

# Children Who Witness Abuse Program's 20 Most Commonly Asked Questions from New Workers

updated 2012



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## INTRODUCTION

The original *Children Who Witness Abuse Program Handbook: 20 Most Commonly Asked Questions* was funded by the Vancouver Foundation in 1995 and compiled by Sharon White and edited by Jodie McConnell. The purpose of the original handbook was to provide support for new Children Who Witness Abuse (CWWA) programs.

The BC Society of Transition Houses updated this resource in 2012 to meet the current needs of CWWA Programs. The focus of this version has changed slightly as it aims to answer questions from new CWWA workers working in existing programs. New workers may have inherited intake and assessment forms, session outlines, and CWWA policies; therefore, this document aims to fill in the gap of information that may have been lost since the inception of CWWA programs in 1992.

The majority of children/youth referred to a CWWA program will have seen, heard, and/or be aware of the violence against their mother. As such, this resource may also prove useful for front-line workers at transition, second stage, third stage houses and safe homes as it provides a framework for developing a support program for children and youth exposed to violence in the home.

This resource will provide all anti-violence workers with:

- a rationale for working with children and youth who have been exposed to violence in the home
- resource suggestions for developing a program
- suggestions for community outreach, and
- suggestions for additional resources, which provide sample forms to assist with intake, assessment, group sessions and program evaluation

Counsellors are encouraged to adapt material to respond to the varied needs and resources in their communities. We suggest that new CWWA counsellors start here and supplement this introductory resource by downloading the *Best Practices for the Children Who Witness Abuse Program* and *Records Management Guidelines: Protecting Privacy for Survivors of Violence* from the BCSTH website.

If you have any other questions about the CWWA program, please contact us at [info@bcsth.ca](mailto:info@bcsth.ca) for more information.

## HER STORY OF CHILDREN WHO WITNESS ABUSE PROGRAMS

In 1992, the B.C./Yukon Society of Transition Houses responded to a need for supportive psycho-educational counselling for children and youth exposed to violence in the home. The society began by researching existing services and models of programs for children and youth exposed to violence against women throughout Canada and the United States. Research and development funding was provided by the Vancouver Foundation and the United Way of Greater Vancouver. A proposal for core funding for programs throughout the province was submitted to the Ministry and Social Services and the Ministry of Health, with 1.4 million dollars provided by the Ministry of Social Services. Initially, 41 programs were established.

As of 2012, there are 88 community-based programs for children and youth exposed to violence in the home offered by women serving anti-violence organizations throughout British Columbia. The now BC Society of Transition Houses works closely with each of the 88 programs, providing support through networking, communication, consultation and training. Currently, both the coordination of Children Who Witness Abuse Programs and the community programs are funded by the Ministry of Justice.

## 20 MOST COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### 1. Why Work With Children And Youth Who Have Been Exposed To Violence In The Home?

The United Nations Secretary-General’s Study on Violence Against Children estimated that between 85,000 and 362,000 children or youth are exposed to domestic violence each year in Canada. On any given day in Canada, about 2,500 children or youth are living in an abused women’s shelter with their mothers, with 67% under the age of 10.<sup>i</sup>

According to Cunningham and Baker,

“Children living with conflict and abuse will actively interpret, predict, assess their roles in causing a “fight”, worry about the consequences, engage in problem solving and/or take measures to protect themselves or siblings, both physically and emotionally.”<sup>ii</sup>

Dr. Peter Jaffe et al<sup>iii</sup> describe six lessons that children who are exposed to violence learn:

1. Violence is an appropriate form of conflict resolution.
2. Violence has a place within the family interaction.
3. If violence is reported to others in the community, including mental health and criminal justice professionals, there are few, if any, consequences.
4. Sexism, as defined by an inequality of power, decision-making ability, and roles within the family, is to be encouraged.
5. Violence is an appropriate means of stress management.
6. Victims of violence are to tolerate this behaviour or to assume that they are responsible for the violence.

At an early age in their development, children and youth exposed to violence learn:

- to feel responsible for the violence
- to blame others for their behaviour
- that hitting others to get what you want is right
- that asking for what you want is dangerous
- that feeling angry is bad, and
- that aggression brings control and safety

For some children, the impact of violence against women begins before they are even born. The violence often starts during pregnancy and is more likely to occur as soon as children are born. These children live with fear and anxiety as they anticipate the next violent episode.

Studies indicate that children's exposure to violence against their mother significantly disrupts their development, resulting in disturbed patterns of cognitive, emotional and/or behavioural adjustment. Interventions provided by Children Who Witness Abuse programs are essential to promote attitudinal and behavioural change in ways that will help children and youth feel safe and better able to succeed socially and academically.

## 2. What May Children And Youth Exposed To Violence Experience?

Children and youth living in families where violence in the home occurs may be exposed to violence and abuse in a number of ways. They may be direct witnesses to abuse, may suffer harm incidental to the violence at home and/or may have their lives disrupted by moving or being separated from one or both parents. They may be used by the abuser to manipulate or gain control over their mother, and they themselves are more likely to be abused.<sup>iv</sup> One North American study found that children who were exposed to violence in the home were 15 times more likely to be physically and/or sexually assaulted than the national average. Forty percent of child abuse victims report domestic violence in the home.<sup>v</sup>

Children and youth's perception of their role in the violence significantly contributes to the overall impact of the violence on their self-esteem and well-being. Children and youth who believe they are to blame for the violence or feel guilty because they were unable to protect their mothers or other siblings will experience more long-term effects than children who are able to distance themselves from the violence.

The overall impact on children varies based on their age, sex, role within the family, and their stage of development.

The following identifies the possible impacts on children and youth exposed to violence in the home:

### **Infants**

- basic need for attachment may be disrupted
- sleeping and feeding routines may be unpredictable
- maternal stress may be transferred to the infant
- physical security may be at risk

### **Children**

- live in fear of betraying the family secret
- feel guilty about not protecting mom
- facing ongoing feelings of fear and anxiety
- feel anger, fear, and confusion towards dad

- perceive mother as weak
- believe violence is appropriate
- feeling overly responsive toward mom and siblings
- experience loss of self-esteem
- appear hyper-vigilant and over-involved in adult activity

### **Youth**

- withdrawn from the family unit
- exhibit anti-social or acting out behaviour
- demonstrate violence in peer relationships
- link sex with violence

### **Subtle Impacts**

- little understanding or awareness that violence is an inappropriate response
- difficulty in taking responsibility for inappropriate or disruptive behaviour
- poor skills for resolving conflict or getting needs met

### **Possible Effects on Children's Coping**

- children who cope best have mothers who are coping well
- frequent moves affect children's ability to cope
- children whose parents have had three or more separations will have the hardest time coping

We must also consider that other factors significantly influence the impact of exposure to violence on an individual child/youth and that you may need knowledge and referral partnerships in the following areas:

- child sexual abuse
- emotional and psychological abuse
- physical abuse
- neglect
- bullying and cyber bullying
- sibling bullying/violence
- dating violence and violence in relationships (including friendships)
- violence in schools
- media (music lyrics, video games, movies)
- criminal harassment including textual harassment and coercion to send sexts
- gang association

- internet
- sports
- crime
- pornography and sexting
- trafficking of children
- war
- persecution
- abuse of older adults (grandparents)

### 3. What Is The Children Who Witness Abuse (CWWA) Program?

The CWWA Program is a psycho-education initiative aimed at supporting children and youth living with the effects of being exposed to violence against their mother. It involves:

- free community-based support programs for children/youth between the ages of 3 and 18
- information-sharing and support to mothers or caregivers; and
- school prevention activities

#### **CWWA Program Objectives**

The long-term, short-term and operational objectives of the program are:

1. To support children and youth with what they are feeling in the present as a result of being exposed to violence in the home before these feelings are denied or repressed.
2. To break the cycle of violence.
3. To assist children/youth who have witnessed abuse with developing self-esteem, an awareness of safety issues, an understanding of their own emotions and of the dynamics of violence against women.
4. To provide support services to these children/youth through support groups and individual counselling.
5. To provide support to mothers about their children's exposure to violence through resources, groups, and/or counselling.
6. To raise community awareness related to violence against women.

#### **CWWA Program Principles**

CWWA programs work from a combination of four distinct principles:

- Psycho-educational
- Feminist

- Child/Women Centered: Strength-Based and Developmental
- Anti-Oppressive

Note: Psycho-educational principles focus on providing children/youth with information to help them understand their responses to their mother's abuse.

For more information on CWWA Program Principles and how they relate to practice, please see Section 1 in the *Best Practices for the Children Who Witness Abuse Program*.

### **Anticipated CWWA Program Outcomes**

1. Children/youth will be able to label and express their feelings in relation to their exposure to violence in the home.
2. Children/youth will be able to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy ways of expressing anger, and will develop healthy ways.
3. Children/youth will understand that they are not responsible for the violence perpetrated against their mothers.
4. Children/youth will understand that they are not alone in their exposure to violence. This is often exemplified during group support.
5. Children/youth will be able to identify who they can talk with to be safe and develop a safety plan if needed.
6. Children/youth will be able to recognize the positive aspects of their current support system. Their support system will also be broadened based on their needs.
7. Children/youth's self-awareness and confidence will be enhanced. They will be able to identify their strengths and the challenges they face. They will learn how other people see them and how they see themselves, especially with respect to their family relationships. They will feel some control over themselves, their relationships, and their environment.

#### **4. What Is The Rationale For Providing The CWWA Program?**

Children and youth exposed to violence in the home need to have an opportunity to deal with traumatic events in their lives before they are denied or repressed. It is important to assess the impact that the violence has had on a child/youth. Their feelings need to be validated and recognized as important.

The BC Society of Transition Houses believes that group and individual support should be available to help children/youth identify and express emotions surrounding violence, separation, blame, loss and/or ambivalence. Alternatives to violence must be taught by providing children/youth with ideas for coping more effectively with their emotions. Like their mothers, children/youth exposed to violence have often kept silent about the abuse in their

family and will need to be supported in breaking the silence. The program is based on the beliefs that:

**Above all children/youth have the right**

- **to be treated with respect and be met where they are at**
- **to access our free services**
- **to privacy and confidentiality of information**  
Children, youth and their caregivers should be made aware of how to voice complaints regarding any service provision.
- **to physical, psychological and emotional safety**  
In a violent home, children/youth may be caught in the middle of the violence.
- **to know they will be looked after**  
Children/youth from violent homes live in a traumatic environment. When a woman leaves her abusive partner, her children's lives are uprooted and the turmoil increases. Children/youth need stability and regular routines.
- **to know they are not responsible**  
Children/youth often believe they are to blame for the abusive behaviour towards their mother. They may need assistance to help them express their feelings, know the violence is not their fault and that they are loveable human beings.

**The UN Convention on The Rights Of The Child,  
in Child-Friendly Language, Identifies the Following Rights**

- ◆ Everyone under age 18 has these rights.
- ◆ All children have these rights, no matter who they are, where they live, what their parents do, what language they speak, what their religion is, whether they are a boy or girl, what their culture is, whether they have a disability, whether they are rich or poor. No child should be treated unfairly on any basis.
- ◆ All adults should do what is best for you. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children.
- ◆ The government has a responsibility to make sure your rights are protected. They must help your family to protect your rights and create an environment where you can grow and reach your potential.
- ◆ Your family has the responsibility to help you learn to exercise your rights, and to ensure that your rights are protected.
- ◆ You have the right to be alive.
- ◆ You have the right to a name, and this should be officially recognized by the

- government. You have the right to a nationality (to belong to a country).
- ◆ You have the right to identity – an official record of who you are. No one should take this away from you.
  - ◆ You have the right to live with your parent(s), unless it is bad for you. You have the right to live with a family who cares for you.
  - ◆ If you live in a different country than your parents, you have the right to be together in the same place.
  - ◆ You have the right to be protected from kidnapping and no one has a right to kidnap or sell you.
  - ◆ You have the right to give your opinion and for adults to listen and take it seriously.
  - ◆ You have the right to find out things and share what you think with others, by talking, drawing, writing, or in any other way unless it harms or offends other people.
  - ◆ You have the right to choose your own religion and beliefs. Your parents should help you decide what is wrong, and what is best for you.
  - ◆ You have the right to choose your own friends and join or set up groups, as long as it isn't harmful to others.
  - ◆ You have the right to privacy.
  - ◆ You have the right to get information that is important to your well-being, from radio, newspaper, books, computers and other sources. Adults should make sure that the information you are getting is not harmful, and help you find and understand the information you need.
  - ◆ You have the right to be raised by your parent(s) if possible.
  - ◆ You have the right to be protected from being hurt and mistreated, in body or mind.
  - ◆ You have the right to special care and help if you cannot live with your parents.
  - ◆ You have the right to care and protection if you are adopted or in foster care.
  - ◆ You have the right to special protection and help if you are a refugee (if you have been forced to leave your home and live in another country), as well as all the rights in this convention.
  - ◆ You have the right to special education and care if you have a disability, as well as all the rights in this convention, so that you can live a full life.
  - ◆ You have the right to the best health care possible, safe water to drink, nutritious food, a clean and safe environment, and information to help you stay well.
  - ◆ If you live in care or in other situations away from home, you have the right to have these living arrangements looked at regularly to see if they are the most

appropriate.

- ◆ You have the right to help from the government if you are poor or in need.
- ◆ You have the right to food, clothing, and a safe place to live and to have your basic needs met. You should not be disadvantaged so that you can't do many of the things other kids can do.
- ◆ You have the right to a good quality education. You should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level you can.
- ◆ Your education should help you use and develop your talents and abilities.
- ◆ It should also help you learn to live peacefully, protect the environment and respect other people.
- ◆ You have the right to practice your own culture, language and religion – or any you choose. Minority and indigenous groups. need special protection of this right.
- ◆ You have the right to play and rest.
- ◆ You have the right to protection from work that harms you and is bad for your health and education. If you work you have the right to be safe and paid fairly.
- ◆ You have the right to protection from harmful drugs and from the drug trade.
- ◆ You have the right to be free from sexual abuse.

Source: *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*<sup>vi</sup>

## 5. How Does a CWWA Program Support Children, Youth and Caregivers?

1. CWWA programs that receive core funding from the BC Provincial Government are contracted to provide services to children and youth through:
  - Age-appropriate groups for children/youth
  - Individual support for children/youth not ready for group counselling or who need service when no developmental age group is available
2. Programs also communicate with and support non-offending caregivers by providing them with information about CWWA services, develop safety plans for children and youth, referrals to support groups, and individual support sessions around their child's exposure to violence in the home. Programs help caregivers understand the impact of exposure on children and youth and ways to support them.
3. Where resources permit, CWWA programs deliver prevention activities to children, youth, educators and caregivers in school and throughout their community.

## 6. How Can I Ensure that the Program is Culturally-Appropriate?<sup>vii</sup>

In working with children/youth from ethno-cultural communities, it is important to remember that:

1. Different cultures have different perspectives on violence and the role of men and women in relationships, and in society as a whole.
2. It can be harder for people from minority cultures to disclose violence. Authority figures, such as school principals and police officers, may not be trusted to deal with disclosures in a sensitive fashion. In many circumstances, victims of violence feel they are not only betraying their partner, but also their culture/family in disclosing.
3. New Canadians may have different perspectives on the role of police. Authority figures may be viewed as political agents of the state who could compromise safety and citizenship rather than provide assistance. New citizens may face additional roadblocks such as gaining access to support services that are available in their language and are culturally sensitive.
4. You can always ask the mother how they would like to be supported in order to meet their needs. Alternatively, consult with local community groups/service providers for suggestions on culturally appropriate service delivery.
5. In working with children/youth and mothers from various ethno-cultural communities, it is necessary to determine and respect culturally learned methods of interaction and communication. For example:

### **Language**

- Literal translation can create confusion. This is particularly true when slang is used either in the original language or in the translation.
- Those with English as an additional language may have difficulty understanding how connotation and context can change the meaning of words and phrases.
- Some cultures use metaphor extensively. This less direct method of explaining is often met with impatience and suspicion in North America.

### **Rules of Conversations**

- The patterns of greeting one another vary considerably from culture to culture.
- Use of and reaction to silence is culturally conditioned. Many Western societies tend to react to silence negatively and with discomfort. Other societies may use silence as a sign of respect, to guard their privacy, or as an expression of politeness.
- The volume and directness of speech also varies with culture. What some cultures may value as forthright may strike members of other cultural groups as immature, clumsy, aggressive or even rude. What some groups may value as subtle and sensitive may be interpreted as evasive or non-committal by others.

### **Expressing Emotion**

- Emotion expressed openly and spontaneously through gestures, facial expression, and tone of voice have a positive value for some cultural groups, while the masking of feelings may be taken as a sign of maturity and social politeness by other groups.

### **Eye Contact**

- As previously mentioned, some cultures regard averting the eyes as a sign of respect. This is in direct contrast to the Canadian expectation that we should be direct and look one another right in the eye.

### **Touching and Personal Space**

- Comfortable speaking distance varies between cultures. This distance may range from inches to several feet. With respect to touch, in some cultures physical contact is frequent. In others, contact is less frequent or may even be taboo.

### **Privacy**

- Some cultures value individual privacy very highly. In others, very few occasions are deemed private.
- Canadian culture, and more broadly North American culture, can be confusing in this regard. This right to privacy is highly valued while some individuals may be quite public about issues and feelings that others would invariably view as private.

Within any culture there may be a range of culturally acceptable responses along any of the dimensions noted above. The range of acceptable responses within any culture will vary over time because every culture is dynamic and experiences change. Consult with and involve service providers who know the child/youth's language and customs.

### **Working with Children/Youth from Aboriginal Communities**

The Children Who Witness Abuse Program will need to be adapted for use in Aboriginal communities. It is important to recognize Aboriginal perspectives within both rural and urban areas. Although Aboriginal persons are often considered to belong to one group, in reality, hundreds of cultures and languages are represented by nations across Canada. The following issues will need to be considered in developing a children's program that is sensitive to all Aboriginal cultures:

1. In the original cultures, many Aboriginal communities were matriarchal and do not tolerate violence or disrespect in relationships.
2. Many Aboriginal communities trace social problems, including violence, loss of traditional ways, racism and abuse to the Residential School System and colonization.

3. Many Aboriginal communities seek solutions to end violence that are more holistic and involve the entire community, rather than individual solutions that involve institutions such as the police.
4. Aboriginal leaders acknowledge a higher level of abuse within Aboriginal communities.<sup>viii</sup>

### Suggestions

1. Acknowledge the abuse of Aboriginal persons by the dominant culture for over 500 years. Canadian experiences include the physical, sexual, and spiritual abuse of many Aboriginal children and adolescents in residential schools throughout Canada.<sup>ix</sup> Offer to provide a group within the Aboriginal community, perhaps on reserve.
2. Co-facilitate with an Aboriginal facilitator.
3. Incorporate culturally specific exercises, material and examples into your program.
4. Endeavour to assess the specific needs of Aboriginal children/youth before you start the group.
5. Before beginning any intervention, meet with the community and perhaps the Elders within the community to seek their guidance.

For more information on working with Aboriginal Students and Cultural Groups please refer to *BC Society of Transition Houses (2007) Violence Is Preventable: Enhancing Partnerships Between Children Who Witness Abuse Programs and BC Schools*.

## 7. What is a Children Who Witness Abuse Counsellor?

Job descriptions of Children Who Witness Abuse Counsellors vary in order to meet the needs of each unique community.

CWWA Staff should have the following knowledge, skills and abilities:<sup>x</sup>

- Ability to deal appropriately with disclosures of abuse and follow *Child, Family and Community Service Act* found here [http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/child\\_protection/](http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/child_protection/)
- Strong understanding of safety issues for staff and the training to deal with critical incidents.
- Strong understanding of a child/youth-centered approach.
- Understanding of how violence affects children/youth.
- Group work skills and facilitation.
- Ability to work with diverse cultures .
- Understanding of diverse child-rearing practices.
- Understanding of child/youth developmental stages.

- Ability to recognize symptoms of trauma in children/youth and make appropriate referrals.
- Ability to engage and empower children/youth.
- Understanding of children's rights.
- Good working knowledge of community resources for referrals and the ability to refer when necessary.
- Understanding and respecting of all cultures.
- Understanding and respecting of issues facing immigrant and refugee population.
- Qualifications that meet the needs of the position.

Employers of CWWA programs will ensure:

- Criminal records checks are obtained for all staff.
- Staffing reflects local cultural diversity as much as possible.
- Orientation and clinical support is provided to all staff members.
- Agency violence and safety protocol is reviewed by all staff members.
- Ongoing training opportunities are available to staff to increase their knowledge and skills in working with children/youth exposed to violence.
- Staff receives regular support and supervision as is possible.
- Staff is co-operative and respectful in their role modeling for children/youth.
- The agency has appropriate liability insurance.
- Staff maintains an adequate level of professionalism.
- Program staff is given the opportunity to develop competencies.

## 8. What Do I Need to Consider Before Starting a CWWA Program?<sup>xi</sup>

### **General Service Provision**

Good quality service provision depends on the ongoing development of services. It is important for providers to continually look for ways to improve their services. Service provision can improve by providing consistent and responsive services, ongoing evaluation and through accountability.<sup>xii</sup>

CWWA service providers will:

- Provide services in a professional manner.
- Obtain informed, written, and time-limited consent to service provision. It is important that children/youth gain some understanding of the reason they are becoming involved in services.

- Maintain appropriate boundaries relating to program participants, and discuss these boundaries with them (e.g., explain why they cannot become Facebook friends or the reason that they will not initiate a greeting if they meet in a public place).
- Strive to be consistent in service provision. Every individual can expect to receive the same level and quality of service.
- Respond to service recipients in a timely manner.
- Ensure they are aware of work place policy and procedures. This will guide individuals in their work with service recipients.
- Be flexible and open to making changes in service delivery and safety plans when the need becomes apparent.
- Continue to pursue opportunities for professional development to increase skills necessary to do the work.
- Keep up to date and implement current practices.
- Prioritize the need for ongoing program evaluation.
- Develop good working relationships with other related service providers in the community. It is through networking that there is opportunity to collaborate when possible, and support mutual learning. If working in an isolated area it may be helpful to connect with service providers in other locations.
- Ensure that services are accountable. This includes accountability to service recipients, funders, and community. It will be important to have a process by which child/youth, parent/guardian, if applicable, and others may provide feedback to ensure services are meeting their needs.

### **Consent**

It is necessary to understand the importance of obtaining informed, written and time-limited consent. Informed consent indicates that participants are not only aware of the service being provided but also give consent for their children to participate in the service. 'Written' means that they sign a *Consent to Service* form before beginning service. 'Time-limited' means that consent for service will be given for the amount of time specified; however this can be extended if necessary in order to ensure complete transparency.

The need to obtain consent will depend on the service provided and the age of participants. Agencies will have different policies regarding informed consent when working with minor children and caregivers. It is important for individuals to be aware of policies and privacy legislation within their work places.

CWWA Programs must:

- Be aware of their agency policy and privacy legislation with respect to obtaining informed consent.

- Provide information about the service to the child/youth, even though his or her consent may not be required. It is important that children/youth gain some understanding of the reason they are becoming involved in services.
- Be informed of parental status (sole or joint custody/guardianship), and primary residence of the child in the program. It is necessary to obtain the consent from the guardian or caregiver. If parents have joint guardianship it is helpful to obtain consent from both parents. If both parents do not provide consent, it is possible that one parent may object to the child's participation in the program.
- Be informed of the agency's policy regarding the minimum age for children/youth accepted into the program without the consent of a parent.
- Provide some services that do not require consent. Some services that are offered throughout the school day, for example, may not need parental consent if they are part of the curriculum.
- Consult Ministry of Child and Family Development if a child is in foster care or a permanent ward of the court to determine a child's eligibility for the service.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality has been identified by the International Organization for Standardization. ISO in ISO – 17799 ensures that “information is accessible only to those authorized to have access” and is one of the cornerstones of information security. See Wikipedia, [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/confidentiality](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/confidentiality).

It is important to:

- Ensure participants are made aware that information will not be obtained from or given to anyone without written consent, unless required by law when a life is in danger, a child is in need of protection, or a court has issued a subpoena.
- Review confidentiality and its limitations with the caregiver and child/youth as is appropriate to the provision of service.
- Be aware of your agency's policy regarding the confidentiality of participant information.
- Ensure participant documentation is kept in a secure file cabinet or a locked room.
- Ensure child/youth/caregivers are made aware that their information may be shared with a supervisor in order to provide them with the best possible service.
- Ensure that confidentiality is introduced to children/youth when defining “group rules.”
- Encourage participants not to share the personal information of the participants with others outside of the group setting. This is a guideline that will help ensure group safety for all participants.
- Be aware of and work in accordance with the appropriate professional association, where applicable.

- Be aware of the sections relating to confidentiality in the funding agreements that the agency may have with funders.<sup>xiv</sup>

## 9. What Do I Need to Address in My First Meeting with a Child/Youth? What About With His/Her Mother/Caregiver?

Prior to the group beginning, it is suggested that you meet both the mother/caregiver and the child/youth. You will need to decide whether to meet with them individually or together. This usually depends on the age of the child/youth. For very young children, it is recommended that you meet them with their mother/caregiver.

### **Consent**

See Section 8 for more information.

### **Pre-Group Interviews:**

In your first meeting with the child/youth, it is important to identify the most pressing issues. You may use an “intake form” to guide your questioning or, even better, ask open-ended questions and have a natural conversation. By the end of the meeting, you should be able to assess:

- how ready the child/youth is to talk about his/her family situation
- how comfortable the child/youth may be in a group setting
- if the child/youth is able to trust an adult
- if the child/youth’s behaviour will fit in or disrupt the group process

### **Meeting a Caregiver:**

This meeting will give you an opportunity to find out, from the mother/caregiver’s perspective, how the child has been affected by their exposure to violence in the home. It will also provide you with insight into how supportive the mother/caregiver might be during the group process. In some cases, mothers/caregivers are not ready to deal with issues arising from the group format.

It is important to let the mother/caregiver know exactly what the goals of the group are and what her role will be during the process.

Rapport with the mother/caregiver can be established during this interview stage which will facilitate a co-operative approach if a difficult situation arises.

During the group, it is essential that the mother/caregiver know that supports are available to them and that they will be kept informed of the issues that will be addressed in the group. This

is important as it enables them to prepare and respond to behavioural changes that might arise from painful or difficult issues addressed.

For example, if the child begins to act out, they need to know that you are available to assist them in developing strategies to cope with the anger and acting out behaviours.

It is also important to stress the need for the mother/caregiver to keep you informed of any changes in the family situation so that safety plans can be adjusted. During this interview the mother/caregiver should be advised that if certain information is disclosed during the group, you will contact her for more information.

Throughout the interview the importance of ongoing and open communication between the mother/caregiver and the counsellor should be emphasized. Not only will this help the counsellor provide support to the children, it will ultimately strengthen the relationship between the mother/caregiver and child/youth.

#### 10. How Do I Determine if a Child/Youth Is Ready for a Group?

When a referral is made, initial screening/assessment is usually done by phone. This is to determine whether or not the referral is appropriate or if a child/youth needs to be referred to another agency. During the assessment it is also important to find out:

- the age of the child
- gender
- number of children in the family
- whether the child/youth is living in a stable environment

**Age:** To determine if there is an appropriate upcoming group and, if not, to maintain a referral list for starting a group for a particular age range.

**Gender:** To ensure the group is gender balanced.

**Number of Children in Family:** To arrange for siblings to attend separate groups to avoid the potential for one to be inhibited by the presence of brother(s) or sister(s).

**Stable Living Environment:** If a child is still living where the abuse is continuing, it would not be safe for children to attend the group. Individual counselling may be considered to assess the child/youth's safety and the impact on the child/youth of living with the abuse.

**Group Readiness:** During the intake you will need to determine if there are any other concerns that need to be addressed before the child/youth is ready to join a group. One of the most common concerns is sexual abuse. If this is disclosed, provide the mother/caregiver with a

referral to an appropriate agency/program. Explore strategies with the mother/caregiver for minimizing other barriers to her child's participation (i.e., language difficulties, learning impairments, etc.).

### **Determining Readiness**

1. Children/youth's readiness to discuss the issue of violence and their capacity for doing so in a group process should be assessed.
2. Support systems need to be in place. Caregivers must support the child/youth being in group and be willing to deal with issues that surface. Children with separation anxiety may find group difficult as they are apart from their caregiver.
3. Motivation to attend the group must be considered. Are children/youth being pressured? It is important to give them a sense of control over the decision. Motivation is the single most significant factor in the success of any group.
4. Children/youth with severe behaviour challenges or aggression could have difficulty in a group setting. Consider working with them individually.
5. Children/youth who have been exposed to repeated acts of severe violence over many years may have more concerns than a group can handle.

All children/youth should be given access to services but it may be necessary to provide individual support or referrals for children/youth where some of these above factors are present.

## **11. What is the Benefit of Providing Group Support and How Should I Start?**

### **There are many benefits of Group Work for Children and Youth<sup>xv</sup>**

- Clinical experience shows that group support is a very effective treatment option for children/youth that have been exposed to domestic violence.<sup>xvi</sup>
- Groups are an opportunity for children/youth to receive violence education in a safe supportive environment.
- Groups can assist children/youth in their relationships with others their age, and reduce isolation.<sup>xvii</sup>
- Groups can be fun. Many children/youth belong to groups and feel less threatened attending a group than they may feel attending individual counselling.
- Groups can empower children/youth to overcome feelings of helplessness.
- Groups can provide safety planning options.
- Groups can help children/youth to share feelings and experiences.
- Groups can increase ability of children/youth to identify different types of violence.
- Groups can help children/youth learn healthy ways to communicate and resolve conflict.

## Getting Started

Review program resources to develop age-appropriate curriculum. These resources include:

- Best Practices for the Children Who Witness Abuse Program (BCSTH, 2009).
- Violence Is Preventable: Enhancing Partnerships Between Children Who Witness Abuse Programs and BC Schools (BCSTH, 2007).
- Safety Planning with Children and Youth: A Toolkit for Working with Children and Youth Exposed to Domestic Violence (Ministry of Justice, 2011).
- Determine where your group will take place. Ensure your space is cozy and age-appropriate.
- Establish a time frame for your group (8 - 10 weeks). You will need to allow time for pre- and post-assessment interviews.
- Consider a co-facilitator. It will be your responsibility to assess the learning needs of a co-facilitator and provide the necessary information (i.e., reading material, video).
- Acquire the material you will need (i.e., a flip chart stand and paper, scissors, paper, felts, crayons, glue, magazines). You may also need access to audio visual equipment.

## Points to Consider

- Ideally, groups should be led by two counsellors; preferably a female and a male co-facilitator. This will enable the co-facilitators to model appropriate female-male interactions.
- It is recommended that groups consist of no more than 10 children. Groups of between 6 and 9 are considered most effective.
- Groups usually consist of 10 sessions running from 1.5 to 2 hours each depending on the age of the group.
- The best time of day to provide a group will likely be between 4 and 6 p.m. or at the school in order to reduce travel barriers.
- Groups should follow a structured format but will require flexibility.
- Children/youth should be out of the immediate crisis situation and should have the support of the mother or caregiver to attend.

## Suggestions for Group Work with Children/Youth

**The Group Room:** This should be large enough to move around in but not so large that participants are tempted to stray away. Eliminate dangers and distractions as much as possible.

**Content and Language:** Adapt content and language to fit the participant's maturity level. With younger children, keep it simple but remember that they usually can understand much better than they can express themselves. When you think they don't understand, try rephrasing instead of repeating. With youth, be careful not to talk down to them.

**Pacing the Group:** Help the group to move through the activities at a pace that seems comfortable to them. Where some are ready to move on and others are finishing an activity, you may need to divide them up. Some children, especially younger ones, enjoy repetition. Others like new activities each time. Adapt to the group. When you seem to have lost the participant's attention, change approach or activities. You can come back to it later.

**Modelling:** Children/youth learn by modelling other's behaviour. As a result, they may imitate your ideas or another participant's ideas. This happens especially with younger children. It is helpful to start with different children each time so that each child has a chance to be creative. Children will also tend to model your behaviour in the group. The way you respond to them is often the way they will respond to you and to each other.

**Helping Participants Listen:** Many of the participants may not have listening skills. Rewards can be given for listening. It is also helpful to ask participants to repeat what another participant has said. "Who can tell me how Janet said she was feeling today?" Model good listening skills by listening attentively to them.

**Using the group:** It is important to use the group as much as possible in the presentation of content. Draw them out; let them come up with their own answers. Let them take turns leading activities. Give them responsibilities. Use the group to help children/youth to behave appropriately. When a participant is acting out it is not always necessary to act immediately. Let some time pass to see if the group handles it. Let participants make up some of their own rules before the group begins (ground rules) or as they go along. Ask younger children to hold hands during an activity to help each other pay attention. Ask youth to remind each other of the rules.

**Setting limits:** Set limits by reinforcing "ground rules". For example, "We all agreed that there would be no name calling – what are some other ways to ...." Be firm about these rules. Some rules can be added gradually over the course of the group.

**Rewards and Positive Verbal Reinforcement:** These should be utilized liberally throughout the group. They build self-esteem and encourage appropriate behaviour. Remember never to take away a reward from a participant after it has been given.

**Using Touch:** Respect boundaries of children who may have problems with touch.

**Using Movement:** Children/youth can tire of sitting for long periods. Follow a sitting activity with an activity involving movement. Invent or let the children invent brief exercises and use these during restless times.

**Time-Outs:** For younger children have a time-out pillow or chair. Explain that participants can take a time-out when they need one, and that you may ask them to take a time-out if you think they need it. Time-outs give children a chance to calm down before coming back to the group.

They should be brief and forced time-outs should be used only when all else fails. Remember that if a time-out is not calming a child down, try something else. With youth, suggest that if they need a break, they are welcome to leave the group for a few minutes.

**Be Creative:** Each group is different. Be attentive to how each participant and the whole group function and you will get ideas for how to work with them. Keep trying out new things - like technology. In a younger children's group, where they were having trouble forming a circle when asked to by the counsellors, the group decided that they needed a magic word that would mean "form a circle". They thought up their own word and from then on "Alla Peanut Butter Sandwich" brought them into circle. <sup>xviii</sup>

## 12. Are there any Resources Available to Assist in Developing Curriculum?

Several models for providing a support group for children and youth exposed to violence in the home have been created. The models may provide you with options and ideas for developing a program responsive to the needs of your community. The following program manuals are recommended for review.

1. BC Society of Transition Houses. *Violence Is Preventable: Enhancing Partnerships Between Children Who Witness Abuse Programs and BC Schools*, 2007.  
This manual includes information that aims to help CWWA programs better support children and youth through prevention presentations and group intervention. Section 7, *How Can CWWA Programs Implement Effective School-Based Group Intervention for Children Exposed to Domestic Violence?*, includes information on pre-group interviews, consent and sample group outlines and activities.
2. Battered Women. *How Do I Determine if a Child/Youth is Ready for a Group?* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995.
3. Churchill, Crockford, and Hoen. *End Violence: A Manual for Group Leaders*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Scarborough, ON: Aislin Discoveries Chiel & Family Centre, 2001.
4. Crager, Meg. *Helping Children Who Witness Domestic Violence: A Guide for Parents, Instructor's Manual*, 1999. [www.lfcc.on.ca]
5. Fitzpatrick, D. *Outreach to Teens: A Manual for Counsellors who Work with Teen Victims of Violence against Women*. Amherst, NS: Cumberland County Transition House Association, 1991.
6. Henderson, A., J. Ericksen and S. Ogden. *Parenting Support for Women who have Experienced Abuse: Facilitator's Manual*. Vancouver, BC: FREDA Centre, 1997.
7. Kerr, J., McKenzie-Cooper, and Elliot. *Children Who Witness Abuse Group Program: Lesson Plans/Activities for Preschool-aged Children*. Vancouver, BC: BC/Yukon Society of Transition Houses, 2006.
8. Kidsrights. *Children's Domestic Abuse Program: Group Manual*. Charlotte, NC, 1996.

9. Loosley, S. (ed.) Group Treatment for Children who Witness Woman Abuse – A Manual for Practitioners. London, ON: Children’s Aid Society of London and Middlesex, 1997. This 10-session group is designed for ages four to 16 with five separate age groups recommended.
10. Roseby, V., et al. A Safe Place to Grow: A group treatment manual for children in conflicted, violent, and separating homes. Binghamton, NY: Hawarth Maltreatment and Trauma Press, 2005.
11. Tutty, L., and J. Wagar. Outline of the Storybook Club for Children Who Witnessed Family Violence, 1994.
12. When Love Hurts: A Guide on Abuse, Respect and Relationships. [www.dvirc.org.au/whenlove/] Peled, E., and D. Davis, Group Work with Children of Battered Women.
13. Wilson, S., et al. Manual for a Group for Children Exposed to Wife Abuse, 1986.
14. Yawney, D., and B. Hill. Project Child Recovery: Group Intervention for Child Witness of Family Violence. Lethbridge, AB: Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse/YWCA Harbour House, 1993.

### 13. What Do I Need to Consider in Offering Individual Support?

When doing an intake assessment for group you may decide a particular child/youth is not appropriate for group at this time but would benefit from individual support.

1. To prepare for individual support with a child/youth, assess the impact of abuse on the child/youth and the support needs of the child/youth and their mother/caregiver.
2. The number of sessions per child/youth will largely be determined by the demands for your services.
3. If you find you are seeing someone whose problems are too complex, such as multiple personalities, don’t hesitate to refer them on to a registered and trained therapist.
4. Remember this is a psycho-educational program. Ensure that the interventions you provide are consistent with the program objectives and your program’s CWWA contract.
5. You could use many of the same techniques that are outlined in the various group programs. The main difference will be the individual attention the child/youth receives.
6. Ultimately, children/youth receiving individual support should, at some point, participate in a group if possible. The child/youth benefit from knowing that they are not alone in having been exposed to their mother being abused.

### 14. How Do I Involve Mothers/Caregivers in the CWWA Program?

Non-offending caregivers should be fully involved in their child’s process. The following steps may be taken to promote caregiver involvement:

**Caregiver Interview:** Explain the goals and structure of the CWWA program. Encourage questions and expressions of concern. You may ask the caregiver to call you should any issues arise that they would like to discuss, and explain that you will do the same. If you are running any support groups for mothers, you may use this opportunity to assess the caregiver's willingness to participate.

**Caregiver Letters:** You may send standard letters home each week to briefly explain the group activities and to suggest how the caregiver might reinforce what was learned at home.

**Final Interview:** It is suggested that you schedule an interview with the caregiver as soon as possible after each group ends. This is an opportunity to discuss their child's participation in the program. Again, questions and concerns are encouraged. You may talk about the strengths you have observed in the child/youth and discuss any concerns and referrals you may have.

## 15. What Support Can I Provide Directly to Mothers/Caregivers?

Mothers/caregivers may have a hard time with their children who are attending a CWWA program. It is important to offer them support. This is often an opportunity to provide some useful information. CWWA programs can offer individual support and support groups to mothers/caregivers.

Depending on the availability of your time and resources, you could provide support groups for mothers/caregivers, which would ideally run parallel to children/youth groups. The goals of the mother's support group are:

1. To support each woman in her experiences as a mother/caregiver.
2. To provide a safe, trusting environment for participants to discuss common issues.
3. To assist each caregiver in developing a realistic and feasible safety plan for themselves and children.
4. To assist caregivers in understanding how they and their children have been impacted by the violence perpetrated against their mothers.
5. To increase awareness of skills and resources that may assist caregivers in their parenting role.

If your program does not have the resources to provide a support group for caregivers, the same goals apply to individual support. However, if a woman needs to do significant personal support refer her to a Stopping the Violence (STV) counsellor or someone else in the community.

## 16. Are there Any Existing Parent Support Group Programs I Could Review?

The following two programs may assist you in developing a structure and curriculum for a group for mothers of the children participating in the program.

### ***Parenting Group, Domestic Abuse Project:***<sup>xix</sup>

This ten-week, psycho-educational parenting group is a voluntary option for parents of children participating in the children’s group. The first half of each session consists of an educational activity focusing on the day’s topic. In the second half, parents are given the opportunity to support each other by sharing child-related needs and concerns. In addition, the parenting group provides a convenient and safe setting for keeping parents informed on the weekly content of the children’s groups, and for discussing questions and concerns they may have regarding their child’s group experience. The program manual includes curriculum on:

- Effects of Witnessing Violence
- Influence of Early Life Experiences on Parenting
- Child Development
- Parents’ Rights/Children’s’ Rights
- Discipline Versus Punishment
- Abusive Parenting
- Self-Esteem
- Communication
- Sibling Relationships
- Changing Families

### ***What About the Kids – Groups for Parents***<sup>xx</sup>

A thirteen week program for mothers of children who have witnessed abuse. The program manual includes the following curriculum:

- Intake & Orientation
- Family Background
- Child Development
- Abuse
- Nurturing
- Healing
- Discipline
- Communications
- Co-Parenting
- Being Involved with your child

## 17. How Can I Introduce the Program to the Community?

Introducing the program to your community is beneficial for referrals and reaching children and youth who may not be aware a CWWA program exists.

- Develop a letter to community agencies and schools. The list may include: mental health, financial aid works, social workers, family court counsellors, women’s centres,

community centres, counselling agencies, elementary, middle and high schools.

- Include pamphlets. BCSTH has one on their website; this free download can be modified.
- Follow-up with phone calls.
- Offer to make a presentation regarding the impact of violence on children/youth.
- Get on the agenda for a staff meeting or Professional Development Day.
- Ask local radio/TV for free air time to advertise.
- Run a small ad in the local paper(s).
- Distribute pamphlets to such places as doctors' offices, laundromats, daycare centres, any place families may frequent.
- Post information about your program on your agency website.
- Let women in transition housing programs know about your CWWA program.

## 18. What Role Can I Play in Schools?

Several CWWA programs are involved in the Violence Is Preventable Program, a school-based prevention program in BC. This is important as they link students to CWWA programs in the community.

As a CWWA counsellor, you can become involved in existing programs like the Violence Is Preventable Program or be the driving force that gets programs going in your community. You can find our VIP resources at [www.bcsth.ca](http://www.bcsth.ca)

## 19. Are Any Program Manuals Available?

### ***Violence Is Preventable Program***

BCSTH developed the Violence Is Preventable (VIP) in 2004. This program links existing CWWA programs to schools in their community. The *Violence Is Preventable: Enhancing Partnerships Between Children Who Witness Abuse Programs and BC Schools Manual* includes information on pre-group interviews, consent, and sample group outlines and activities.

It also includes information that aims to help CWWA programs better support children and youth through prevention presentations and group intervention.

### ***ASAP – A School-Based Anti-Violence Program***

The London Family Court Clinic has developed an anti-violence program for elementary and secondary school-age children. The comprehensive program manual includes curriculum ideas,

activities, hand-outs and a video for teachers and administrators embarking on school-based or system-wide violence prevention programs. The manual addresses:

- why schools need to be involved in ending violence and promoting equality
- who should be involved and how to get commitment
- awareness and professional development sessions on violence in relationships
- a safe school climate and zero tolerance of violence
- elementary school strategies for violence prevention
- secondary school strategies for violence prevention
- handling student disclosures of witnessing violence at home
- roadblocks and how to overcome them
- ethnocultural & aboriginal issues
- evaluation
- putting it all together, developing an action plan
- resource list

## 20. Who Can I Contact for Further Information And Support?

The BC Society of Transition Houses can provide you with resources and expertise to assist with the development of a community-based program for children exposed to violence in the home.

Download the Best Practices for the Children Who Witness Abuse Program from the BCSTH website [www.bcsth.ca](http://www.bcsth.ca), which includes information on CWWA administrative and legal issues. You may also want to download the Records Management Guidelines: Protecting Privacy for Survivors of Violence to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of program service recipients.

Contact us, download more resources from our website [www.bcsth.ca](http://www.bcsth.ca), or call us at 1.800.661.1040 or 604.669.6943.

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<sup>i</sup> Cunningham, Alison and Baker, Linda. (2007). Little Eyes, Little Ears: How Violence Against A Mother Shapes Children As They Grow. Ottawa, Ontario: Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System.

<sup>ii</sup> Cunningham, Alison and Baker, Linda. (2007). Little Eyes, Little Ears: How Violence Against A Mother Shapes Children As They Grow. Ottawa, Ontario: Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System.

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- <sup>iii</sup> Jaffe, P., Wolfe, D., & Wilson, S. (1990) *Children of battered women*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- <sup>iv</sup> The Advocates for Human Rights. (2010). Stop Violence Against Women, Effects of Domestic Violence on Children Accessed August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012 [http://stopvaw.org/Effects\\_of\\_Domestic\\_Violence\\_on\\_Children.html](http://stopvaw.org/Effects_of_Domestic_Violence_on_Children.html).
- <sup>v</sup> UNICEF. (2006). Behind Closed Doors: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children.
- <sup>vi</sup> United Nations. (1989). UN Convention on the Rights of the Child <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>
- <sup>vii</sup> All material on “Ethno-cultural Issues” and “Aboriginal Issues” (except suggestions 2-6) has been excerpted from “A School-Based Anti-Violence Program” (London Family Court Clinic Inc., 1994) pgs. 121-123.
- <sup>viii</sup> Canadian Panel of Violence Against Women. (1993). Changing the landscape: Ending violence, achieving equality: Final report of the Canadian Panel on Violence against Women: Ottawa
- <sup>ix</sup> Canadian Panel of Violence Against Women. (1993). Changing the landscape: Ending violence, achieving equality: Final report of the Canadian Panel on Violence against Women: Ottawa
- <sup>x</sup> Saskatchewan Ministry of Justice and Attorney General. (2010). “A Guide for Children Exposed to Violence Programs in Saskatchewan” Accessed August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012. [http://www.justice.gov.sk.ca/adx/asp/adxGetMedia.aspx?DocID=216,173,131,81,1,Documents&MedialD=1920&Filename=Guide\\_Children\\_Exposed\\_to\\_Violence\\_Programs\\_SK\\_Dec2010.pdf](http://www.justice.gov.sk.ca/adx/asp/adxGetMedia.aspx?DocID=216,173,131,81,1,Documents&MedialD=1920&Filename=Guide_Children_Exposed_to_Violence_Programs_SK_Dec2010.pdf)
- <sup>xi</sup> Saskatchewan Ministry of Justice and Attorney General. (2010). “A Guide for Children Exposed to Violence Programs in Saskatchewan” Accessed August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012. [http://www.justice.gov.sk.ca/adx/asp/adxGetMedia.aspx?DocID=216,173,131,81,1,Documents&MedialD=1920&Filename=Guide\\_Children\\_Exposed\\_to\\_Violence\\_Programs\\_SK\\_Dec2010.pdf](http://www.justice.gov.sk.ca/adx/asp/adxGetMedia.aspx?DocID=216,173,131,81,1,Documents&MedialD=1920&Filename=Guide_Children_Exposed_to_Violence_Programs_SK_Dec2010.pdf)
- <sup>xii</sup> Gevers, L., Marise Goddard-Jones. Working with Children and Young People Living with Domestic Violence. Australia: The Office of the Status of Women, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2003.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Saskatchewan Ministry of Justice and Attorney General. (2010). “A Guide for Children Exposed to Violence Programs in Saskatchewan” Accessed August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012. [http://www.justice.gov.sk.ca/adx/asp/adxGetMedia.aspx?DocID=216,173,131,81,1,Documents&MedialD=1920&Filename=Guide\\_Children\\_Exposed\\_to\\_Violence\\_Programs\\_SK\\_Dec2010.pdf](http://www.justice.gov.sk.ca/adx/asp/adxGetMedia.aspx?DocID=216,173,131,81,1,Documents&MedialD=1920&Filename=Guide_Children_Exposed_to_Violence_Programs_SK_Dec2010.pdf)
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