

## *When NOT to Co-Parent*

### *Family Violence*

There are number of situations in which parents should exercise caution in the co-parenting relationship.

Specifically we need to protect children from abusive relationships– especially whenever there’s been a history of abuse between parents and a cycle of violence and control/manipulation.

Family violence can negatively affect children in many different ways.

- Children’s sense of safety is dramatically reduced.
- Children exposed to family violence often second guess who they can trust in their lives; this is especially damaging if the trusted person is a parent.
- Children exposed to family violence often suffer many more mental health issues long term, including lower self-esteem.
- School performance and conflict resolution skills drop significantly.
- Children may have stronger beliefs on traditional gender roles, what it means to be a “man” and a woman” and have a lower self-image.
- Children exposed to family violence as a child are more likely to become involved in family violence themselves when they become adults– either by becoming an abuser or by becoming a victim of an abusive partner.

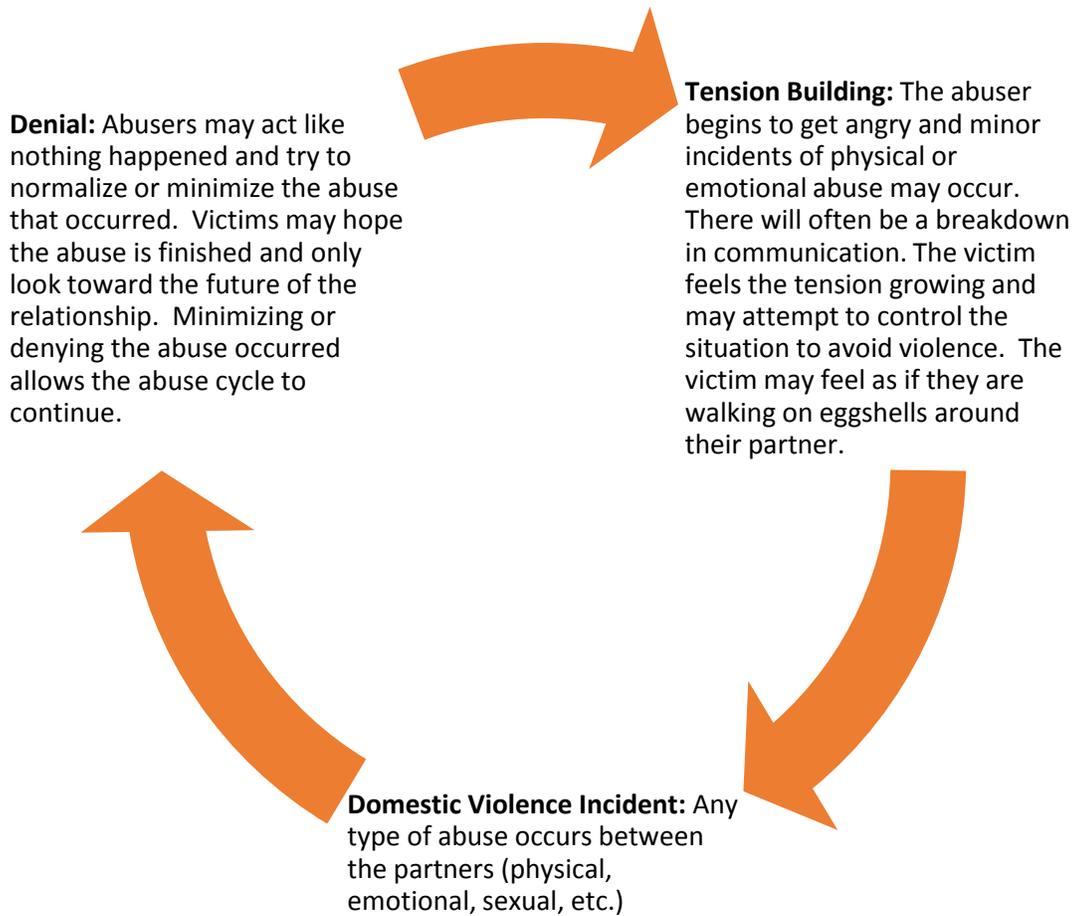
Research shows that when children are removed from an abusive environment **they do better**. This means that when one parent hits or is abusive to the other parent, the best thing for the children is for those parents to separate.

### *Recognizing Abusive Relationships*

For many parents, recognizing they are involved in an abusive relationship is key to finding the support necessary to break away.

- Some of the common signs of an abusive partner include:
  - Provokes arguments
  - Limits contact with friends or family
  - Insistent on always knowing where their partner is or who they are with
  - Referring to their partner with rude names in public, shouting or swearing
  - Deliberately frightening their partner
  - Preventing their partner’s knowledge about, or access to, income
  - Preventing their partner from having employment outside the home
  - Physical abuse

Relationships where these signs are present tend to follow a cycle. The following graphic shows the “**Cycle of Violence.**”



### ***Abusive Partners***

It is important to be cautious about the how an abusive partner might try to manipulate or control their partner. Often times, the control or manipulation an abusive partner uses in marriage does not end after the couple has separated.

Sometimes the abuser will convince their partner to return to the relationship by promising they will never hurt the partner again. They may try to use the child as a tool to manipulate or pressure their partner into returning to the relationship or seeing their child when they are not supposed to. Abusive partners may also try to get the children to believe negative things about their co-parent so that the children will not want to be with their non-abusive parent.

For example:

- The abusive partner may say, “If you weren’t trying to divorce me, Stacy wouldn’t be going through all this. She’s just a child, how can you put her through this? Why don’t we just get back together?”
- The abusive partner may say, “I know I’m not supposed to have unsupervised visitation with Junior, but come on! I’m his father! What kind of mother wouldn’t let his son see his father?!”
- The abusive partner might tell their child, “Your mother is a terrible person. Don’t you see how she is trying to rip our family apart? She doesn’t deserve our love.”
- The abusive partner may say, “You know honey, your mom/dad is trying to keep you from me...”

Partners should be aware of ways that an abuser might try to manipulate them into returning to a relationship. Remember, no matter what the abuser might say or do to convince their partner otherwise, it is **always** best for a child when parents in this situation separate. Additionally, **it is against the law for children to be exposed to domestic violence. Thus, protecting children from these types of relationships is absolutely critical.**

## *Other forms of Abuse and Addictions*

Children should be protected from any addictions their parents may be struggling with, such as adult substance use, gambling addictions, and sex addictions (including pornography use).

These addictions are not only extremely damaging to the well-being of children, but also serve, on a basic level, as distractions that can keep adults from being an effective parent who is able to meet the needs of their children. This can easily turn into child abuse and neglect if a parent puts their children in active harm in order to pursue an addiction. For example:

- A parent is neglecting their child by leaving them unmonitored in the car while gambling, and may put them at risk of death by leaving them in a car that is too hot.
- A parent may actively put their children (and others) at risk by driving with them in a vehicle while being under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- As a result of being under the influence of drugs or alcohol, a parent may not be aware of their child’s whereabouts, or what they are doing. This is also a form of neglect. The parent may even be using drugs with the children present and this is a form of abuse.
- Other parents may look at pornography and not be aware that their children are watching as well, or may not protect their children from their own sexual relationships with others. These are forms of sexual abuse.

**As a parent, it is important to note that if you know your child is being exposed to these types of behaviors, not reporting the behaviors is against the law. In some cases, not reporting can affect your custody and access to your children. If you suspect that your co-parent is involved with any of these activities, get professional help from a counselor or ask someone from Child Protective Services to check into the inappropriate behaviors.**

**REMEMBER: false allegations are a criminal offense and could cause you to lose parental rights too. Be wise, be responsible, and be careful.**

## *Options for Establishing Safe Visitation*

Depending on the situation, following a divorce it may still be possible, and beneficial, for a child to have a relationship with their co-parent, even in one of the previously described situations. Every situation is unique. When dealing with abuse and addictions in co-parenting, always consult a professional to help determine what co-parenting options are the best for the family as a whole.

Safety of the children is the utmost concern when dealing with violence, abuse and addictions. Depending on the situation, specific arrangements should be made to ensure the safety and protection of the child and parents.

For example:

- In the case of domestic violence, arrangements should be made that facilitate minimal contact and minimize the need for shared decision-making.
  - Specific conditions must be met for abusive parents to have contact with their children.
  - These conditions may include: supervision of contact, completion of batterers intervention program, discontinuance of violence, and consequences for violating agreements.
- In some cases, supervised visitation may be the best option so that the relationship with the other parent is not hindered, but continues while the parent is getting help for their personal problems.
- In other cases where visitation is not an option, a child may be able to maintain a relationship through writing letters, or phone calls. However, even this kind of contact may need to be supervised.

## *Finding Support*

If family violence is playing a part in your divorce, it is important to seek professional help. Your local community may have a domestic violence shelter close by, while those in rural areas may have to look to resources further away. At the end of this program, we have included a resource sheet for each county in Oklahoma with available resources for not only domestic violence, but resources for dealing with substance abuse, individual, couple and behavioral counseling, religious-affiliated resources, non-profit resources, and financial counseling.

Remember, keeping yourself and your children safe is your highest priority. Thus, you should be aware that when looking up resources for support, computers can easily track your internet history. Make sure if you access the hotline website, you do so from a safe location.

- To help identify local resources that you can use, you can contact the Oklahoma Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault. Call their SAFeline at: 1-800-522-SAFE(7233) or visit their website: [www.ocadvsa.org](http://www.ocadvsa.org).
- The National Domestic Violence Hotline is available to provide expert advocates to speak with you about your specific situation. You can call the hotline at: 1-800-799-7233 (or TTY: 1-800-787-3224) or you can visit their website at: [www.hotline.org](http://www.hotline.org).

Other things to remember when creating a safety plan to leave an abusive partner includes the following:

- Making sure that if you need to or decide to leave your home, you know what you will do, where you will go, etc.
- Having a bag of clothes and necessities, a spare set of keys, and important documents available so you can leave quickly.
- Have a person who knows about the violence who can call the police if violence erupts.
- Teach your children to use the telephone and call the police if needed.
- Have a code word established with family and friends to call for help if needed.

After leaving the abusive partner, keep these things in mind to maintain safety for you and your children:

- Have a savings account available to increase your independence.
- Have a way to make a call for emergency help if needed.
- Change the locks on the doors and windows of your new home to increase safety.
  - Changing wooden doors to steel doors can help as well.
  - Installing security systems, additional locks, window bars, poles to wedge against doors, etc. can help as well.
- File for a protection order with the court and keep a copy with you at all times.
  - Also give a copy of this order to the police department, your family, friends, employer, etc.
  - If your partner violates the order, call the police and report it as well as contact your lawyer or tell the courts about the violation.
- Inform the people who care for your children (school, day care, babysitter, Sunday school, teacher, neighbors, friends) who has permission to pick up your children and who does not.
  - Inform these people that they should call the police if you have a protective order against your abuser and they see this person near your residence, place of work, church, etc.

When it comes to co-parenting, once safety has been established for both the parents and the children, comprehensive support is needed to establish a safe co-parenting arrangement. This process involves support for both the victim, as they support their children's recovery and improve their parenting skills, as well as clearly defined interventions for the abuser. Some things to keep in mind when seeking support for co-parenting once safety has been established:

- Continued monitoring of the abuser's contact with the children and accountability are central for ensuring safety.
- Support for parents should focus on helping both parents learn more effective ways to decrease the need for communication, which can lead to more opportunities for the abuser to control or coerce their partner. Support should also focus on learning new ways to effectively resolve conflict.
- Setting clear boundaries and expectations for continued safety of the parents and children.

Finally, children who witnessed violence in the home or have been abused or neglected in any way may benefit greatly from receiving therapeutic assistance for help with expressing emotions, understanding safety, and help repairing damaged relationships with parents. You can find information about family therapists and other professionals that would be available to help your child in the resource guide listed here.