



Domestic violence in the Child Protection System: Seeing Double

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As we recognize the child welfare implications of domestic violence, complex issues of practice and policy result. Training child protective workers on domestic violence is a necessary but insufficient response. We are at an early point in our learning about the dynamics of family violence seen as both a child welfare and a woman's issue. Best practice for families where children and women are both at risk benefits from "seeing double," drawing from the knowledge, and values of both a child protective and a women's advocacy perspective. To this end, on-going collaborative relationships with the opportunity for case-specific consultation are important. This paper draws on experience with the Domestic Violence Unit of the Massachusetts Department of Social Services to illustrate issues that arise as we work toward child protective practices that attend to the rights and safety of children and their non-abusive parent.

We know now that domestic violence is a child welfare issue, and initiatives to respond to domestic violence within child protection services are increasing (Aron & Olson, 1997; National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 1998). These initiatives draw from the radically different perspectives of the Battered Women's Movement and Child Protection System (CPS). However, the practice implications of these two traditions and perspectives are not easily combined. The major point in this paper is that they cannot be fully combined given the present systems, and that it is important to have both engaged in practice and policy issues. This is possible if there are ongoing consultations and conversations between the two, which means creating new structures in which both perspectives are represented. Each tradition brings knowledge, practice wisdom, and values that cannot easily be replicated by the other. The tension between their priorities is a useful tension. There are advantages to seeing double.

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This paper begins with a brief review of the research on the overlap between abuse of women and maltreatment of children and an outline of the perspectives of both traditions. Discussion follows of issues identified by child protective supervisors in Boston, Massachusetts about work with domestic violence situations. Difficult questions of policy and practice arise if we attend seriously to the rights and safety of both women and children within a public child protection system.

I have a bias. There is a variety of reform efforts in child protective systems in the United States. In general, however, Child Protection is a crisis-oriented system with authoritative interventions closely linked to an adversarial judicial system (M. Webber, 1998). Such interventions are required when children's lives and safety are at risk. I worry that in our collective alarm about the effects of domestic violence on children we will move too quickly to new policies and laws extending the mandate of CPS to situations of domestic violence that would not otherwise be in the system. I think we do not yet know enough to do this wisely. It also seems to me very difficult to ask child protective workers to serve simultaneously as women's advocates. At this point in the evolution of our knowledge and our systems, I believe women and children will be better served if both child protection specialists and battered women's specialists participate in decisions that involve domestic violence and child welfare.

Domestic Violence as a Child Welfare Issue

Societal awareness of the abuse and neglect of children in families has developed quite separately from awareness of the abuse of women in families. As areas of research and practice, the two have, until recently, involved different scholars and philosophies, different agencies and auspices. This has begun to change. There is compelling evidence that abuse and neglect of children and abuse of women occur in many of the same families (Mills, et al., this issue. See also Schechter & Edelson, 1994; Straus & Gelles, 1990; Ross, 1996). As a result of this evidence, attention to the interrelations between child abuse and domestic violence has increased (Cummings & Mooney, 1988; Edelson, 1995, 1999; Schechter & Edelson, 1994; Schechter & Mihalyi, 1992). At the 12th National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in November, 1998, 11 of 120 workshop sessions addressed domestic violence and child welfare. This special volume on issues in child welfare and domestic violence also attests to the increased awareness of domestic violence as a child welfare issue.

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