

Victim-Defined Safety Planning: A Summary

by Jill Davies

Victim¹ perspectives and priorities determine the strategies, objectives, and direction of victim-defined safety plans. The essential role of advocacy is to offer information, analysis, and resources—to work in partnership with victims to strengthen their plans.



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Victim-Defined Safety Plans Focus on More than Physical Violence

For survivors of violence, safety is a broad concept, not one limited to reducing physical violence or a partner’s controlling behavior. Like all of us, victims and their children also need food, shelter, and other essential resources to live. The spiritual, social, and emotional aspects of our humanity are also necessary for security.

This broader view of safety requires:

- no violence
- basic human needs
- social and emotional well-being

Victim-defined plans for safety will therefore be comprehensive and include strategies that foster all three elements. The content and focus of victim-defined plans will be determined by each victim’s perspective and priorities.

¹The terms “victim” or “survivor of violence” are used to speak the truth about the harm of violence, the injuries, and the lifelong effects of trauma. These terms are also gender and age inclusive. Those who experience violence may reject those terms in favor of ones that focus on healing and renewal, such as “survivor.” When working with victims, use the terms they choose. When advocating more broadly, it is important to convey both the strength and resilience of victims and the damage done by those who use violence. The language used should not send a message that because victims are striving to overcome the harm that resources and effective responses are unnecessary or that violence is somehow less serious or even tolerable.

Currently, the term “*safety plan*” typically refers to plans with an almost exclusive focus on physical violence. These plans mostly rely on physical separation and a victim leaving a relationship to enhance safety. These types of plans, perhaps more accurately described as “*escape plans*” are important tools for many victims, but their narrow focus offers limited safety and for some victims increases risks. For example, an escape plan might not keep an abusive partner from continuing to use violence, or a plan might reduce the violence but leave a victim homeless and with no source of income to survive.

Victim-Defined Safety Plan Strategies Are Relevant to Each Victim’s Perspective and Priorities

Each victim’s perspective and priorities for safety involve her risk analysis, life circumstances and plans. These are unique to each victim. Understanding that context for each victim is how advocates know what strategies will be relevant. There is no single formula for safety. Strategies that don’t match risks and circumstances may not improve safety and may even increase risks.

Risk Analysis

Survivors of violence face two sets of risks. One from a partner who is violent – *Partner-generated risks* and another set from her life circumstances – *Life-generated risks*.

Partner-generated risks include battering² and violence that is not battering. Battering occurs when a partner uses violence along with other tactics to dominate and control. Non-battering³ is violence without the domination and control. A victim with a partner who batters might experience physical violence, sexual violence, threats to intimidate, extortion around money, control over what she can say or do, and a relentless barrage of insults and emotional harm. Victims raising children must also cope with additional tactics from a battering partner that raise risks for the children, make parenting more difficult, and use children as pawns in a never ending effort to show her “who’s the boss.” An example of non-battering violence is a slap, shove, or other violent act that does not intimidate the person harmed or lead to diminished autonomy.

Whether battering or non-battering, the violence victims experience differs in frequency and severity. All violence is harmful. A thankfully small amount is lethal. Violent behavior may have

² Survivors of intimate partner battering are most often women abused by male partners so that is the gender language used here. All victims, including LGBT persons, men with a female partner, and children affected by battering deserve advocacy that makes them safer.

³ The categories of battering and non-battering are used to inform advocacy. Some violent behavior may be difficult to identify as battering or non-battering.

certain patterns but occurs across a spectrum. The harm, the meaning, and the effects of violence also differ for each victim. A shove and insult from a soon-to-be ex-boyfriend may have minimal effect on one victim and be a terrifying threat of more violence to another.

Life-generated risks are risks any of us might face. These might include poor health, challenges associated with caring for a disabled child or elderly parent, or being laid off. Many victims and their children must deal with the harm, scarce options, and uncertainty of living in poverty. Victims deal with ineffective institutions and services. They may also face bias and discrimination because of their race/ethnicity, who they love, how they speak, their abilities, their gender identity, their immigration status, or even the neighborhood they live in. Life-generated risks are a powerful factor for safety. Partners who batter may manipulate life-generated risks to further their control. For example, a gay man abusing his partner might reinforce anti-gay attitudes held by some in the legal system to keep his partner from seeking legal help. Life-generated risks often reduce a victim's options and safety strategies. Multiple intersecting risks and limited alternatives make safety planning difficult and complicated for many victims.

Life Circumstances and Plans

Violence happens in the life of a person. Who that person is – not just the violence they experience – is an important factor in determining the relevance of safety strategies. Their lives might include parental responsibilities, work, school, advocating for a cause, day to day life chores, church meetings, a child's wedding or a parent's funeral, and endless other possibilities. Victims have different abilities and resources. They come from different cultures, faith traditions, and family structures. Many survivors of violence are parents and those responsibilities are central to their lives and plans. These life circumstances will influence, and for some victims determine, the parameters of any safety plan. For example, deeply held cultural values regarding marriage may lead one victim to eliminate divorce from the list of possible safety strategies. Another victim may reject any strategy that threatens her job security because she has no other source of income.

Safety strategies must fit with each victim's plans, which include the decisions she makes and the direction she sees for her life. Her partner's violence may not be her top priority. Perhaps it is keeping a roof over her children's heads. Maybe it is finishing school or caring for an elderly parent through the end of his life before relocating. Whatever is the first or most important issue for each victim is the starting point for safety planning advocacy.

Life circumstances also bring resources, resilience, and additional safety strategies. The strengths of adult and child victims should be preserved and utilized.

Victim-Defined Safety Strategies Are Not Limited to Leaving

Leaving a relationship is a common and important safety strategy and makes some victims and their children safer. Leaving is not an option for everyone. Far from a guarantee of safety, leaving can mean the escalation of violence, more danger and uncertainty for the children, and the loss of a home, income, job, health insurance, immigration status, faith community, or even the support of family or friends. Some victims find that leaving makes things better, that the struggle is worth it. Yet, for many survivors and their children, leaving makes their lives more difficult and dangerous.

Many victims can't afford to leave. Leaving takes money to pay for things such as moving, a security deposit, food, utilities, and all the other costs of living. Many victims simply do not have the money to move or to make it on their own, especially if an abusive partner was paying some or most of the costs.

Children may be at more risk even if their mother leaves a relationship with a father who is abusive, as the children will likely continue to have contact. Children may now be exposed to their father's violence without the presence of a watchful parent. Separation typically also leads to a reduction in standard of living. For those in poverty, this can mean the children and the victim-parent experience more deprivation, face homelessness, poor nutrition, and little or no access to medical and dental care. Leaving can also mean children no longer have access to the people, activities, and resources that may have supported their well-being and resilience.

Leaving is an essential strategy that must continue to be offered. More resources must be made available so that more victims have a reliable way to escape violence. No longer forced to remain because of no means to leave, victims would have a true choice regarding their relationship. As that goal is pursued, more attention, options, and understanding must be offered to those who remain in a relationship or in contact, including children who will continue to interact with a parent who is violent to their parent and sometimes to the children as well. These *victims-in-contact* also deserve protection and effective advocacy to strengthen their safety plans.

Victim Decision-Making

“Decision-making is best understood as a process that occurs over time and unfolds differently for each woman, depending on shifting circumstances and priorities.”⁴ Key factors include the severity of the violence, concerns for the children, the depth of the relationship with the abusive partner, and social and financial resources. Victims, particularly those who remain in a

⁴ Davies, J. & Lyon, E. (2014). *Domestic Violence Advocacy 2d*. Sage. p.59.

relationship, are often judged harshly, their decisions second guessed by those who do not walk in their shoes.

It is commonly believed that a victim can leave if she wants to. If she simply reaches out for help, the resources will be there for her to start a new life. Some victims may be able to access what they need, but not all. Survivors' lives are complex, and for most the options are extremely limited. The choices they must make often demand a heartbreaking balancing of excruciating life pressures. Victims

must weigh which plan will achieve the most safety and lead to the least harm. As Figure 2 illustrates, a victim's risk analysis will consider whether leaving will keep risks the same, make them better or worse, or whether she really can't know or predict.

Each victim will bring a unique risk analysis to safety planning discussions she has with an advocate. An understanding of that analysis, along with each victim's circumstances and decisions are central to the process of safety planning. Advocacy to strengthen plans requires an active, yet respectful, constructive, and humble approach--one that seeks to improve safety and honors each victim's right to make decisions about her/his life and relationship.

Victim-Defined Safety Strategies Include Children's Safety

A violent partner or parent affects the children in the household. The children experience a parent being beaten, the chaos and the effects of violence. Some children are hit, raped, or emotionally demeaned. Children also face life-generated risks. They will share some life circumstances with a parent and have their own child-specific factors as well, such as their developmental stage, school experiences, and interests. Many factors determine the impact of

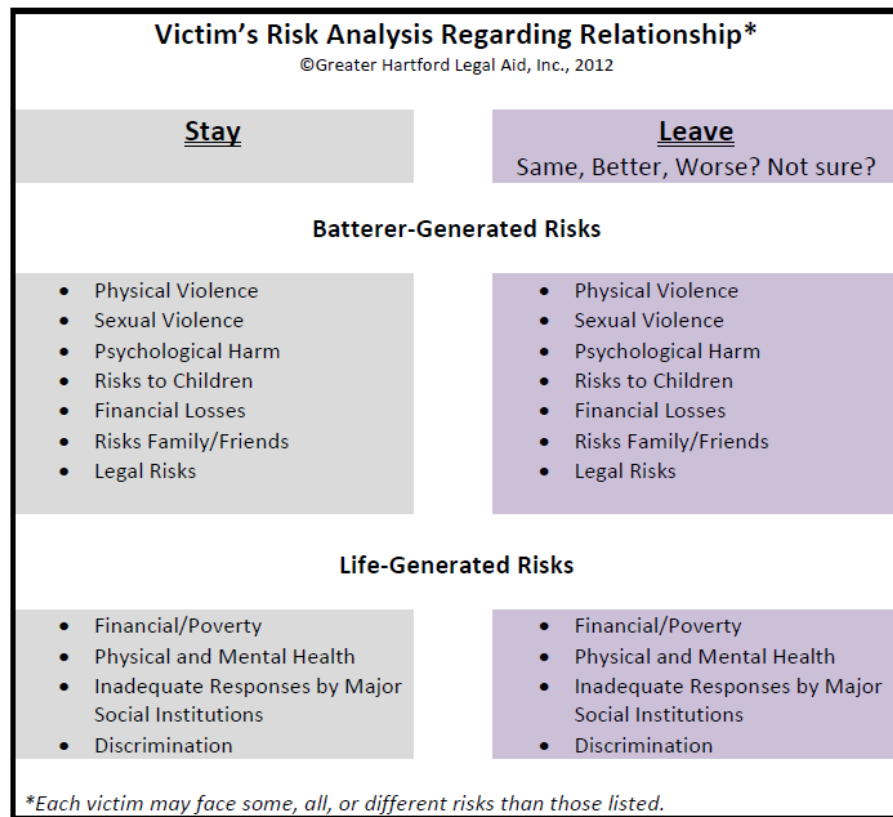


Figure 2

violence on children including severity, frequency, and proximity. Aspects of children's lives also support their well-being and mitigate harm from exposure.

Children need strategies that address the violence, their basic human needs and support emotional and social well-being. Children also need a capable adult to care for them. Child and victim-parent safety are usually inter-related. Securing the comprehensive safety of one supports the overall safety of the other. See Appendix 1 for a chart illustrating what makes children safer.

Children are central to an adult victim's decision-making. Comprehensive strategies for children's safety are often integral to a victim-parent's plan. Some children, particularly those who are older, may have a limited and specific safety strategy of their own, such as leaving the room when a parent starts to yell at or hit the other parent. Access to the relationships, activities, and opportunities that foster resilience and healing might also be part of a child's plan that is coordinated with a victim-parent's plan. The relationship with a non-violent supportive parent is a foundational safety strategy for children.

We want children to be safe. Yet when they are in danger, readily available resources and quick yet sustainable fixes are uncommon. While it is understandable that responsibility is placed on the parent we have access to, this limited approach often doesn't work. Victim-parents facing the violence and control of a partner, often with limited resources and few options, need help. Ask: What do the children need to be safer? What does the parent need to be safer? What help does the parent need to make the plan feasible? Then try to offer that help. If working with the victim-parent does not lead to adequate levels of safety for the children, then other advocacy and action is necessary. See also the discussion on children's safety later in this paper.

Victim-Defined Plans Make Victims Safer

Helping victims achieve complete safety—no violence, basic human needs met, and emotional and social well-being—is a vision for this work. Every victim deserves to be safe. It is not possible for some. There are partners who use violence who will not be stopped. Many victims live in poverty and do not have the means to meet basic needs. Grim circumstances, living with the effects of trauma, and barriers to social connection may keep some victims from having peace of mind and the experience of wholeness and health. Some who seek help are met with indifferent, under-resourced, or biased responses and systems. There are so many victims with so many needs. What then is a feasible goal for safety plans? One answer is to make victims *safer*—less violence, increased economic stability, and strengthened well-being. Advocates accomplish this when they offer options and strategies that support victims in ways that makes their lives and their children's lives better. See Figure 3.

Eliminating the risk of physical violence may be the priority for some victims. However, making it the purpose of all safety plans restricts advocacy, reduces options, and limits who will be

Safety
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No violence• Basic human needs met• Social and emotional well-being

Safer
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Less violence• Economic stability increased• Well-being strengthened

helped. “Safer” is a broad and yet feasible goal. As a measure of success it provides advocates and other responders with many strategies and options to work with victims to improve safety.

Figure 3 – © 2012 Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc.

Safer as a goal does not mean advocates will simply accept that victims have inadequate options, making do and settling for less. Victim-defined advocacy requires both individual and systemic effort. See text box *Genna* below. Advocates help the individual develop the best plan possible and then also work to change the systemic response to remove barriers and improve options for other victims. This pragmatism co-exists with a relentless commitment to end violence, respect for each victim’s unique experience of violence and path to safer, and demand to those who use violence to reduce and ultimately eliminate that harmful behavior.

<p style="text-align: center;">Genna - through an interpreter</p> <p><i>“My priority is my boyfriend’s violence-how he hurts me and my son. My plan is to break up with him and to ask the court to order him out of my home. But when I went to court, no one could speak my language and I couldn’t read the forms because they were in English.”</i></p> <p>Individual advocacy helps <i>Genna</i> get the restraining order. Systemic advocacy increases language access for all.</p>
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Children’s Safety

A vision for this work is that all children are completely safe—that they experience no violence, never go without basic human needs being met, have the opportunity to thrive and grow, and are raised by competent, nurturing parents or caretakers. All children—like adults—deserve to be safe. A difficult, unacceptable reality to face is that many won’t have comprehensive safety. The vision of safety for all must be pursued while individual-level advocacy achieves the possible. Realistically, the outcome of safety planning and advocacy is that children are safer. But, there must be a standard—children must have adequate levels of safety. One way to assess this is to

ask: “Are children safer enough?” This phrase reflects that even with children, the day-to-day advocacy goal is not perfection (safety) but improvement (safer), although a standard must be met (safer enough).”⁵

If the answer is “no”—the children are not safer enough—then additional advocacy and safety planning are necessary. This might include more advocacy time and work with the victim-parent around her understanding of the risks her children face and the resources she can access to develop an effective plan. It might include intervention with the parent/person using violence, engaging other family members or others who are resources for the child and/or the victim-parent, connecting children to services, strengthening children’s resilience, or accessing legal protections. There may be circumstances when the involvement of child protection is warranted.

The determination of whether a child is safer enough and who gets to decide involves many elements, including cultural and social considerations, child development, violent behavior and its effects on victims, legal standards, and other factors. A discussion of this complex process is beyond the scope of this summary. Given the stakes and layers of policies, approaches, and systems involved, the participation of victim-defined advocates is essential for adult and child safety.

Overview of Individual Victim-Defined Advocacy & Safety Planning

Advocacy that is defined by each victim’s priorities leads to victim-defined safety plans. The process begins with understanding each victim’s perspective. This understanding includes learning about her risk analysis and life circumstances, past and current safety plans, relationship decisions and identifying her priorities. What is most important for her? What issues come first? Each victim’s perspective determines the initial focus. The process requires working with the victim to build a partnership, review risks, and identify options relevant to her priorities, decisions, and the dangers she faces. With strategies identified, the next step is to implement a strengthened comprehensive safety plan.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the unique circumstances of each victim require a dynamic and interactive process in which one aspect of the interaction is likely to inform the other. The exploration of options furthers the advocate’s understanding of the victim’s perspective which in turn narrows the potential safety strategies to discuss. There are pathways and patterns to guide advocates, but no set formula for safety.

⁵ Davies, J. & Lyon, E. (2014). *Domestic Violence Advocacy 2d*. Sage. p.171.

In practice, the intersecting components of victim-defined advocacy require significant skill and knowledge and even a thorough overview is beyond the scope of this summary. A few key aspects of the process are discussed next.

Victim-Defined Individual Advocacy Overview

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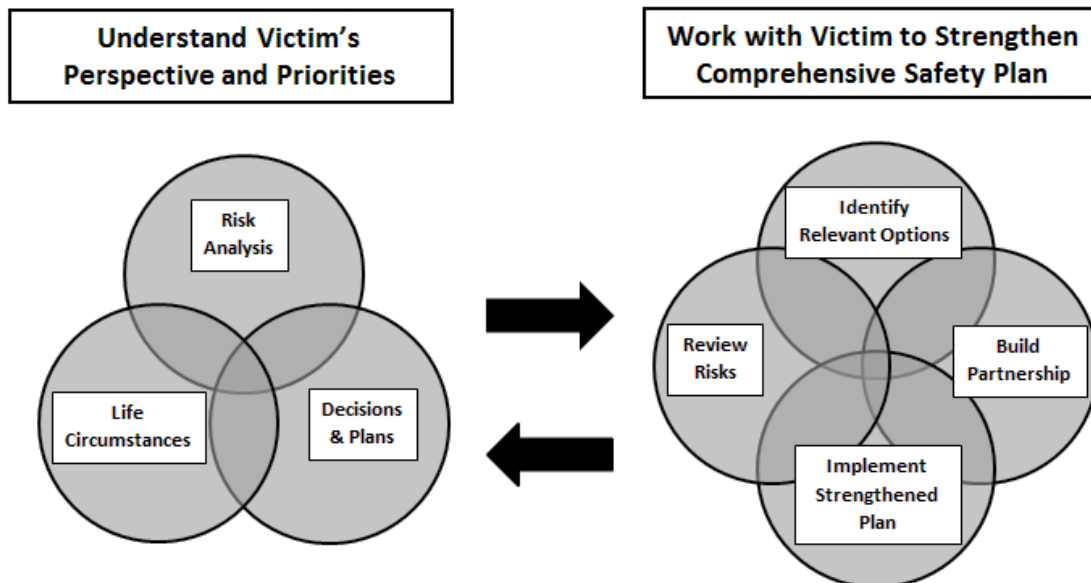


Figure 4

Listen – “Victim First, Then You”

Listening is a foundational and powerful tool in safety planning. To be victim-defined, advocates must start by understanding each victim's perspectives and priorities. This information provides the context for offering essential advocate information and analysis. Listening first allows advocates to gather the information they need to help, saves extremely limited advocate time, and helps to build the partnership between advocate and victim—the sharing of tasks and information. Note that long, detailed, sequentially administered intake or other forms undermine a “listen first” approach.

Review Risks Respectfully

To develop a common understanding of the dangers to be addressed in a safety plan, advocates must talk through the risks with each victim. In addition to sharing advocate perspectives on danger, this discussion will also help identify what victims are most worried about and what the victim decides should be addressed first. A review of life-threatening danger and serious risks to children are part of a review. If an advocate has a different view of risks, an exchange must be

conducted with humility and respect. Advocates hold important information, but they may not have an accurate view of a victim's risks.

Keep in mind that victims often face multiple life-generated and partner-generated risks. If a victim prioritizes the risk of losing her housing it does not mean that she's ignoring or minimizing the risk of physical violence or the risks her children face from witnessing her being abused. She's coping, struggling to handle more than anyone could at one time. Respectful, open-minded risk review helps a survivor of violence sort through the dangers and strengthens the working partnership that will make her safer.

Offer relevant options:

Telling every victim to take a particular action will enhance the safety of some, do nothing for others, and may even put still others in more danger. Survivors of violence and their children are safer when safety plans include strategies relevant to their risks and life circumstances. This is common sense, yet it can be challenging when what we have to offer is not what victims need. Consider the implications of offering strategies that do not match needs in the Boat Analogy on this page.

Relevant Strategies--Boat Analogy



The safety equipment on a boat might include an anchor to keep the boat in place and away from danger, a life preserver to keep a person afloat, and a radio to call for help. If you're on a boat and someone goes overboard, you wouldn't throw the person an anchor. If the boat were headed for the rocks, you wouldn't toss out the life preserver. In the same way, if a victim's priority risk is more focused on providing for her family than physical violence, you wouldn't only offer strategies that would reduce her financial security—for example, a shelter stay that would mean she loses her job or a move that would mean the loss of subsidized housing, or law enforcement that would mean her partner would lose the source of income that supports the family.

Advocate

Safety plans can be difficult to implement, even when they are victim-defined and feasible. Victims often need help to use the strategies identified in the plan, to access systems and resources, prevent unintended consequences, and to revise plans when risks and circumstances change. Advocacy in partnership with survivors of violence to implement plans is essential for safety. This advocacy can take many forms. An advocate might: guide and stand with a victim in court, drive her to look for a new apartment, connect a parent and child with a supportive teacher, challenge an ineffective systemic response, interpret for an officer who doesn't speak the victim's language, explain what just happened and what happens next, or speak up for a

victim when she is not listened to. These are just a few examples of how implementation advocacy supports safety.

Conclusion:

Plans defined by victim perspectives, risks, and life circumstances make victims safer. Strategies cannot be limited to leaving. Children and children's safety is a central factor in planning. Leaving is not the answer to domestic violence, reducing violent behavior is. Victim-defined advocacy strengthens safety plans. Advocates work in partnership with victims to provide space, support, analysis, comfort, guidance, access to options and resources, the hope that life can be better, and the help to make each victim safer. Victim-defined advocates also work to improve systemic responses.

Advocacy is powerful.

Listen.

Think.

Advocate.

Resources: *Domestic Violence Advocacy 2d: Complex Lives, Difficult Choices*, by Jill Davies and Eleanor Lyon, Sage, 2014. This paper summarizes a number of key concepts and discussions from this book. *Advocacy Beyond Leaving: Helping Battered Women in Contact with Current or Former Partners*, by Jill Davies, Futures Without Violence, 2009. Available at: www.vawnet.org.

About the Author: Attorney Jill Davies is the deputy director of Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc. (GHCLA) and directs Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence, a key initiative of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, in collaboration with GHCLA. Her advocacy on behalf of family violence victims spans three decades. One aspect of her work is the conception and continued development of the *victim-defined* approach to advocacy. She has written and consulted extensively on issues of importance to family violence victims, including advocacy and safety planning, poverty, and legal issues. The author of numerous articles and materials regarding violence against women, sexual violence, and family violence, her writing encourages critical thinking and supports improved practice.

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Appendix 1

What Makes Children Safer

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<p>Violence Prevention & Reduction</p>	<p>Economic Stability & Educational Opportunity</p>
<p>No violence against children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No physical, sexual, emotional violence against children <p>Less exposure to violence against others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower level and frequency of violence against parent • Less violence against others • Reduced witnessing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer gaps in meeting basic human needs • Family has increased financial security and resources • Increased learning opportunities and access to quality education
<p>Child Well-Being Strengthened</p>	<p>Capable Caretaker/s</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased resilience to effects of violence • Emotional healing • Increased social supports • Cultural values promoted • Increased connection to supportive & loving family members, siblings, adult(s) • Increased access to activities (e.g., sports, art, clubs) • Growth, development nurtured 	<p><u>Battered</u> parent safer & supported</p> <p><u>Safer:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less violence • Economic stability increased • Well-being strengthened <p><u>Supported:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role as parent supported, parenting skills increased • Has enough economic stability and personal well-being to be part of the emotional and financial support to child <p><u>Parent who batters</u> less harmful & more helpful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less/no violence against other parent or child • Less/no harmful parenting, positive parenting skills increased • If still a danger to other parent or child then access and/or opportunity to harm is limited or eliminated, harmful behavior acknowledged • Has enough economic stability and personal well-being to be part of the emotional and financial support to child

Appendix 2

Victim-Defined Perspectives on Safety

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Safety

For victims, safety is a broad concept, not one limited to reducing physical violence or a partner's controlling behavior. Like all of us, victims and their children also need food, shelter, and other essential resources to live. The spiritual, social, and emotional aspects of our humanity are also necessary for security.



- **No Violence**
- **Basic Human Needs Met**
- **Social and Emotional Well-Being**

Safer

Every victim deserves to be safe. Some victims do not have that chance. When total safety is not possible, working with victims to make them safer is a practical goal. Such safety plans will include feasible strategies and incremental improvements. While never abandoning the ultimate goal of safety for all, this approach creates many ways to help. This pragmatism co-exists with a relentless commitment to end violence, respect for each victim's unique experience of violence and path to safer, and demand to those who use violence to change. Systemic advocacy to increase options is necessary.



- **Less Violence**
 - Reduced level
 - Less frequent
 - Less control
- **Economic Stability Increased**
 - Fewer gaps in meeting basic needs
 - More financial resources
- **Well-Being Strengthened**
 - More resilience to effects of violence
 - Emotional healing
 - Increased social supports
 - Reinforced cultural strengths

Safer Enough

Children deserve comprehensive safety. Some do not have access to that ideal. As advocacy toward the vision of safety for all continues, making children safer is a practical goal—if there is a standard. Do children have adequate levels of safety? Are they “safer enough”? This phrase reflects that even with children, the day-to-day advocacy goal is not perfection (safety) but improvement (safer), although a standard must be met (safer enough) Davies, J. & Lyon, E.(2014). *Domestic Violence Advocacy 2d*. Sage. p. 171. See also “What Makes Children Safer” chart.



- **Adequate Levels of Safety**
 - No Violence - no physical, emotional, sexual violence against children; limited/less exposure to violence against others
 - Basic Needs - food, shelter, health care, educational opportunity
 - Social and Emotional Well-Being - healing, resilience, development
- **Capable Parent/s or Other Caretaker/s**