

Enhancing the Safety and Liberty of Women and Children Subjected to Domestic and Family Violence by Increasing Perpetrator Accountability:

Abridged Reflective Practice Tool



Acknowledgements

Participatory action research informed the development of this reflective practice tool. Various learning events took place on the unceded lands of the Darkinjung, Gadigal and Dharug peoples. The authors wish to pay respects to past, present, and future Elders of these and all nations and are committed to contributing to the continuation of cultural, spiritual, and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Reconciliation Australia, 2023).

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We would also like to acknowledge the strength and dignity of women and children subjected to domestic and family violence. We hope that these messages from practice contribute to enhancing their safety and liberty by increasing perpetrator accountability.

Content warning

This document includes discussions of family violence which some may find confronting or distressing. Recommended support services include: 1800 RESPECT – 1800 737 732 and Lifeline – 13 11 14

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About Pregnancy Family Conferencing (PFC)

The [*Sydney District Pregnancy Family Conferencing*](#) (PFC) program is a strengths-based, trauma informed program offered to expectant parents and their families where significant child protection concerns have been identified for the unborn baby. The program is a partnership between Sydney Local Health District (SLHD) and NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) Sydney District and aims to provide a forum for families and services to have open and transparent conversations about child protection issues.

Domestic and family violence perpetrated by fathers against expectant mothers is a common reason for referral into the PFC program. This Tool offers a conceptual framework, resources and practice tips that can support practitioners working with victim-survivors of DFV to enhance their safety and liberty. This includes shifting blame for DFV away from mothers through increasing perpetrator accountability.

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Introduction

The *Safer Children, Safer Communities* participatory action research project aimed to increase the safety and liberty of women, children, and their families through enhancing multiagency collaboration to increase the visibility of perpetrators of DFV. This research focused on the creation of ‘webs of accountability,’ developed through a shared understanding of DFV, perpetrator behaviour and its impact, and the interconnections between DFV and child maltreatment. Moreover, the project focused on developing a collective notion of ‘perpetrator accountability’ that could be used to enhance safety and liberty, and to promote behavioural change of people who use violence and coercive control.

This Abridged Practice Tool is a companion document to the full Practice Tool developed through this project. The content in this document provides an overview of the practice guidance detailed in the full Practice Tool for quick reference and should be used in combination with the full Tool whenever possible.

The Reflective Practice Tool

This Tool was developed to support practitioners working with victims-survivors who have been subjected to DFV. It provides a perpetrator focused approach that holds people who use DFV accountable and avoids blaming mothers for DFV and its consequences.

Practice wisdom was sought across domains that were identified as being critical to developing strong and collaborative systems that promote both victim-survivor safety and liberty as well as perpetrator accountability. Practitioners were invited to share thoughts and experiences developed through the CoPs, as well as to talk, dream and design their aspirations of ‘transformative practices.’ This wisdom has been documented, collated, and included within this Tool.

The domains are as follows:

- Building webs of accountability: multiagency working
- Focusing on children: victim-survivors in their own right
- Promoting dignity for the victim-survivor: a central principle of practice
- Attending to diversity: applying an intersectional lens
- Identifying patterns of control: holding perpetrators accountable
- Harnessing the power of words: language and documentation

Principles underpinning this research

- DFV is a gendered crime embedded within interlocking systems of inequality
- An intersectional lens is required to attend to the diversity of people's experiences
- Failing to engage in practices that promote perpetrator accountability whilst simultaneously constructing mothers as 'failing to protect' their children is a form of systemic gender inequality.
- The safety and liberty of women and children is the paramount goal. Perpetrator behavioural change is inextricably connected but secondary.
- Practitioners have valuable insights that can be harnessed to enhance practice and policy

Note: Detailed explanations of the principles underpinning this research is included in the full-length Practice Tool.

Limitations

We note that although participants came from a diverse range of backgrounds, a wider representation of diverse populations would have been useful within this project. The participants self-selected based on their roles and organisations and, as a result, there are some gaps in representation. Given the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system and limitations of current approaches to addressing DFV within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, future research led by First Nations' peoples is desperately needed. We acknowledge the intersecting challenges, intergenerational trauma, and structural disadvantage caused by colonisation, and successive oppressive government policies. We support the aspirations of the [*Safe and Supported National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children \(2021-2031\) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action*](#) to commit to progressive systems transformation that has First Nations self-determination at its centre.

PFC Parent Supporters with lived experience expertise were part of the Communities of Practice that led to the development of this Tool. We acknowledge the diversity of victim-survivors' experiences and recognise that further victim-survivor led research is needed.

Glossary

A glossary of terms is included with the full-length version of the Reflective Practice Tool.

Building webs of accountability: Multiagency working



“We need to work better together... we need to understand that poor practice comes at the expense of the mother’s safety.” - CoP Member

PFCs are, by their very nature, processes that facilitate collaboration between agencies and families. Many families come to the PFC having already had contact with at least one agency or service, so it is important to establish trusting, genuine relationships with our colleagues across agencies and with families to work effectively and collaboratively. (Lewkowicz & Tayebjee, 2019)

Effective multiagency work involves timely information sharing, collaborative goal setting and open, honest, and transparent communication. Having a shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities of all practitioners working together with a family can reduce role confusion, avoid duplication and lead to better outcomes. Sharing vital information about the perpetrator’s pattern of violence, abuse and coercive control can occur more effectively when communication channels are well-established and well-understood by all parties.

Participating practitioners identified these key themes:

- ✓ *Working collaboratively with other agencies*
- ✓ *Working collaboratively with families*
- ✓ *Sharing information and communicating effectively*
- ✓ *Setting goals collaboratively*

Questions for consideration

- What are the biggest challenges for you in working collaboratively? In your own agency? With external agencies?

- How do we problem-solve when frameworks clash, there are different guidelines or power imbalances?
- How do we navigate the reality that different practitioners and agencies may hold different thresholds of risk and safety?
- Do you need to advocate for policy change to improve collaboration efforts, or do you need to find a workaround?

Specific practice resources:

- [Creating a collaborative working culture across Health and Child Protection to support vulnerable pregnant women](#)
- [Pregnancy Family Conferencing in Sydney Local Health District](#)

Focusing on children as victim-survivors in their own right



“We must always question how it is for the children, no matter who we speak to” - CoP member

For too long, children have been seen as appendages of their mothers, akin to secondary victims. They have not been positioned as victim-survivors. It is vitally important that practice is child-focused and that the voices of children are heard, honoured, and responded to.

The [2023 Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#) (ACMS) found that many children are subjected to domestic violence and other forms of maltreatment. Across the Australian population approximately 40% of people experienced exposure to domestic violence in childhood before the age of 18 years. 39.4% of Australians experienced more than one type of maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence). Most children who experienced more than one type of maltreatment experienced exposure to domestic violence. This landmark study highlights how it is incumbent upon practitioners to be aware of the co-existence of maltreatment types.

A ‘whole of family’ approach when working with families where DFV is present – using models such as PFCs – allows consideration to be given to the impact of DFV on the child/ren and their family environment. Ideally this includes the perpetrator of violence, but this may not always be possible; this will be discussed later in this document.

Participating practitioners identified these key themes:

- ✓ *Applying a child-focused lens to risk and safety assessments*
- ✓ *Keeping practice centred on the child at all stages*
- ✓ *Working directly with children and young people*
- ✓ *Wholistically assessing the impact of DFV on children and young people*

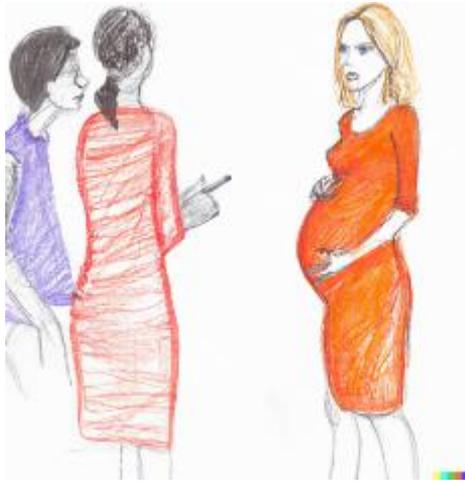
Questions for consideration

- How would you facilitate a PFC if there was a child in the room?
- What strategies would you use to make sure that children are seen and heard, even if they can't be seen (unborn) or heard (non-verbal)?
- What does honouring dignity look like when working with children?
- How do we honour acts of resistance in children?

Specific practice resources:

- [2023 Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#)

Promoting dignity for the victim-survivor: a central principle of practice



“Decisions about safety are not always separate from or superior to dignity” - Insight Exchange, 2021

Dignity driven practice focuses on building an understanding of victim-survivors’ acts of resistance against violence, oppression, suffering or harm. This aligns perfectly with strengths-based approaches – which is a founding principle of PFCs – and paves the way for collaborative work in partnership with the victim-survivor. The resource, [Dignity Driven Practice Recognising Resistance Practice Tips](#) highlights how recognising resistance is a central feature of dignity driven practice.

The practice of ‘pivoting to the perpetrator’ is also useful for dignity-preserving practice as it centres the abusive behaviours of the perpetrator as the central problem. The [Safe & Together Institute](#) first coined the phrase ‘pivoting to the perpetrator’ to describe the deliberate practice of centring the perpetrators’ violence, abuse, and coercive control. This approach can avoid problematic responses that problematize the victim-survivor's responses to DFV, that directly contribute to mother-blaming practices. In a PFC context, this approach can provide a means by which to keep the father accountable and reduce the potential for ‘mothering blaming.’

Participating practitioners identified these key themes:

- ✓ *Recognising and honouring the victim-survivor’s expertise*
- ✓ *Collaborating with victim-survivors*
- ✓ *Upholding dignity through acknowledging resistance*
- ✓ *Reframing behaviour – from incidents of violence to patterns of control*

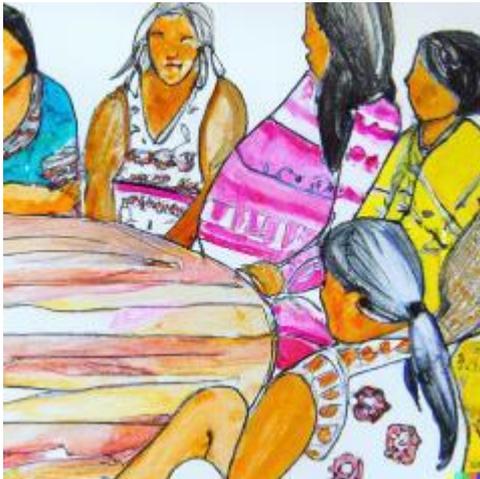
Questions for consideration

- Consider how the mother tells you her story. Why do you think she tells it in the way she does? Remember, her words are likely to have been very carefully chosen and depict the various strategies that she uses to keep herself and her children safe.
- Have we asked the victim-survivor what she needs and wants? Have made any assumptions here?
- Have we asked the victim-survivor what her own assessment of her own and her children's safety is?
- Are we honouring her contribution to the web of accountability?
- Are we respectfully resisting narratives that attribute responsibility and blame on victims-survivors?

Specific practice resources:

- [Safe & Together Institute](#)
- [Dignity Driven Practice Recognising Resistance Practice Tips](#)

Attending to diversity and complexity: applying an intersectional lens



“You can’t separate out complexity – it’s everyone”
– PFC practitioner

Women and their families who participate in PFCs often experience multiple intersecting complexities and the service system frequently fails to centre DFV. For this Tool, ‘attending to diversity’ is an acknowledgement that every person, family and their situation is unique and that we, as practitioners, must respect the individuality of every person. We can centre diversity through person-centred, dignity-preserving practice, utilising an intersectional approach.

Participating practitioners identified these key themes:

- ✓ *Complexity can detract from the main issue, namely DFV*
- ✓ *Attending to diversity is not an ‘add on’*

Questions for consideration

- Are you involved in a response that attends to the central problem (DFV) or that responds to the impact of the problem (mental distress, problematic substance use)?
- What frameworks do you use to help you understand the diverse experiences of victim-survivors and people who use DFV? Do your frameworks help you to understand the broader context of their experiences?
- How can we keep the perpetrator of violence in view?

- Does your agency have adequate assessment tools, protocols in place to support your broader assessment and response to intersecting forms of oppression and/or coercion?
- Do you and/or your service need to address any barriers to access and equity for peoples from underserved communities?

Specific practice resources:

- [Improving family violence legal and support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women](#)
- [Intersectionality Matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women](#)
- [The Choice: Violence or Poverty](#) report
- [The Pride in Prevention Evidence Guide](#)
- [Help-seeking by male victims of domestic violence and abuse](#)
- Towards Access and Equity: Disability Informed Practice in Child Protection
- Seeking help for domestic and family violence: exploring regional rural and remote women's coping experiences

Identifying patterns of control: holding perpetrators accountable



“Practice would be more child-focused if men were engaged with as fathers, rather than solely as perpetrators of violence” - CoP member

Historically, statutory child protective services have focused on the mother, assessing her parenting and protective capacity. When DFV is a key risk factor her efforts to keep the children safe have often been front and centre, rather than the perpetrator’s behaviours and related risks posed by them. As [The Invisible Practices Research Project](#) found, there are still settings where perpetrators of violence are excluded, or rendered invisible, from interventions.

PFC is a unique model that seeks to engage in whole of family practice, but it is important to note that, different parties to PFCs have different traditions, mandates, policies around working with perpetrators of DFV. When practitioners collaborate within the PFC, it is important that questions around how and when work with the fathers is safe and/or appropriate need to be carefully considered.

Working with domestically violent fathers or having fathers as part of the conversation may be new to your practice. Many practitioners hold a level of fear in relation to working with perpetrators of DFV, including fear for their own safety or for the safety of the family members with whom they are working. These are valid concerns and measures must be carefully put in place when building webs of accountability to minimise the risks to practice effectively.

Participating practitioners identified these key themes:

- ✓ *Men should be engaged as fathers*
- ✓ *How to have conversations with fathers*
- ✓ *Understand the father’s use of AOD and/or coercive control*

- ✓ *Safety with or without father engagement*

Questions for consideration

- How do we engage men in father-focused conversations?
- How can we increase the visibility of men in PFCs?
- How can your agency overcome barriers to engaging men in conversations about their fathering practices when they use domestic violence and coercive control?
- Who is our main client? The mother or the child? Where does the father fit in?

Specific practice resources:

- [*The Invisible Practices Research Project*](#)
- [Help-seeking by male victims of domestic violence and abuse \(DVA\): a systematic review and qualitative evidence synthesis](#)

Harnessing the power of words: language and documentation



“Whoever is writing has the power to impact the trajectory” – CoP member

Language is not ‘neutral;’ even the act of aiming for neutral language is misguided. In the context of DFV, neutralising language can inadvertently minimise or exonerate the actions of the person using violence and coercive control. If the aim is to promote perpetrator accountability, we cannot overlook the role and power of our language. This relates to the way we speak with and about families, the questions we choose to ask or choose not to ask, and the decisions we make about the way to record and document our interactions.

Participating practitioners identified these key themes:

- ✓ *Language is a valuable tool*
- ✓ *How and what to document*
- ✓ *Context and voice in documentation and practice*
- ✓ *Language and documentation when engaging with fathers who use violence*

Questions for consideration

- Who are we writing the case notes for?
- Do we define what we mean when we write ‘domestic violence’ in reports and records? What efforts are we taking to describe violence, abuse, and coercive control in clear behavioural terms?

- Does our language promote dignity, safety, and liberty?

Specific practice resources:

- [Trauma Sensitive Language](#)
- [Language and Violence: Analysis of Four Discursive Operations](#)

Resources

Note: An extensive list of resources is available within the full-length version of the Reflective Practice Tool.

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