

***Safe Engagement of Fathers  
When Domestic Violence is Present:***

**Building a model response to domestic violence within  
Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

Prepared by:

**David Mandel and Associates LLC**

**PO Box 745**

**Canton, CT 06019**

**www.endingviolence.com**

**<http://rfi.endingviolence.com/blog/>**

Funding for the “Promoting Responsible Fatherhood” program was provided by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration of Children & Families, grant #90FR0031, as administered by the Connecticut Department of Social Services.

## ***The Challenge of Safe Engagement***

Fathers<sup>1</sup> have a significant and long-lasting impact on the lives of their children. They are a powerful force in their children's lives whether they are directly involved or absent from their children's daily lives. Fathers' influence on their children's lives ranges from their children's social, academic, and cultural development to their children's physical, emotional and spiritual growth.

While always significant, the impact an individual father has on his children's lives and development can be positive or negative based on the choices he makes about how to interact with his child and co-parent(s). A father can be a tremendously positive force in his children's lives when he sets appropriate limits, is emotionally present for his children, finds time for play, and respectfully negotiates the challenges of parenting with his co-parent. But when he chooses to be intimidating or assaultive, undermines his co-parent's authority in the home, limits the families access to resources and support, or treats family members as sexual objects and property, his involvement can become traumatic and terrifying. The choice to engage in these behaviors undermines the positive potential that he may have as a parent.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most important factors determining a father's influence is the quality of his relationship with his children's mother(s). Consequently, a father may impact his children positively or negatively based on how he engages in his relation with his co-parent(s). Does he engage in mutual decision making and share household and parenting responsibilities fairly? Does he demonstrate respect for his partners and their parenting? Or does he treat his partner as a servant based on unrealistic and rigid rules and respond to disagreement as a sign of disrespect for his authority? A father's answers to these questions will have profound impact not just on his relationship with his partner, but his impact on his children as well.

Unfortunately, the prevalence of coercive and harmful behaviors perpetrated by fathers against their children and partners is high. Nationally, one in four women (25%) has experienced domestic violence in her lifetime.<sup>3</sup> In the vast majority of cases, the perpetrator of abuse against these women is a male partner. Women accounted for 85% of the victims of intimate partner violence<sup>4</sup>. And in many cases,

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, the term "father" will be used to refer broadly to biological fathers, stepfathers, fathers of adopted children, and men who play a parental role or provide care for the children in their lives. This term is used to refer to fathers regardless of the direct involvement with their children's daily lives and includes fathers who reside with their children, have shared custody or who have or are allowed no contact with their children.

<sup>2</sup> There has been significant documentation of the positive outcomes correlated with father's involvement in children's lives. There is equally compelling documentation of the negative outcomes for children when their father's engage in behaviors such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, or a range of other behaviors harmful to children.

<sup>3</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institute of Justice, Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence, July 2000. The Commonwealth Fund, Health Concerns Across a Woman's Lifespan: 1998 Survey of Women's Health, 1999

<sup>4</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics Crime Data Brief, Intimate Partner Violence, 1993-2001, February 2003

***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

the abuse is not limited just to the women. In a national survey of American families, 50% of the men who frequently assaulted their wives also frequently abused their children<sup>5</sup>.

The prevalence of domestic violence is even higher when the full range of coercive behaviors is considered. Many studies of the prevalence of domestic violence focus primarily on physical assault. When a broader definition of domestic violence as a pattern of coercive control perpetrated by one intimate partner against another which can include both behaviors beyond physical assault and both criminal and non-criminal behaviors is used the number of fathers who engage in these behaviors grows dramatically.

The prevalence of domestic violence perpetrated by fathers necessitates an effective and appropriate response to domestic violence by fatherhood programs. It is an unfortunate reality that a very high percentage of fathers who access Responsible Fatherhood Program services have some history of domestic violence. Of 2,927 participants assessed by certified fatherhood programs in Connecticut from January 1, 2007 through March 31, 2011, fifty six percent (56.4%) report having put down, sworn at, insulted or threatened a partner. Fourteen percent (14.7%) report engaging in some physical assault (pushed, grabbed, slapped, punched, kicked, beat up, burned, or choked, etc.) of their partners. In some cases, occurrences of domestic violence by program participants will be documented and in others domestic violence will be present but undocumented so the actual prevalence of domestic violence would be higher than that reported by participants. Fatherhood programs offer resources to help fathers with the significant responsibility of their role as parents. They can provide fathers with support, skills and knowledge to be involved in their children's lives in a positive way. They can help address systemic and cultural barriers to father's involvement in their children's lives. For fathers with histories of domestic violence, fatherhood programs can be an opportunity to effectively identify and respond to family safety issues related to domestic violence. For other fathers, fatherhood programs are a unique opportunity to help improve their relationship with their children's mother(s) and possibly even prevent future abusive behaviors.

The challenge for fatherhood programs is to determine the most effective way to respond to issues of domestic violence in a way that engages fathers and respects the safety and confidentiality of mothers and children. An ideal response will balance the need to assess for the history or current presence of domestic violence without creating another barrier for men fathering their children, particularly poor men and men of color. Developing an effective response to domestic violence for fatherhood programs must also overcome the tendency to focus either on fathers as parents or men as perpetrators of domestic violence. "You are either a father with domestic violence issues," said one participant of a stakeholder focus group "or you are a batterer who happens to have children." This comment captures our historic tendency to focus either on men's parenting or their domestic violence, but rarely to integrate the two into a seamless approach.

---

<sup>5</sup> Strauss, Murray A, Gelles, Richard J., and Smith, Christine. 1990. *Physical Violence in American Families; Risk Factors and Adaptations to Violence in 8,145 Families*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

***Safe Engagement cannot come at the expense of mothers:***

Our focus on father's involvement and influence should never be used to criticize, implicitly or explicitly, the value and role of mothers. Mothers, as co-parents and single parents, successfully attend to the needs of their children often despite the harmful behaviors of fathers. This is the challenge the Safe Engagement model addresses. How do we avail children of the positive potential of fathers' involvement while proactively addressing the behaviors that may make fathers' involvement traumatic to children rather than supportive? How do we support father's capacity to improve the lives of their families while respecting the parenting efforts of mothers and never compromising on the right of mothers and children to be safe in their homes?

***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

## The Process for Developing Recommendations

The Connecticut Department of Social Services, in collaboration with state and community partners, is committed to developing a model response that creates a seamless approach that meets the challenge of safely engaging fathers who engage in domestic violence and addresses the broader needs of families. The Department has contracted with David Mandel and Associates to develop a model approach for fatherhood programming to address the intersection of domestic violence and fatherhood. This report aims to articulate this model approach, referred to as the ***Safe Engagement*** model.

The recommendations contained in this report were developed through a series of activities aimed at gathering information about the current practices for responding to domestic violence by fatherhood programs and soliciting suggestions from responsible fatherhood program providers and community stakeholders on the design of a model response by responsible fatherhood program providers to domestic violence. It was also understood that fatherhood programs are just one part of a coordinated community response to domestic violence. For this reason, another important goal was to evaluate how fatherhood program might best coordinate with other providers of domestic violence services to fathers, specifically batterer intervention programs.

Primary activities employed in the development of the Safe Engagement model included:

- (1) Review of fatherhood curriculum and materials: Current forms, materials and curricula were reviewed as an initial step in developing the recommendations included in this report. This review included forms used by state-certified fatherhood programs. Curricula reviewed included Healthy Marriage in Fragile Families (Program for Couples), Money Smart, 24/7 Dads and InsideOut Dads. The review also included curriculum used by batterer intervention services to address fatherhood and the impact of domestic violence on children. These resources included Caring Dads, and Addressing Fatherhood with Men who Batter.
- (2) Program and Stakeholder surveys: Online surveys were developed to solicit information from Responsible Fatherhood program providers and state and community stakeholders. Forty seven responses were received from the Promoting Responsible Fatherhood program provider survey. Of these, 79% of respondents identified as being part of a state-certified fatherhood program. Fifty one responses were received from the survey for state and local partners in the John S. Martinez Fatherhood Initiative of Connecticut and additional community stakeholders.
- (3) Responsible Fatherhood Program provider and stakeholder focus group: In June 2011, a statewide focus group was held with both Responsible Fatherhood program providers and state and community stakeholders. A total of fifty stakeholders were in attendance. The focus group provided an opportunity for fatherhood program providers and community and state stakeholders to (1) consider key findings from the Promoting Responsible Fatherhood surveys for program providers and stakeholders, (2) discuss the current state of practice of fatherhood programs regarding the identification of and response to domestic violence, (3) discuss the appropriate role of fatherhood programs in providing domestic violence

***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

programming and (4) identify specific steps that can be taken to strengthen the capacity of fatherhood programs to identify and respond to domestic violence.

Information gathered from all of these activities was used to inform the development of recommendations for best practice regarding programming for fathers with a history or pattern of coercive control with partners included in this report.

## **The Foundation of *Safe Engagement*: What children need most from fathers is safe co-parenting**

There is nothing children need more from their fathers than for them to engage in a safe and positive relationship with their mother. Children are harmed when fathers engage in a pattern of coercive control against their mothers. Conversely, children's lives can improve when fathers stop engaging in domestic violence. More broadly, children benefit when fathers make efforts to improve the quality of their relationships with their co-parents. All of this is true regardless of whether a father resides with his children and their mother or not.

The ***Safe Engagement*** model is designed to help fathers respond to this most basic need of their children. **The foundation of the *Safe Engagement* model is that a safe and positive relationship with mothers is central to being a good father.** This foundation guides good practice in promoting stronger co-parenting by fathers, effective assessment of coercive control and domestic violence, and appropriate responses when safety is an issue. The model supports Responsible Fatherhood programs in conscientiously promoting safe and positive relationships with mothers into all programming for all fathers, including appropriate interventions to respond to coercive behaviors when they are identified.

This comprehensive approach allows the model to be appropriate for the range of fathers participating in fatherhood programming. ***The Safe Engagement*** model:

- (1) Helps fathers who have are not engaging in a pattern of coercive control strengthen their relationship with the mother of their children.
- (2) Helps fathers who have already been identified as currently engaging in a pattern of coercive control eliminate these behaviors and improve the safety of their families.
- (3) Helps fathers who are not currently being abusive but whose families continue to face the impacts of their past abuse address this impact and support healing of their children and co-parent.
- (4) Ensures that fathers who are currently engaging in coercive behaviors that have not been identified through a screening process are exposed to education about domestic violence and challenged to set goals about safe and responsible co-parenting.

**In practice, this integrated approach means all fathers are encouraged to set goals related to improving their relationship with their children's mothers and provided with basic information about domestic violence. This practice is implemented regardless of the reason for a father's participation in a fatherhood program and whether any history of domestic violence has been documented because**

***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

**of the inherent benefits for children. For some, goals could focus on eliminating threatening behaviors, while for others they could be related to improving communication about parenting decisions.**

An integrated focus on safe co-parenting reduces the resistance from fathers and staff members to talking about issues related to domestic violence. This child-focused approach implies that all children benefit when fathers focus on goals associated with safe and positive relationships with their children's mother. It also avoids the perception that we are looking for things that fathers have done wrong. Instead we are always helping fathers look for ways improve as parents and strengthen relationships that matter to their children. It also addresses some of the challenges of screening for domestic violence and does not result in staff members waiting for issues of domestic violence to be identified and documented before important conversations about family safety can be discussed.

This integrated approach responds to the concern of fatherhood programs about preserving their ability to build relationships with fathers that promote engagement and retention of fathers. During the focus group, some responsible fatherhood program providers expressed concern about the resistance that fathers demonstrate to talking about domestic violence and how this resistance presents an obstacle to their relationship building. Without positive relationships, programs run the risk of fathers dropping out. By placing conversations about domestic violence in a context which is child centered and that doesn't just focus on what fathers may be doing "wrong", this approach can preserve (and possibly enhance) program's ability to engage fathers, reduce resistance to discussions about coercive behaviors, and increase overall education about domestic violence.

***Safe Engagement*** also means that a focus on the quality of a father's relationship with his co-parent will be an ongoing component of case management services. Too often, it is assumed that the goal of case management is to refer to programming. Case management however offers a significant opportunity to engage fathers in conversations that support accountability and motivate positive behavior change. As such, case management is central to the behavior change goals of responsible fatherhood. Case managers, particularly those who are male, can play a powerful role models for respectful partnerships and co-parenting.

Implementing this integrated approach requires commitment and ongoing support. Fully implemented, it can produce an enhanced systemic approach to domestic violence that can improve the lives of fathers, mothers and children. It can be accomplished with important but relatively limited changes in program policies, practices, and forms. However, fully realizing the potential of this approach relies heavily on engagement skills, conceptual clarity, interagency collaboration, and ongoing support of staff. It must be supported within the culture of fatherhood programs. Without these, changes to forms and policies will be shallow changes in practice unlikely to produce significant changes in family safety.

### **Embracing the full scope of safe and positive relationships**

The ***Safe Engagement*** model is grounded in recognition of the benefit to children of fathers' safe and positive relationships with mothers. Being realistic and safe, the model recognizes the full range of

***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

possible arrangements for fathers to engage in safe and positive relationships with mothers. Safe and positive may mean that a father resides with his family, sharing parenting responsibilities fairly and demonstrating respect for his partner through his daily practice as a partner. A father may not reside with his family but have shared custody or visitation while still demonstrating the ability to focus on the best interests of his children and negotiating the challenges of co-parenting with respect and a commitment to safety.

**Importantly, the *Safe Engagement* model also recognizes that some fathers are not capable of and not all mothers are interested in co-parenting. Some fathers have engaged in behaviors that have caused so much trauma that their ongoing involvement is an obstacle to their children’s recovery and well-being. In other cases, fathers have been ordered by the court to avoid any contact or involvement as a result of the harmful behaviors in which they have engaged. In these cases, safe and positive relationships with mothers may mean limiting contact or avoiding contact all together. It may mean parenting is limited to responsibly fulfilling one’s financial obligations to the family.**

*The Safe Engagement model recognizes that safe and positive relationships with mother may mean anything from a father’s full involvement in the daily routine of his family to having no contact whatsoever.*

As such, the ***Safe Engagement*** model recognizes that safe and positive relationships with mother may mean anything from a father’s full involvement in the daily routine of his family to having no contact whatsoever. The model embraces the significant positive benefits that fathers’ involvement may offer to children and that the appropriate level of involvement an individual father is guided by the behaviors that father engages in and the impacts of these behaviors on his partner(s) and children.

### ***Guiding principles for Safe Engagement***

Fatherhood programs have a strong foundation upon which to build an effective response to domestic violence and its impacts. Programs possess extensive experience in working collaboratively with community partners, in addressing personal, cultural and institutional barriers faced by fathers and developing cooperative relationship with fathers. Program leaders have also demonstrated enthusiastic support for improving practice that reflects their personal and programmatic commitment to family safety.

Efforts to enhance fatherhood program response to domestic violence must build upon this foundation through further integration of principles and practices that support family safety. Developing a model for responding to domestic violence within fatherhood programs is driven by the following guiding principles:

1. **Respect for mothers/co-parents is a fundamental element of responsible fatherhood.** It is not possible for a father to disrespect or hurt a child’s mother and not negatively affect the child

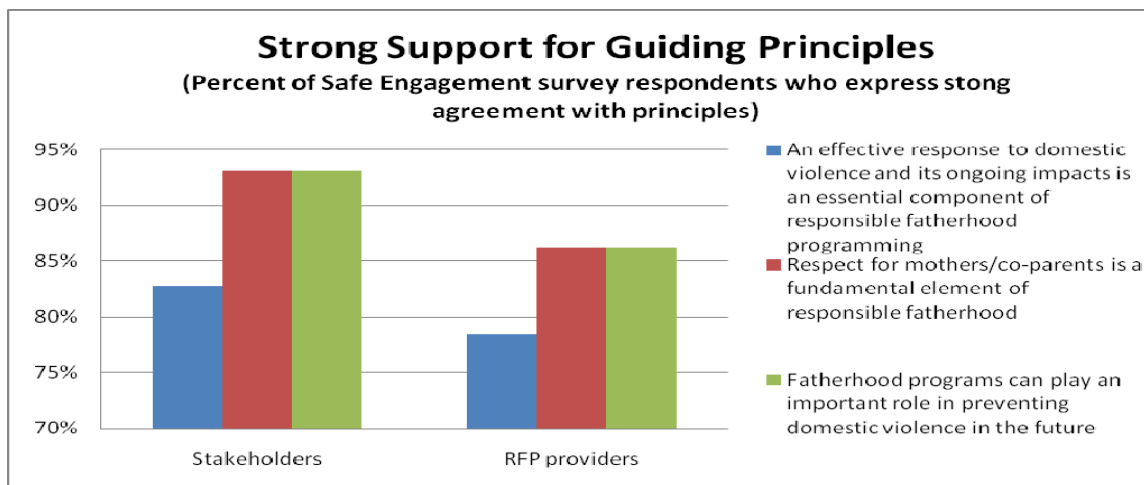


*Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:*  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

themselves. Failure to respect the safety of a partner/co-parent undermines the potential positive benefits of a father’s involvement in his children’s lives. It is important that program reinforce this message to all fathers. For children exposed to fathers who have been abusive, the absence of abusive behavior may not be enough to support the healing and healthy development of these children. These children in particular need to see their fathers demonstrating active support and respect for their mothers whether they reside together or not.

- 2. An effective response to domestic violence and its ongoing impacts is an essential component of responsible fatherhood programming.** Given the essential role that respect for mother/co-parents plays in responsible fatherhood and the harmful effect of domestic violence on children, fatherhood programming must necessarily incorporate an effective response to domestic violence. The high prevalence of domestic violence and coercive control perpetrated by fathers also necessitates an effective response by Responsible Fatherhood programs. This response must help fathers identify abusive behavior, understand the impacts of their current and past abusive and increase motivation to seek appropriate help and change behavior. It must also incorporate a focus on the prevention of domestic violence and the unique roles that men can play in creating families and communities in which domestic violence is not tolerated.
- 3. Fatherhood programs can play an important role in preventing domestic violence in the future.** Men in general, but fathers specifically, can play a powerful and unique role in the creation of family and community settings that promote safety and challenge violence against women and children. Through direct relationships with fathers, responsible fatherhood programs possess great potential in supporting domestic violence prevention and intervention efforts in ways that are culturally meaningful to fathers.

Support for these guiding principles was extremely high among respondents to both the Safe Engagement fatherhood program and stakeholder surveys.



This high level of support provides a solid foundation for the Safe Engagement model.

## **A shared perspective on domestic violence: an essential aspect of *Safe Engagement***

Building effective practice related to domestic violence must be built on a comprehensive understanding of domestic violence and those who choose to perpetrate it. The following are key principles about domestic violence upon which practice recommendation in this model are based:

1. **Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive behaviors perpetrated by one partner against another.** Perpetrators of domestic violence can use coercive behavior in any range of intimate relationships, including relationships between current and former partners who are not co-habiting and in relationships that have ended. Their behavior may have been perpetrated in the past with ongoing impact still experienced by the family. The coercive behaviors perpetrators engage in include but are not limited to physical assaults. They also include behaviors that can be defined as criminal acts as well as many others that while abusive are not criminal behavior. The patterns of coercive control engaged in by men who batter routinely include behaviors involving children.
2. **There is significant variation in the coercive behavior patterns engaged in by individual perpetrators.** Fathers who engage in patterns of coercive control will vary in the specific behaviors that they engage in. Some may engage in physical assaults. Others may not. This is also true for the full range of coercive behaviors men who batter engage in. The variations in coercive behavior can vary over time. They reflect differences in the behaviors fathers are willing to engage in as well as different determinations of what behaviors will be effective based on the perpetrators' knowledge of their partners vulnerabilities.

Variation also exists in the frequency and severity of coercive behaviors. Some may engage in abusive behaviors regularly while others may choose to be abusive less frequently. Some fathers may choose to push a partner while others may use weapons and cause serious injury. The severity and/or frequency of coercive behaviors for any individual father may also vary over time.

These variations will also be reflected in perpetrators' behaviors toward their children and in their parenting styles. In many cases, the behaviors perpetrated against partners (as well as the attitudes that support them) will also be reflected in parenting behaviors as well. As a result levels of dangerousness and potential for change will also vary greatly.

Efforts to engage fathers who abuse and appropriate intervention should vary according to an ongoing assessment of each father's behaviors, the impacts of these behaviors on the family, and the risk that the father poses to his children and co-parent.

3. **Domestic violence is a choice.** Being abusive to a partner is a choice that fathers who engage in domestic violence make. Their behavior is not the result of a skills deficit, substance abuse or

***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

mental health issues. This choice is often rooted in unrealistic expectations about relationships, gender and family. It persists because of the tangible benefits that derive from it. As a choice, fathers have the ability to choose whether or not they engage in this behavior regardless of external circumstances or the behaviors of others. As a result, the capacity for choosing to be a responsible parent and respectful co-parent exists regardless of intervention program or necessarily the need for specific skill building or acquisition.

*The foundation of the Safe Engagement model is that safe and positive relationships with mothers are central to being a good father.*

4. **Domestic violence and the values/social norms that support it are strongly influenced by culture.** In each culture, there are values, traditions and practices that support abusive and coercive relationships and there are also values, traditions and practices that support and promote safe and respectful relationships. To fully understand men’s choices to abuse their partners and children requires exploring the cultural meaning that these behaviors have for men. These behaviors are frequently grounded in cultural norms related to gender, gender roles, and relationships. Identifying and supporting motivations to change behavior also requires an exploration of culture and cultural resources available to individual men. Culturally relevant engagement strategies are an important element of addressing the disproportionate numbers of low income children and children of color in the child welfare system and of low income men and men of color in the criminal justice system.
5. **The person responsible for the harm/impacts is the person who engaged in the behavior causing the harm/impact.** Domestic violence is not the result of a dysfunctional family system or bad relationship in which responsibility for behaviors are shared. Supporting fathers’ acceptance of responsibility for their behavior and its impacts is an essential component of supporting behavior change and reflects a strengths-based approach recognizing fathers’ capacity for change. Focusing on accountability for behavior does not need to conflict with recognition of other obstacles or issues that men may face in their lives such as homelessness, discrimination, or mental health issues.
6. **Domestic violence causes long term impacts for the whole family.** These impacts must be considered and addressed throughout our work with families even if the behaviors were committed in the past or the partners are not longer in relationship. Identifying and understanding the long-term impacts of domestic violence on a father’s parenting relationship and the needs of his children are fundamental to supporting responsible fatherhood.

## **Core Components of the *Safe Engagement* model**

The ***Safe Engagement*** model is built on the premise that there is nothing a child needs more from their father than safe and positive co-parenting. For this reason, ***Safe Engagement*** fully integrates the promotion of safe and positive relationships with mothers into programming for all fathers, including appropriate interventions to respond to coercive behaviors when they are identified.

The implementation in practice of the ***Safe Engagement model*** is built around six core components. These six core components are intended support the integration of the model into the daily practice of family engagement, program policies and procedures and interagency collaboration.

The ***Safe Engagement*** core components include:

1. All fathers are provided opportunities to develop individualized behavioral goals related to safe and positive co-parenting regardless of the documented presence of patterns of coercive control.
2. A comprehensive process for screening for domestic violence and coercive control is conducted with all fathers.
3. When domestic violence or coercive control is identified, fathers are engaged appropriately and offered appropriate resources and programming.
4. Responsible Fatherhood program staff members receive appropriate training and supervision about domestic violence and engaging abusive fathers to support the ***Safe Engagement*** model.
5. Agencies providing Responsible Fatherhood programming maintain appropriate policies to support safe engagement.
6. Agencies providing Responsible Fatherhood programming maintain appropriate collaboration to support ***Safe Engagement***.

***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

**Safe Engagement Core Component #1: All fathers are provided opportunities to develop individualized behavioral goals related to safe and positive co-parenting regardless of the documented presence of a pattern of coercive control.**

There is nothing a child needs more from their father than safe and positive co-parenting. For this reason, **Safe Engagement** encourages all fathers to set goals for improving their relationship with their children's mother(s) regardless of the reason for their initial involvement in the program.

**Implementation recommendations:**

- (1) Responsible Fatherhood programs include discussion of the importance of safe and positive co-parenting and opportunity for individualized goal setting into the initial contact with fathers.** Because safe and positive co-parenting is so crucial to children, establishing personal goals related to this component of responsible fatherhood is appropriate to do with all fathers regardless of the reasons for a father's involvement with the program.
  
- (2) Responsible Fatherhood programs revise intake and services planning documents to provide for specific goal setting related to safe and positive co-parenting.** The current Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Service Plan used by certified fatherhood programs provides encourages fathers to identify specific goals. With only slight modification, this goal setting process can encourage identification of specific goals related to safe and positive co-parenting.
  
- (3) Responsible Fatherhood programs ensure that discussions about safe and positive co-parenting goals are included in case management on an ongoing basis.** While programming resources provide fathers with opportunities to explore strategies for exploring motivations to change and for learning new skills and knowledge, case management support offers fathers a chance to set goals, synthesize their learning and explore resources to support their success. Case management also offers opportunities for role modeling and accountability. For these reasons, ongoing discussion between fathers and their case managers is an essential part of supporting behavioral goals related to safe and positive co-parenting.
  
- (4) Responsible Fatherhood programs provide education about domestic violence and its effects in all healthy relationship and parenting programming.** The **Safe Engagement** model focuses on supporting all fathers in engaging in safe and positive relationships with mothers regardless of their personal histories of engaging in domestic violence. As discussed earlier, the fathers engaged in fatherhood program services will vary in regard to their personal histories of domestic violence and coercive control. For those with histories of coercive control, these behaviors may or may not be documented through the screening process. Consequently, it is important to provide education to all fathers about domestic violence and its impacts. For men without histories of abuse to partners, this focus helps build their commitment to safety and respectful co-parenting and can provide new opportunities to assert leadership within their social networks. This focus can also help men whose histories of abuse and/or disrespect of partners are undocumented or in very early stages to learn about abuse and hopefully motivate

***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

them to seek help for these behaviors. All efforts should be culturally relevant to men and build on cultural themes/norms that resonate.

***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

**Safe Engagement Core Component #2: Responsible Fatherhood programs engage in a comprehensive process for screening for domestic violence and coercive control with all fathers.**

The prevalence of domestic violence within the population of fathers served by fatherhood programs is high. An effective screening process for domestic violence is an essential element of the Safe Engagement model. While it is likely that screening process may not identify all fathers who are engaging in a pattern of coercive control (or have in the past), it is important that the screening process maximize the potential for identification of domestic violence. Many fathers will resist acknowledging their behaviors. Consequently, the screening process must be informed by as many sources of information, including the voices of partners, as possible.

Information collected during the current screening process at Connecticut’s certified fatherhood programs document the high prevalence of domestic violence among program participants. The data also appears to show some inconsistency in the levels of domestic violence documented. The following chart reflects participant responses to the question “Have you engaged in any of the following behaviors: Insult your partner or put them down, swear at them, or threaten them?”

	Aggregate	Career Resources	Families in Crisis	Family Strides	Madonna Place	New Haven Family Alliance	New Opportunities, Inc.
N=2927							
Never	30.6%	33.6%	21.1%	24.9%	21.5%	35.6%	41.1%
A few times	38.3%	26.1%	31.3%	39.3%	25.1%	21.2%	28.8%
Sometimes	14.6%	7.8%	17.9%	20.2%	24%	7.7%	11.4%
Often	2.9%	2%	3.4%	2.4%	5.8%	1.6%	2.5%
Always	0.6%	0.6%	1.6%	0%	0.8%	0.2%	0.7%
Unknown	23%	29.9%	24.6%	13.2%	22.8%	33.8%	15.4%

The information collected from participants may reflect some differences in populations that the programs work with or may indicate differences within the screening process. Variation can be supported by difference in staff comfort with asking questions about domestic violence, the degree to which talking about domestic violence is consider part of the program’s role with participants or other factors. The fairly high rate of answers that are “unknown” also make analysis difficult. It would be helpful to understands what contributes to this rate. In general, a significant number of fathers are reporting coercive behaviors against their partners.

**Implementation recommendations:**

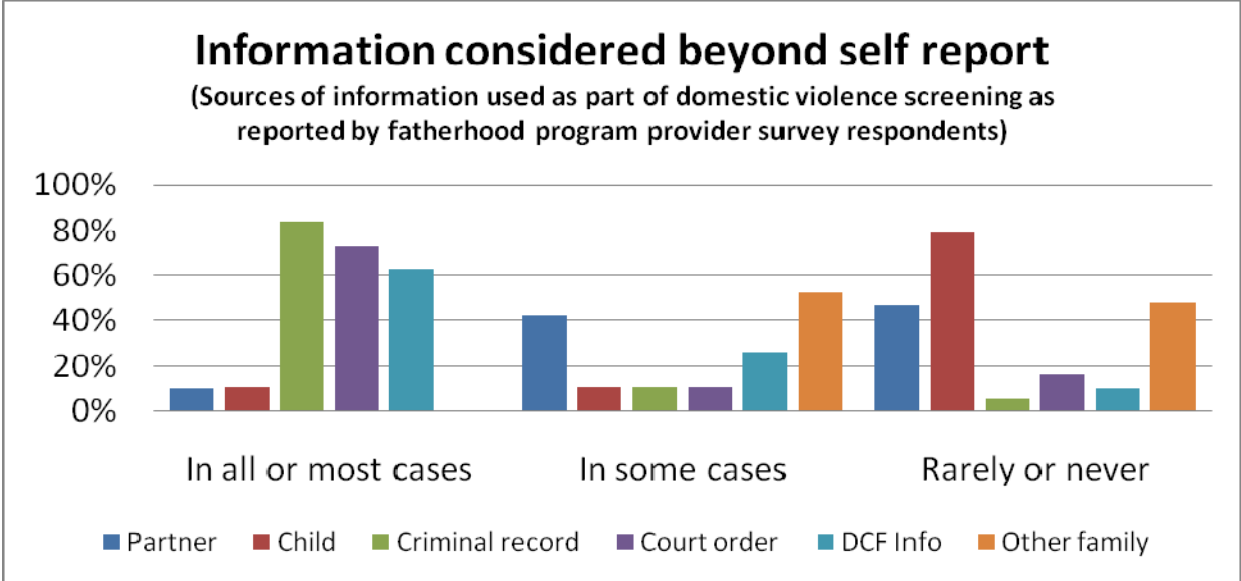
- (1) Responsible Fatherhood programs review and update screening and intake forms to ensure that screening questions reflect a comprehensive definition of domestic violence and coercive**

*Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:*  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

**control.** This screening must explore the potential presence of both past and current coercive behaviors including efforts to undermine the authority of a co-parent and to use children (or issues related to children and parenting) as weapons against a co-parent. Current questions focus primarily on physical assault.

*Screening for domestic violence and coercive control must assess for both current and past behaviors, including behaviors toward previous partners.*

**(2) Responsible Fatherhood programs ensure that screening for domestic violence includes information from a broad range of sources.** The quality of screening for domestic violence is often dependent on the quality of information informing the assessment process. Responses to the Responsible Fatherhood program provider survey indicate that screening for domestic violence relies most heavily on fathers’ self-reports and formal system documentation, such as criminal records, DCF records, and court orders. Forty three percent of survey respondents indicated that they rely solely on a father’s self report.



**(3) Responsible Fatherhood programs ensure screening for domestic violence considers the ongoing impacts of past domestic violence.** The impacts and trauma of past behavior have lasting effects that are relevant to efforts to support responsible fatherhood. Understanding these impacts can provide context to children’s behavior(s), obstacles to co-parenting, and stepfathers can take to support safety and healing for their families.

**(4) Responsible Fatherhood programs engage in ongoing assessment of risk factors related to lethality and severe violence.** The risk posed by individual domestic violence perpetrators to



***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

their partners and children vary and can change greatly in short periods of time. Research has revealed a range of static and dynamic factors commonly associated with increased risk of lethality and severe violence with which people who work with men who batter should be familiar.

***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

**Safe Engagement Core Component #3: When domestic violence or coercive control is identified, fathers are engaged appropriately and offered appropriate resources and programming.**

An effective response to domestic violence is an essential component of the ***Safe Engagement*** model. Once it has been identified that a father has engaged in a pattern of coercive control in the past or is currently engaging in one, strategies for engaging the father and resources offered should be guided by the specific history of behaviors, the impact the behaviors have had on his family, and the risk he poses to his family. Some abusive fathers may still be appropriate for traditional parenting and healthy relationship programming in combination with target support around coercive behaviors. For others, a more specialized intervention focusing on coercive behaviors and victim safety will be appropriate. Case planning decisions should be guided by a structure decision making framework informed by an ongoing assessment of risk.

**Implementation recommendations:**

- (1) When coercive control is documented, Responsible Fatherhood program assist fathers in developing behavioral goals relevant to these behaviors and their impacts.** Supporting responsible co-parenting involves supporting fathers who have been abusive in defining specific behavior goals that are directly relevant to ending their pattern of coercive control, provide for the safety and healing of others impacted by their behavior, and are personally meaningful and realistic. These goals should be behavioral, not programmatic. For example, rather than focusing on participation in batterer intervention programming, an appropriate goal might be for a father to “end any further intimidating behavior towards any family member, including threats take the children.” Program referrals and participation can support achievement of behavioral goals but on their own do not constitute behavior change or success.
  
- (2) Responsible Fatherhood programs maintain a clear and consistent decision making process based on a structured assessment of risk to guide decisions about appropriate programming for fathers with histories of coercive control.** Responses to the Promoting Responsible Fatherhood surveys and discussion at the ***Safe Engagement*** focus group indicate decisions made about how to respond to fathers once domestic violence is documented are often informal and can be inconsistent. It is appropriate that decisions about appropriate programming and referrals should be individualized given the variation in coercive behaviors, relationship status, and the level of risk posed. A father with a pattern of coercive control that is very limited or occurred a long time ago may be appropriate for traditional healthy relationship programming supported by case manager knowledgeable about the history of abuse. A father with a significant and/or current pattern of coercive control with ongoing contact with his children would be appropriate for a more specialized domestic violence intervention such as batterer intervention program. However, over the course of time decisions about appropriate programming for abusive fathers should be based on consistent criteria and information.

*Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:*  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

**(3) The Department of Social Services and Responsible Fatherhood programs initiate local or regional stakeholder processes to establish collaborative agreements about the appropriate roles for responsible fatherhood and batterer intervention programs in serving fathers with histories of coercive control.** One of the most frequent challenges voiced by both survey respondents and focus group participants was the availability of and access to specialized domestic violence programming for fathers with histories of domestic violence. In some areas, programming was simply not available and in others programming was available but eligibility was restricted by the source of referrals and/or funding sources. Expanding access could be accomplished through a number of options including expanding access to existing batterer intervention programs or developing new programming within fatherhood programs. The appropriate solution for one community may not be preferred option for another. Determining the best option for each community requires local dialogue between all relevant stakeholders supported by those who provide funding for fatherhood and batterer intervention programming.

**(4) Responsible Fatherhood programs ensure fathers referred for specialized domestic violence intervention programming are referred to appropriate programming and resources.** Programming to address domestic violence and responsible parenting must remain focused on coercive behaviors and expectations for positive behavior change. Responses to the Responsible Fatherhood program provider survey indicated that fathers with histories of coercive control are frequently referred to anger management and individual counseling. This can be because services are not available or that access is limited to certain referral agencies or funding sources. This can also be due to the resistance of fathers and the comfort level of staff members. **Responsible Fatherhood Programs that choose to provide specialized domestic violence programming should maintain appropriate policies and practices.** Fatherhood programs could responsibly provide specialized domestic violence programming such as batterer intervention programming. Doing so though requires additional skills, collaboration and expertise without which such programming could not be responsibly provided. Programs choosing to explore this option must, at a minimum, address the following requirement:

- a. Use recognized curriculum reviewed and approved in collaboration with local domestic violence advocates,
- b. Recruit staff with an appropriate combination of knowledge of domestic violence, group facilitation skills, ability to engage abusive fathers, and commitment to the safety and perspective of batterer women and their children,
- c. Provide ongoing training for staff, in collaboration with domestic violence experts
- d. Provide ongoing supervision by a person familiar with batterer intervention services, and
- e. Develop collaborative agreements with victim service providers and referring agencies regarding risk assessment, partner contact procedures, and completion and dismissal criteria.

*Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:*  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

**(5) The Department of Social Services supports a pilot program for fathers with documented histories of domestic violence operated within an agency that runs a state-certified fatherhood program.** Based on the outcome of the local or regional stakeholder processes, the Department should identify an opportunity to pilot programming for fathers with documented patterns of coercive control against partners located within an existing fatherhood program. Such a pilot should be developed in collaboration with local domestic violence service providers and should be consistent with the Safe Engagement model implemented throughout the fatherhood program.

*Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:*  
Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming

***Safe Engagement Core Component #4: Responsible Fatherhood program staff members receive appropriate training and supervision about domestic violence and engaging abusive fathers to support the Safe Engagement model.***

Implementation of the **Safe Engagement** model requires staff who can engage fathers effectively, possess an understanding domestic violence and its impacts, can consistently apply the principles of **Safe Engagement**. Staff members must demonstrate the same comfort level in asking about and exploring coercive behaviors as they possess around alcohol/drug use, criminal behavior and incarceration, and employment and financial issues. They must be comfortable that promoting safe and responsible relationships with mothers is a core part of their jobs.

**Implementation recommendations:**

**(1) Responsible Fatherhood programs provide staff members with adequate, appropriate and ongoing training and supervision in collaboration with domestic violence experts.**

Effective practice with families impacted by domestic violence requires staff members who possess relevant skills and knowledge. Staff training must provide staff members with:

- a. an understanding of the focus on safe and positive relationships with mothers as a core component of their work with families,
- b. skills to engage fathers in effective discussions of and goal setting around co-parenting,
- c. an adequate understanding of domestic violence and its impacts on families including the screen for domestic violence and assess the safety risk posed by abusive fathers,
- d. the capacity to explore underlying attitudes about abuse and cultural norms related to gender, and
- e. The ability to engage in critical dialogue about the role of race, gender and culture in relationship to domestic violence and expectations of fathers and mothers.

*Staff training and supervision should help staff acknowledge and effectively manage personal biases about domestic violence.*

**(2) Staff members have skills to effectively engage fathers in direct discussions about domestic violence and responsible fatherhood in a manner that supports ongoing engagement and involvement.**

Effective practice with fathers requires staff to be aware of personal, interpersonal and cultural barriers to responsible fatherhood and to have skills in building and maintaining effective relationships with fathers even when talking about behaviors that fathers may feel resistant to discussing. Staff members must be capable of talking comfortably about violence in a direct manner without collusion or power struggles. For examples, staff member need to feel comfortable talking directly about tactics like name calling and threats without relying on general terms like “fighting”, “anger” or “bad temper.” These skills also include the

***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

ability to build relationship with fathers while effectively addressing victim blaming and efforts to shift responsibility for abuse. Staff members should be capable of engaging in discussions about domestic violence with men from different cultural backgrounds.

**(3) Responsible Fatherhood programs provide frontline staff members with supervision from someone capable of supporting staff in the implementation of the *Safe Engagement* model.**

The success of the *Safe Engagement* model relies on the creation of an organizational culture that supports its implementation and effectiveness. Staff supervision and supervisory support plays a critical role in the creation of this culture. In particular, supervision should help staff members manage their personal response to and biases about domestic violence and avoid victim blaming and collusion.

**(4) The Department of Social Services, in collaboration with Responsible Fatherhood program providers, develops an ongoing training resource curriculum and program to support implementation of the *Safe Engagement* model on a statewide basis.**

A well trained workforce is central to the successful implementation of the *Safe Engagement* model. While individual programs have a responsibility to ensure that staff members are adequately trained, a statewide training resource could help provide more consistent training at less cost than each program attempting to dedicate scarce financial resources to program specific training.

**(5) Responsible Fatherhood programs invite local and state victim advocacy and shelter providers and batterer intervention programs to participate in and contribute to training on domestic violence for program staff.**

Domestic violence advocates and batterer intervention program staff possess information that can help Responsible Fatherhood programs to implement the *Safe Engagement* model. This form of collaborative training can help build interagency relationships and be a foundation for greater information and resource sharing.

*Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:*  
Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming

***Safe Engagement Core Component #5: Responsible Fatherhood programming maintain appropriate policies to support Safe Engagement***

The Safe Engagement model relies heavily on the assessment and engagement practices of direct service staff members. To be fully successful, the daily practices of staff members must be supported by appropriate policies and procedures.

**Implementation recommendations:**

- (1) The Department of Social Services, in collaboration with the John S. Martinez Fatherhood Initiative network, updates the current statewide standards for fatherhood programs to reflect the Safe Engagement model.** The Department of Social Services already facilitates a certification process for fatherhood programs based on seven nationally-developed standards. Integrating the *Safe Engagement* model into the statewide standards provides Departmental support for the integration of the model into program policies and practices. It also provides opportunity for the evaluation of program's efforts to implement the model in practice.
  
- (2) Responsible Fatherhood programs update program policies to reflect a comprehensive definition of domestic violence and its impacts.** A comprehensive definition of domestic violence includes both current and past assaultive and non-assaultive coercive behaviors, including efforts to undermine the authority of a co-parent and to use children (or issues related to children and parenting) as weapons against a co-parent. Current statewide standards require fatherhood programs to have a domestic violence protocol. However, these protocols tend to be fairly limited in scope. These protocols should be expanded to provide a foundation for a more comprehensive approach to identifying and addressing domestic violence and coercive control.
  
- (3) Responsible Fatherhood programs provide their domestic violence protocols to their local domestic violence advocacy agency for review and comment before the protocol is adopted and when changes are proposed.** Providing opportunities for domestic violence advocates and survivors of domestic violence to contribute to the formation of program policies can strengthen both the policies and the interagency collaborations between fatherhood and domestic violence service agencies. Ideally fatherhood programs could demonstrate the efforts to respond to the feedback they receive from advocates and survivors.
  
- (4) Responsible Fatherhood programs provide opportunities survivors of domestic violence to inform program policy and practice.** Demonstrating respect for co-parents and mothers is an essential element of responsible fatherhood. Fatherhood programs model this commitment when they provide direct and meaningful opportunities for survivors of domestic violence to have a voice in the development of program policies and practices that will affect their lives.

***Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:***  
**Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming**

**(5) Responsible Fatherhood programs possess organizational leadership with expertise in domestic violence.** An organization's board of directors or advisory board and program administrators should possess experience and knowledge for the development of domestic violence policy and oversight of domestic violence practice. Fatherhood programs should include at least one person with experience in domestic violence policy and practice on their board of directors or advisory board. Ideally, program leadership at this level will include at least one person with experience representing survivors of domestic violence.

**(6) The Department of Social Services, in collaboration with fatherhood and domestic violence service programs, develop appropriate outcomes and indicators of success to evaluate implementation of the *Safe Engagement* model.** The development of an effective evaluation process provides important information about how well the *Safe Engagement* model is being implemented and how the lives of participants and their families are being affected. The evaluation process must allow for analysis of whether fathers are setting and meeting goals related to safe and positive co-parenting.

Efforts to track and evaluate outcomes related to violence cessation and prevention must maintain a direct connection between coercive behaviors and family safety. Improvements in a father's health, well-being or financial security or increased access to his children may in no way indicate an increase in his family's safety. It is also important to maintain a distinction between behavioral outcomes (e.g cessation of physical assaults, increased respect for co-parent relationship with child, demonstrate support for child's healing, etc.) and completion of programming or curriculum components. While completion of programming is a helpful performance indicator it does not substitute for indicators of behavior change.



*Safe Engagement of Fathers When Domestic Violence is Present:*  
Building a model response to domestic violence within Responsible Fatherhood Programming

***Safe Engagement Core Component #6: Agencies providing Responsible Fatherhood programming maintain appropriate collaboration to support Safe Engagement***

The successful implementation of the **Safe Engagement** model requires active collaboration between Responsible Fatherhood programs and other service providers, particularly other domestic violence service providers. Particularly when safety issues related to domestic violence are identified, the **Safe Engagement** model reflects the important concept of a coordinated response to domestic violence. The strength of a community's efforts to protect the safety and autonomy of survivors and to promote accountability and behavior change of domestic violence offenders stems from the ability of the community to coordinate its efforts to engage the family in appropriate ways. Both fatherhood program providers and community stakeholders identified enhanced collaborations as one of the most important elements of an improved response to abusive fathers.

**Implementation recommendations:**

- (1) Responsible Fatherhood programs collaborate with community partners to support victim safety, accountability and positive behavior change.** Supporting abusive fathers to engage in positive behavior change often requires building formal and informal systems for holding fathers accountable for their behavior and for following through on commitments. Child protection, probation officers, courts, employers, counselors and others can work with fatherhood programs to strengthen the social expectation for safety and respectful behavior.
- (2) Responsible Fatherhood Programs and domestic violence advocacy organizations maintain and formalize cooperative relationships.** Respondents to the Responsible Fatherhood program provider survey indicated that informal collaboration with domestic violence service providers is common but informal. The development of formal collaboration agreements can strengthen services to families while providing opportunities to support consistent practice, improve information and resource sharing and develop other interagency collaborative efforts. Such agreements can also provide a venue for resolving obstacles to interagency collaboration.

*Ongoing collaboration with domestic violence advocates is an important strategy for ensuring that the perspective of survivors is integrated into program policy and practice.*