

Safety Planning with Children of Battered Women

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Now that I have finished asking you to walk a delicate line between approaching your children as wounded and responding to them as courageous and persevering, I am going to introduce another tricky balancing act:

As much as possible keeping your children from being burdened with adult responsibility, while simultaneously equipping them with strategies for keeping themselves — and you — safe.

If your partner sometimes gets scary or violent, your children are almost certainly aware of the fact, as I discussed early in this book; you cannot avoid that fear by not talking about it. In fact, children feel safer if they can talk to their mothers about how frightened their father's behavior makes them, and discuss actions they might take next time he erupts. And they aren't just afraid for themselves; they are worried about you, and they need to be able to express that concern and feel that you hear them. They also want to know how they might be able to protect you.

When you sit with your children, individually or as a group, to talk about safety strategies, be sure to emphasize the following points:

- Adults are responsible for their own safety. Children can help if they want to, but it isn't their job.
- Safety plans won't always work, and if someone gets hurt, it isn't the child's fault.
- If they make a mistake and do the safety plan wrong, they still aren't at fault for what happens; the abusive man is always responsible for his own actions.
- They can't manage Dad or make him change.
- They don't have to talk with you about safety planning if they don't want to.

Then begin the discussion by asking your children what they think might help, or what they would like to plan to do next time they feel scared of Dad. Elicit as many ideas from them as possible; in this way you will learn what strategies they may already be using, and they are more likely to be able to effectively practice actions that they have come up with themselves. Then add ideas of your own, and see if you can agree on a plan. Here are some of the strategies I have learned about from families over the years, which you might try to include in your safety plan:

Safety Strategies for Children

- Running out of the home when the incident starts
- Locking themselves in a bedroom
- Locking themselves in a room that has a telephone, and calling for help
- Arranging a code word with friends or relatives, so that they can use the phone to call for help without the abuser knowing what they are doing
- Dialing 911 (or the local emergency number if it is different)
- Running to the home of neighbors who know about the abuse, and calling the police from there (if the police are supportive)
- Siblings agreeing to meet together in a pre-arranged spot
- Making an excuse to get Mom out of the home (such as going outdoors and faking an injury, so that she has to come out to help)
- Keeping a cellular phone hidden somewhere indoors, or in a garage or shed, without the abuser's knowledge, where the children know where to find it if they need to call for help
- Planning phrases they can say to themselves or to each other to help them stay calm and get through the scary incident (such as, "We're going to be okay.")
- Leaving home as soon as they see that Dad has been drinking, or observe other behaviors that they know are warning signs of a scary incident
- Hiding weapons or other dangerous objects in the home so that Dad won't be able to find them
- Teaching children to call the hotline for abused women in cases where they feel the need for advice about what to do
- Physically or verbally intervening to protect Mom (which can be very dangerous in some cases, so children should discuss the risks of this choice)

In some cases women discover that their children have already made agreements with each other involving these elements or similar ones, but hadn't mentioned their plans to Mom because of feeling that the abuse was an issue they were not supposed to mention, or out of fear of making Mom feel embarrassed or ashamed.

I have heard a few professionals argue that safety planning with children of abused women is inappropriate, because it burdens them unduly with adult responsibility, reinforcing a dynamic that is already part of their experience. But in practice safety planning seems to make this burden less rather than increasing it; children already feel a profound desire, and a great need, to protect their mothers, as came across powerfully in Caroline McGee's interviews. The only way to truly relieve that burden is to end or escape the abuse, which is far from easy to do, as I discussed in earlier chapters. In the mean time, most children are better off with some empowerment than without it.

If you have not made a safety plan for yourself, apart from any safety planning with your children, I would encourage you to do so first. You can look in Chapter 9 of *Why Does He Do That?* for an introduction to creating your own plan, but I encourage you if at all possible to work in conjunction with an advocate at a program for abused women. (And if you do not have time or transportation to get to the program, work with an advocate there by telephone).

Safety Planning for Unsupervised Visitation

As I discussed in Chapter 13, it is tragically common for family courts to require women to send their children on unsupervised visits with their abusive fathers, even in cases where

there is an extensive and well-documented history of physical violence and/or sexual boundary violations on the part of the abuser.

Safety planning for unsupervised visitation can follow the points above, with the following additional considerations:

- Have them think through the set-up at their father's home, perhaps even drawing a diagram with you, to consider where they could get behind a locked door, get access to a telephone, or both.
- Make sure they know your telephone number by heart.
- Send them on visits with a photograph of you that they can look at for reassurance, a stuffed animal they can hold, or other objects that can help them get through times of feeling afraid, insecure, or lonely.
- Let them know that they should make their own safety their top priority, even if it means they need to go along with their father on speaking badly about you or take other steps to placate him and keep him happy.
- Prepare them for how best to deal with his efforts to pump them for information about you (which a large proportion of abusers do in unsupervised visitation). Let them know that they can tell him what he is asking for if they feel that their safety depends on doing so, but that it is important when they get back home for them to tell you what they told him. (For example, if he has found out from them where you work, or the fact that you are dating a new partner, it is important for you to be able to plan for his possible reactions.)
- As above, discuss how the children might respond if they see signs that Dad has been drinking or see other danger signals, including what to do if he attempts to drive in the car with them while he is intoxicated.
- If you are concerned about possible abduction by the abuser, rehearse with your children their full name, the town and state you live in, and how to call 911. Discuss strategies for passing written messages to other adults to indicate that they are being abducted, or to leave messages in public restroom (especially women's rooms where the abuser is unlikely to go).

As with safety planning when the abuser still lives at home, try to discuss the children's anxieties openly with them while simultaneously trying not to alarm them or intensify their fears. Remind them that when safety plans don't work, they are in no way to blame.

If you are involved in court litigation with your ex-partner over custody or visitation, the fact that you talked to your children about safety planning could be used against you, as the abuser may claim that you have been inculcating fear into the children that wasn't there previously. Because of this risk, you might want to try to arrange with a professional to work out the safety plans with your children, either a therapist or an advocate at a program for abused women. If these resources are not available to you, you might want to only safety plan with children in cases where you are confident that they will not mention the plan to the abuser. (As I discussed in Chapter 5, secret-keeping needs to be avoided as much as possible with children who are exposed to an abusive man; if you ask them not to tell their father about the safety planning, be sure to emphasize to them that in general it is inappropriate for adults to ask children to keep secrets, and that the only exception is in cases where certain secrets are necessary to keep them safe and the child doesn't mind keeping the secret.)

One would certainly hope that unsupervised visits would be stopped by the court if children continued over time to feel unsafe during them, but in practice children's continued anxieties are often blamed on the mother, so long-term coping strategies can be necessary. These might include finding ways to secretly call Mom on the phone to talk, writing in journals to help keep their own sanity, tuning out their fears or loneliness by watching a lot of movies at Dad's house (though heavy video exposure creates problems of its own, as I discussed earlier), and other approaches to psychological survival that you and your child might brainstorm together.