

Free Pass for Survivors?

By Kristen Selleck, MSW, National Training Director

I've been asked in various ways in different places recently a question that boils down to this: Does the Safe and Together™ Model mean that survivors of domestic violence get a free pass in child welfare?

I believe the question is grounded in a concern that partnership with survivors and accountability/intervention with perpetrators that are key elements of the Safe and Together model pushes against the “failure to protect” paradigm. I do think the question, however, is flawed. Perhaps a more meaningful question is “in the context of perpetrators’ choices to be abusive, what can we expect from and ask of the adult survivor?” Rather than focusing on holding her accountable for the behaviors of her current or ex-partner and the risk those partners pose to children, when we can more clearly identify what we can ask of survivors in terms of their protective efforts.

Survivors are active people. In most instances, survivors actively work to protect their children and themselves. They also work to provide financially for their families; promote stability in their homes; help children educationally, emotionally, and socially. They talk to their children about what they've witnessed, how they feel and their hopes. They love their children and maintain good attachments. And this is true for survivors regardless of their relationship status.

I think it's important for child welfare to think of survivors as active, not only because it's true but also because it helps us think more accurately about what we can expect from survivors. We can expect survivors to parent their children, to maintain the needs of their children and to put in efforts to protect their children. That does not mean, however, that if a perpetrator of domestic violence chooses to hurt his partner or child that the survivor failed; it means the perpetrator's choices are endangering children. To be able to clarify that we expect survivors to try, without asking them to be able to control their perpetrator's choices (something over which they inherently don't have control), is important to partnership with survivors. It's also not a “free pass” or permission from child welfare for survivors to not parent or not attempt to protect their children; it's a clarification of how we articulate our concerns for children's safety and our expectations of survivors in a respectful partnering manner that accounts for their real-life experiences, fears and capacities.

It is also important, in the context of this element of our work with survivors, to remain focused on perpetrators' choices. When we ask their survivors, their children, even courts and law enforcement to be responsible for ending their abusive behaviors, the only person getting a “free pass” is the perpetrator. When we ignore him, fail to communicate our concerns about his behaviors and the impact of those behaviors on children, or when we assume another system will be handling his case, we're colluding with that perpetrator's belief and hope that he is not responsible for his actions. And reinforcing his expectation that he is not going to be asked to change them.

While I don't believe the Safe and Together™ model encourages child welfare to let survivors off the hook for their parenting, I do believe that if child welfare solely focuses on survivors (their behaviors, choices, relationship status, etc.), we are unintentionally giving perpetrators an uninterrupted way in which to continue to harm children, in effect a free pass.

