community-based domestic violence service providers should increase their outreach in the community; increase visibility and availability of services.

Survivors' Recommendations

Throughout the focus groups and interviews, survivors made several recommendations for how to improve services for children exposed to domestic violence. To honor the survivors who shared their experiences, and who provided critical information for the CASE Project, this report concludes with their recommendations:

- 1) There was strong belief among survivors that **healthy relationship education** in schools is critical for helping children learn that there are alternatives to violence. Survivors urged for children to receive healthy relationship education as early as possible.
- 2) Increase and **improve training for pivotal staff** who interact with children exposed to domestic violence, including police officers, judges, magistrates, and DSS/CPS workers. Survivors agreed that the dynamics of domestic violence are complicated and that inadequate training for key staff is a major problem.
- 3) **DVSP's should increase awareness and outreach about resources** that are available for survivors. Survivors mentioned that it would have been helpful to them if information about domestic violence and DVSP's were more centrally located in town, such as in places like the post office, schools, and other public places. Elsa noted, "My daughter didn't even know there was help right here in town. There are not enough sources out there that say, "We can help you." Similarly, Angela noted, "I didn't know that there were agencies that did this work. An organization like yours in the community. When you live in that close knit community, you don't know that there is help outside that community. If agencies could do outreach to children in those communities, they would know that there was help outside right near them."
- 4) **Children respond differently** to domestic violence. Service providers must recognize that every child experiences domestic violence differently. Even siblings from the same family will react and behave differently in response to their

experiences with domestic violence. Brenda said, “You have to talk to kids, one-on-one to know how they’re really doing.” Angela mentioned how even though she was dramatically impacted by the violence she witnessed in her home, she wasn’t a child who “appeared to others to have any problems.” She explained, “As children we put on masks and we fantasize about a different world, and about living or being in a different environment. Sandy, mother of four said that “two of my kids are aggressive and two are passive. Each one handled it differently. You have to listen to the children.”

- 5) **Improve the accessibility of mental health and counseling services for children.** Centralize the locations, like in libraries and in health departments so that mothers are more likely to be able to take their children to get the help they need.
- 6) Recognize that children who grow up in a violent family might not trust adults. Angela shared that she did not trust any adult, since many of the ones she knew had some kind of unhealthy issue they were already dealing with. Therefore, agencies working with children should be aware that they might have to **work hard to develop trust on the part of some children.**