Self-Study Course

Domestic Violence:
What Foster Parents Need to Know

This self-study written by ACRF staff in June 2025.

3.0 Hours Credit

ITP TOPIC: Child Abuse/Domestic Violence/Neglect

CREDITS AND SOURCES:

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AWAIC – Abused Women's Aid in Crisis ***About AWAIC***. https://awaic.org/about-awaic/
Updated from Previous Self Study NLA: ***Domestic Violence and Its Impact on Children*** Alaska Center for Resource Families.

To receive training credit, fill out the "CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING" Questionnaire at the back of this course. Return the questionnaire to the Alaska Center for Resource Families for 3.0 hours of training credit. This course is yours to keep for further reference.

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Domestic Violence: What Foster Parents Need to Know

PART 1: What Is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence refers to violence or intimidation between members in a family or in a relationship. It involves the repeated use of forceful physical or psychological behavior intended to intimidate or coerce another person. Domestic violence (also referred to as DV) is a pattern of behavior and may include *physical, sexual, psychological abuse or a combination of all of these.* Battering (another term for domestic violence) can be physical, but it also includes emotional abuse and verbal assaults, social isolation, and sexual assault or degradation. There is a trend to refer to these acts as Interpersonal Violence (IPV) to reflect that domestic abuse does not just occur in marriages but can be reflected in many different kinds of relationships.

Abuse is about control. It is a pattern of one person scaring another person into submission. Abuse isn't just physical; there are many types of abuse, and they are all difficult to experience.

Types of Abuse in Intimate Relationships

Intimidation / Emotional / Verbal Abuse	Non-physical behaviors such as threats, insults, excessive monitoring ("checking in"), excessive texting, humiliation, isolation, and intimidation.
Stalking	Repeatedly watching, following, or harassing someone, causing fear or distress.
Financial Abuse	Controlling access to money, bank accounts, employment, or financial resources to maintain power over a partner.
Physical Abuse	Use of physical force to cause fear or injury, including hitting, shoving, kicking, strangling, biting, or using weapons.
Sexual Abuse	Coercing or forcing sexual activity, ignoring consent, or restricting access to birth control or condoms. May include emotional, verbal, or physical pressure.
Digital Abuse	Use of technology to harass or control, including GPS tracking, monitoring calls or messages, impersonating online accounts, or using spyware for surveillance.
Pet Abuse	Intentional harm, threat, or neglect of companion animals by an abuser as a means of exerting power and control over their partner or other household members.

Unfortunately, Alaska has some of the highest rates of domestic violence and sexual assault (DV/ SA) in the country. About 58% of Alaska women experience DV/SA in their lifetime. Many of these women are also mothers. Children in these homes often witness violence between adults, in addition to possibly experiencing abuse or neglect themselves. While a large number of cases involve male violence against female partners, abuse can occur in any relationship, including those involving women as aggressors, teen dating relationships, LGBTQ+ couples, and elderly partners.

The Relationship between DV and Child Abuse: In Alaska's child welfare system, domestic violence involving children is typically classified under the Mental Injury Child in Need of Aid (CINA) category in Alaska Statute. This includes cases of "mental injury," defined as harm to a child's emotional, intellectual, or psychological well-being, demonstrated by significant and observable impairments in functioning. Reports of mental injury—often related to DV or substance abuse—are the second most common referral type to OCS, following neglect.

DV and child abuse are deeply interconnected, often co-occurring within the same families. Research shows that in 30–60% of homes where one form of abuse is present, the other is as well. While DV and child maltreatment are frequently treated as separate issues, both are rooted in patterns of power, control, and social inequities such as poverty, mental health challenges, and isolation. Children are often used as tools of control in abusive relationships. They may be threatened with injury, manipulation, or harmed as a way to intimidate the adult victim. Over time, violence in the home can escalate in severity and frequency, increasing the likelihood that children will become direct victims themselves.

Does alcohol and substance abuse cause domestic violence? Domestic violence is a complex issue influenced by multiple risk factors, with substance use being one of the most significant. Research shows that 40–60% of DV cases involve alcohol or drug use, and individuals with substance use disorders are four to ten times more likely to commit violence. Substance use can increase aggression, lower inhibitions, and impair judgment, all of which can escalate abusive behavior, especially when combined with other risk factors. Survivors, too, may turn to drugs or alcohol as a way to cope with trauma. However, it's crucial to understand that substance use does not cause domestic violence on its own. Rather, it can intensify existing abusive tendencies in individuals already at risk.

Understanding a Parent's Experience: Why She Stayed and Why Connection Still Matters

As a foster parent, you may be caring for a child whose parent has survived domestic violence. While it's natural to feel protective of the child and cautious about their past, it's also important to understand the complex reasons a parent may have stayed in an abusive relationship. Many survivors face overwhelming barriers to leaving, including fear for their safety, financial dependence, emotional manipulation, and isolation. Some stay out of hope that things will improve or because they fear losing their children if they seek help. Some only enter the child welfare system because of their own substance use and its impact on child safety. These choices are rarely simple.

When children enter foster care, it can be both a painful loss and a turning point for a parent. Access to counseling, support groups, legal advocacy, and parenting programs offer a path to healing and change. Maintaining a connection between parent and child is vital during this time even if reunification is not immediately possible. Regular visitation, phone calls, or updates can reassure children that their parent still cares and help preserve the parent-child bond. This connection supports the child's emotional well-being, gives the parent motivation to heal, and keeps open the possibility for future reunification.



Listening to the Voices of DV Victims

These firsthand accounts highlight the complex barriers that can prevent people from leaving abusive relationships including substance use.

"I stayed because I was halfway across the country, isolated from my friends and family. And there was no one to help."

"I was determined to make it work, wanted kids to have their dad, convinced myself that what he did to me wasn't affecting them."

"I guess my ex-husband who used to beat on me a lot and that's when I stayed on cocaine, I said I'll stay numb, that was kind of like my, the one I was having the affair with was cocaine because I didn't have to feel."

"I met him while working at a diner. I was in a bad way, addicted to drugs and alcohol. He was an older man and helped me kick my bad habits. Next thing I know, I am pregnant, and that's when the controlling and abuse started."

"There was the verbal abuse of just dirty name-calling and accusing things. There was the complete tearing down of my ego or personality, and then there was the third kind, the physical, the actual hitting or sitting on top of me and screaming. It all sort of runs together in my mind when I try to go back and sort out if it was progressive or if it was just always there. "

The Role of Shelters and Safe Homes

The Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (ANDVSA) comprises 23 programs statewide, offering services such as emergency shelter, legal advocacy, counseling, and support groups to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. Recognizing that separation is a particularly high-risk time, shelters provide safe, confidential spaces for survivors and their children. In larger communities like Anchorage and Fairbanks, facilities may include beds for families, on-site advocates, legal assistance, men's programs, and children's programs. In rural areas, services are often delivered through safe homes or partner agencies. Common offerings include temporary housing, meals, clothing, support groups, and assistance with legal processes like obtaining civil protection orders. Some communities also provide programs for offenders, such as anger management classes. To find resources in your area, visit ANDVSA's member programs directory at andvsa.org.andvsa.org

Protective Factors for Adult & Child Survivors of Domestic Violence

The Office of Children's Services uses a case planning tool with all parents that focuses on the five protective factors associated with stronger family functioning and developed through the Strengthening Families Program. Building these Protective Factors in family can help to reduce the effects of domestic violence on adult and child survivors, support their personal growth and development, and build a family and community environment that promotes their well-being. The Five Protective Factors for survivors of domestic violence include: *Safer and more stable conditions (Concrete Supports); Social connections, Resilience and a growth mindset; Nurturing parent-child interactions; and, Social and emotional abilities.* Foster parents have a role in supporting helping children build their emotional and social abilities and support positive parent-child interactions through visitation and family contact. To learn more about supporting families impacted by DV and the Five Protective Factors, check out Pathways to Healing at https://promising.futureswithoutviolence.org/protective-factors-for-survivors-of-domestic-violence/ .



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PART 2: How Domestic Violence Affects Children

Imagine growing up in a home where there is tension, verbal abuse and violence between the people who take care of you. Maybe it happens often. Maybe it happens when adults have been drinking. Maybe it is episodic and happens intensely for a short time and then calms down, before it starts up again.

Your father may scream, hit, threaten to kill himself or others, and lash out at your mother, your pets, or even you—only to apologize later and promise it won't happen again. Perhaps your mother is terrified, walking on eggshells, trying to protect you and herself. She might try to explain away your father's behavior or use substances herself to numb the pain. If this is your home, you grow up in a constant state of fear, confusion, and even terror.

Children in homes with DV experience a form of trauma that can shape their emotional world, physical health, and ability to trust others. The trauma may show up immediately or gradually emerge over time. The following table shows some of the more common impacts of growing up in a violent household.

Short-Term Effects	• **Anxiety and constant alertness**: Always "on edge," waiting for the next outburst. • **Developmental setbacks**: Younger children may return to earlier behaviors like thumb-sucking or bedwetting. • **Behavioral struggles**: School-aged children might become defiant or aggressive, while teens may engage in risky behaviors like substance use or skipping school. • **Emotional burden**: Many children blame themselves for the violence or feel ashamed and confused.
Mental Health	These experiences may contribute to longer-term issues such as depression, chronic anxiety, or a deeply rooted sense of insecurity and mistrust, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Symptoms can include: • Nightmares and sleep difficulties • Mood swings or irritability • Emotional numbness • Reenacting violent scenes in play or daily life
Physical and Cognitive Impact	The stress of domestic violence doesn't just affect emotions—it can disrupt physical health and brain development. • **Physical symptoms**: Headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, and a weakened immune system are common in children under ongoing stress. • **Cognitive impairments**: Children may struggle with memory, attention, problem-solving, and learning. Constant stress can keep the brain in "survival mode," limiting its ability to grow and function normally. Over time, these challenges can result in poor academic performance and disengagement from school.

Relationship and Social Development	Children who grow up in violent homes may have difficulty understanding or managing relationships. They may: • Avoid closeness and mistrust others • Withdraw socially or become overly aggressive with peers • Accept controlling or harmful behavior as "normal" in relationships • Without intervention, may carry these patterns into adulthood—either becoming abusers or victims themselves.

The Developmental Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

Exposure to domestic violence can affect children at every stage of development, starting even **before birth.** When a pregnant mother experiences elevated levels of stress due to an abusive environment, her body produces elevated levels of cortisol and other stress hormones. These chemicals can cross the placenta, potentially disrupting fetal development and increasing the risk of premature birth, low birth weight, and long-term health complications.

In **infancy and early childhood,** consistent and nurturing care is essential for building secure attachments—the emotional foundation for trust, self-regulation, and healthy relationships. In homes affected by violence, caregivers may be emotionally unavailable or preoccupied with their own trauma. During the first two years of life, the brain is especially sensitive and rapidly forming neural connections based on experience. Repeated exposure to violence can "hardwire" a child's brain into a constant state of survival—always ready to fight, flee, or freeze. This state of chronic stress can interfere with memory, learning, impulse control, and the ability to form healthy relationships later in life.

> "(Domestic violence) changes the brains of these children."
> -Dr. Bruce Perry

Dr. Bruce D. Perry, a leading child trauma expert, emphasizes the gravity of these early experiences. "The tragic reality of children growing up in domestic violence," he states, "is that they end up with mental health problems at a rate higher than children who are actually the direct victims of physical abuse… it changes the brains of these children." His research reinforces that trauma doesn't have to be physical to be deeply damaging—it's the persistent fear and emotional turmoil that alter a child's developmental path.

This long-term impact is further supported by the landmark **Adverse Childhood Experiences** (ACEs) study conducted by the CDC. The study found that witnessing domestic violence is a significant risk factor for a wide range of lifelong challenges, including chronic health issues, mental illness, substance use, self-harming behaviors, and difficulty forming stable relationships. Yet supportive relationships can dramatically change a child's trajectory. As a foster parent, your care, compassion, and presence can serve as a protective buffer, helping children heal and build resilience.

As children enter **adolescence,** the effects of early trauma can resurface in new and complex ways. Teens who witnessed domestic violence may struggle with dating and forming intimate relationships, especially if they lacked positive role models. They may confuse control with love, replicate abusive behaviors, or tolerate mistreatment because it feels familiar. Low self-esteem, fear of abandonment, and difficulty setting healthy boundaries can make teens vulnerable to dating violence or emotional manipulation. Foster parents can play a powerful role in guiding teens through this stage by talking openly about what healthy and respectful relationships look like, modeling emotional regulation and mutual care, and connecting teens with supportive counseling, peer groups, or positive mentors.



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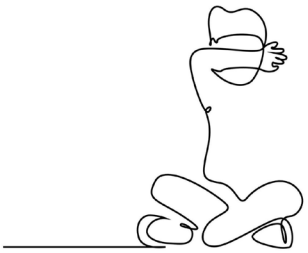
PART 3: Fostering Youth Impacted by Domestic Violence

To explore how foster parents can respond sensitively to children and youth from violent homes in a trauma informed way, let's look at three case examples that explore the most common ways children present.

The Withdrawn, Fearful Child-- Ethan, age 7



Ethan witnessed frequent violence between his parents, including loud arguments, broken objects, and physical harm. Although he was never directly hurt, he often hid in a closet during these episodes. Now in foster care, he is quiet and withdrawn, speaking only when addressed and avoiding eye contact. He startles easily, flinches at raised voices—even when they're playful—and clings to his backpack for security. At bedtime, he insists on keeping the door open and repeatedly checks that the exits are unlocked.

Suggested Parenting Strategies for Fostering Ethan:

- **Create a calm, structured environment** with consistent routines.
- **Allow space for quiet connection**—sit near him during play, read together, or offer gentle, non-intrusive presence.
- **Offer choices,** when possible, to give Ethan a sense of control (e.g., "Would you like to wear the red or blue shirt?").
- **Normalize fear and validate his emotions**: "It's okay to feel nervous. You've been through a lot. I'm here, and you're safe now."
- **Avoid sudden movements or loud voices**, especially during correction or conflict.

The Parentified Child- Maggie, age 11



Maggie grew up in a home where domestic violence was common, often stepping in to care for her younger siblings during violent episodes and providing emotional support to her mother afterward. Her father frequently belittled her mother in front of the children, and Maggie took it upon herself to "keep the peace" in hopes of preventing conflict. Now in her foster home, Maggie takes on adult responsibilities without being asked—managing routines, correcting her siblings, and becoming anxious when her foster mother shows signs of stress or temporarily steps away. This is called "parentification." She remains fiercely protective and loyal to her birth mother.

Suggested Parenting Strategies for Fostering Maggie:

- **Gently release her from adult responsibilities**: "In this home, adults take care of the grown-up things. You just get to be a kid here."
- **Praise her strengths** (like leadership or empathy); while reminding her she doesn't have to carry the weight of others.
- **Offer moments of play or rest**: Engage her in age-appropriate fun or relaxation without guilt.
- **Respond with empathy if she tries to manage you or others**: "Thank you for helping, but as the parent, it's my job to worry about everyone. So, let's do this together."
- **Support her bond with siblings** but establish boundaries so she can gradually learn to be a sister instead of the parent.

The Verbally Aggressive Child- Jayden, age 9



Jayden was raised in a home where verbal abuse was routine; he often heard his father call his mother degrading names and witnessed threats masked as discipline. Although never physically harmed himself, Jayden learned to associate aggression with power and control. In his foster home, he frequently belittles his younger sister, mocks her emotions, and tries to dominate her with harsh words like "Stop acting like a baby" or "You're so stupid." When adults intervene, he becomes defensive, insisting, "That's how people talk."

Suggested Parenting Strategies for Fostering Jayden

- **Set clear, respectful boundaries** around behavior: "In this home, we speak kindly to each other—even when we're upset."
- **Model emotional regulation**: Use calm voice, name your own feelings when frustrated, and repair after conflict.
- **Teach respectful communication** through role-play or correction with empathy: "That was a hurtful thing to say. Let's try saying it another way."
- **Don't assume he understands social cues**—offer direct, non-critical feedback to help him learn.
- **Help him identify feelings under the aggression** (fear, jealousy, sadness): "Sometimes when we feel out of control inside, we act out. I'm here to help you with that."



Supporting a Child Who Has Witnessed Domestic Violence Using Trauma Informed Care

1. Provide Safety and Predictability
Children from violent homes often feel unsafe and on edge. Establish consistent routines, calm responses, and a peaceful environment to help them feel secure.

2. Lead with Compassion and Trauma Informed Care
Challenging behaviors may be rooted in fear, not defiance. Instead of focusing on consequences, try asking, "What might this child be feeling right now?" Responding with empathy helps children feel seen and supported.

3. Reassure Them They Are Safe
Fear doesn't go away just because the violence has stopped. Offer verbal and nonverbal reassurance—gentle tones, open body language, and comforting routines. Let them know, "You're safe here. I'm here for you."

4. Normalize Feelings
Kids who've lived through chaos may not have words for what they feel. Let them know all emotions are okay. Encourage healthy outlets like art, journaling, play, or just quiet time together.

5. Speak Respectfully About Birth Parents
Children love and often miss their parent. Avoid judgmental comments. Instead, acknowledge the complexity: "Your mom had a hard time, but she still loves you." This helps protect the child's sense of identity.

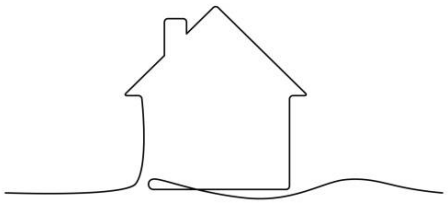
6. Partner with Therapists and Supports
You don't have to do this alone. Work with the child's therapist and other trauma-informed professionals who can guide both you and the child.

7. Model Healthy Communication
Children may never have seen conflict handled respectfully. Show them how to set boundaries, express emotions calmly, and resolve disagreements without yelling or blame. Your example teaches more than words ever could.

8. Nurture Their Identity and Strengths
Trauma can disconnect children from who they are. Support their connection to culture, language, spirituality, and interests. These are powerful sources of strength, belonging, and healing.

9. Use Books to Spark Conversation
Stories can help children make sense of hard experiences. Books like *Something Is Wrong at My House* can gently open the door to healing conversations. Reading together also builds connection.

10. Help Them Build a Safety Plan
Talk about what to do when they feel unsafe—who to go to, where to go, and how to ask for help. Teach them how to dial 911 and make sure they know key information like your address and phone number. The goal is to give them simple, empowering steps they can remember when things feel scary.



Foster Homes and Domestic Violence: *The Alaska Flag Project*

Children who have been removed from a violent home need to be in a safe environment to be protected and to heal. Therefore, there is no tolerance for domestic violence that happens within the foster family. When a potential foster family applies for a license, a criminal background check will be conducted to determine if any parent has been convicted of a felony or any assaults, including domestic violence. Courthouse checks may also be checked for charges of domestic violence that did not result in criminal convictions. Past history of domestic violence may result in a potential foster family being denied a license depending on how long ago it was and the circumstances.

If a domestic violence incident occurs in a currently licensed foster home, a foster home should self-report the incident to their Office of Children's Services licensing worker. For the protection of the child, an investigation is usually done to determine the extent and seriousness of the incident and whether the child can safely remain in that home. Alaska participates in the Alaska "Flag" Project which means that when a home is licensed as a foster parent, law enforcement tags public safety records so that if a foster parent or anyone in the foster home is involved with law enforcement or if police or troopers are investigating a domestic violence complaint that involves a foster family, they will notify OCS. OCS in turn, will assess the safety need to remove the foster children from the home.

The primary focus of the Office of Children's Services is the protection of children. We hold foster parents to a high standard of care for children, including the responsibility to provide a safe, nonviolent home.

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic abuse, we encourage you to reach out for help.

Alaska CARELINE: 1-877-266-HELP (4357) or dial 988
24/7 crisis support including for those experiencing domestic violence.

The Alaska Network on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault

The Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault is composed of 23 programs statewide that provide services to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, offender services, and adult crisis intervention services.

ANDVSA also provides resources to use with youth, for men, and a Legal Rights Handbook and a Women's Legal Rights Handbook at https://andvsa.org/resources/

To learn more about domestic violence, or to find out the women's shelter or domestic violence services nearest you, contact them at:

Phone: (907) 586-3650 Email: andvsa@andvsa.org Website: andvsa.org