

# Domestic Abuse and Refugees

Strategies for Building Healthy Relationships



Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (BRIA)  
New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance

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## NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE

**1-800-799-SAFE**

**[www.ndvh.org](http://www.ndvh.org)**

Call this number if you are being abused or suspect that someone is being abused.

Confidential counselors are on the phone 24 hours a day to help you.

They will refer you to local organizations that can help.

# Introduction

The purpose of this publication is to provide general information about the topic of domestic abuse, particularly as it pertains to refugees and their families.

Please note that any discussion of domestic abuse requires sensitivity and knowledge. Emphasis should always be on the characteristics of healthy relationships so that refugee families have a clear understanding of what constitutes a safe home environment.

The background information and handouts that are included in this publication can be used to inform educators, Social Workers, Refugee Resettlement Case Managers, and other professionals about the topic.

The handouts can also be distributed to refugees as part of a discussion about healthy relationships, domestic abuse, and child abuse.

It is advisable to invite experts in the local community to assist in presenting information about domestic abuse. Have available crucial resources such as hotline numbers, contact information of local emergency shelters, and descriptions of rights and regulations. Page 15 is designed so that local information can be added to the page and then distributed to refugees.

It is also important to recognize that the language of domestic abuse is challenging for anyone, let alone for refugees who are learning English. Words such as *coercion*, *intimidation*, *put-downs*, and *criticism* can be difficult to explain.

Before conducting a discussion about domestic abuse:

- Provide interpreters with the information that will be presented to refugees, including definitions and handouts.
- Identify challenging vocabulary words and be prepared with synonyms and specific examples.
- Recognize that some words may not exist in some cultures, such as *confidentiality* or *Orders of Protection*. Concentrate on the message rather than understanding the specific vocabulary.

# What is Domestic Abuse?

**ABUSE:** bad or improper treatment; harsh or insulting language; sexual assault

## Domestic Abuse

A pattern of abusive or harmful behavior within the confines of an intimate relationship

Physical abuse

Intimidation

Threats

Coercion

Domestic abuse (or domestic violence) is a pattern of behavior used to establish power and control over another person.

**POWER** is gained through fear and intimidation.

**CONTROL** is not random, but systematic.

Most abuse is recurrent and escalates in both frequency and severity.

Physical abuse is almost always present with psychological/emotional abuse (see page 4).

## No Typical Victim

Any age, socio-economic status, gender, race, education level, culture, marital status

Husband and wife

Boyfriend and girlfriend

Adult and child

Family member

People who share a home

Siblings

Estranged spouses

Dating couples

## Psychological/Emotional Abuse

Domestic abuse can be constant psychological or emotional abuse (without physical abuse).

Belittling, demeaning, criticizing

Social isolation

Control over communication such as telephone, internet

Control of finances

Repeated rejection

Sleep interruption

Withholding affection and support

Sexual demands

Reproductive control/abuse during pregnancy

Monitoring daily activities

Stalking

Child custody threats

**Emotional abuse is not necessarily visible, but can result in:**

Restricted contact with family and friends

No access to money and personal items

Constant fear of saying or doing something that will trigger abuse

No control over freedom and use of time

Lack of self-respect and self-esteem

Physical abuse may also be hidden. Bruises, cuts, sex-related injuries, and other results of violence may be concealed so that they are not visible to friends, co-workers, and family members. Abusers may deliberately hurt someone where the injury cannot be seen, such as areas that are covered by clothing.

**Fear can cause the abused and witnesses to keep quiet.**

# Domestic Abuse

Any one of the following behaviors is a signal of domestic abuse, whether it be physical, emotional, verbal, or psychological. Remember that when one person scares, hurts, or continually demeans the other person, it is abuse.

## Does your partner:

- Embarrass and hurt you with insults and put-downs?
- Constantly criticize, harass, follow you around, correct you?
- Look at you or act in ways that scare you?
- Control what you do, who you talk to, or where you go?
- Stop you from seeing friends or family?
- Monitor your every move - including phone calls and computer use?
- Take away your money or checks; make you ask for money, or refuse to give you money?
- Take away important documents?
- Make *all* of the decisions?
- Tell you you're a bad parent or threaten to take away or hurt your children?
- Act like the abuse is not a big deal, it's your fault, or even deny doing it?
- Apologize, say they love you, say they are sorry, but still repeat the behavior?
- Intimidate you with guns, knives, or other weapons?
- Shove you, slap you, or hit you?
- Poke, wrestle, tickle, trip, or slap repeatedly - claiming that they are just fooling around?
- Restrict education or employment opportunities?
- Restrict or determine medical care?
- Hurt you in areas where marks or bruises will not show?
- Accuses you of causing the abuse?
- Destroy property or threaten to hurt pets?
- Force you to drop charges?
- Threaten to commit suicide?
- Threaten to kill you?

**If you checked any of these, you may be in an abusive relationship.**

**If you need help, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)  
1-800-787-3224 (TTY)**

# Domestic Abuse and Refugees

For some refugees, the concept of “domestic abuse” may be confusing, even alarming. Refugees may have experienced very different understandings of what is acceptable in their private lives. But in the United States, domestic abuse is not tolerated – in fact, it can be against the law.

The definitions of domestic abuse as described on pages 3-4 do not change for refugees. However, domestic abuse can be manifested in additional ways in the refugee community, depending upon the cultural background of the refugees, and the laws and traditions of their native countries.

## **Intimidation, threats, and coercion can show up in the following ways:**

- ◆ Threatening deportation
- ◆ Denying opportunities for English instruction, job training, or education
- ◆ Destroying property brought for resettlement
- ◆ Keeping important documents
- ◆ Threatening to reveal (or revealing) information about past history that could be considered shameful and cause family to lose respect in the community
- ◆ Requiring communication only in native (first) language
- ◆ Controlling money, including funds designated for family members in the home country
- ◆ Restricting access to new freedoms and friendships (e.g., dress, food, health care, employment, reproductive health, transportation, social events)
- ◆ Restricting access to Americans *or* restricting access to people of the same cultural background
- ◆ Physical abuse based on assumptions of hierarchy in the household and traditional forms of discipline (e.g., wife disciplined for looking at another man; sexual demands)
- ◆ Refusing access to social workers and other sources of support
- ◆ Limiting interaction in the community; constant supervision and monitoring of all activities.

# Abuse or Adjustment?

Some of the behaviors on page 6 may be the result of adjustment to a new environment that can be overwhelming and frightening. The individual in the family who has traditionally been the “head of household” responsible for the welfare and safety of the family, may be the obvious person to handle documents, monitor daily activities, and limit interactions in the new community.

Once there is a better understanding of English and the cultural traditions of the United States, then gradual changes should occur, resulting in more freedom and self-reliance. For example, women may start to feel comfortable taking public transportation alone, or may become more involved in handling family finances.

However, if there is a pattern of threats and intimidation – regardless of the amount of time the family has been resettled – it is still considered domestic abuse.

## Keep In Mind

In any culture it is not uncommon for victims of abuse to blame themselves, hide the abuse, and modify their own behaviors to comply with the demands of the abuser.

Refugee communities are often close-knit. This can mean that privacy and confidentiality may not be respected. In fact, the concept of confidentiality does not exist in many languages.

Refugee women may find themselves at particular risk of abuse because of their traditional level of dependence, restricted educational opportunities, and limited ability to protect themselves.

Refugee families may be determined to maintain familiar cultural practices, even if some of those practices can negatively affect physical and mental health.

Exposure to alcohol and drugs, and a more relaxed sensibility about sexuality may be contributing factors to domestic abuse, but are not the causes of the abuse.

Domestic abuse can exist in any family, regardless of the socio-economic or cultural background.

# Informing Refugees About Domestic Abuse

Refugees need to know that domestic abuse is not tolerated and may be against the law. If abuse involves children, refugees should know that health care workers, educators, and other professionals such as police officers are *mandated* to report any suspected abuse (see pages 11-12). The first step in addressing domestic abuse is to address it with education.

**Step 1:** Focus on the general characteristics of healthy relationships. (Page 9 is a handout *Characteristics of Healthy Relationships* that can be used for discussion, and should be shared with both men and women, as well as middle grade and high school students.) During the discussion, explain that every relationship has tense moments. Emphasize that there should always be underlying respect and kindness.

**Step 2:** Some of the general qualities of healthy relationships may be difficult to explain, so be specific about daily evidence of healthy relationships:

- ◆ Expressing frustration calmly and reasonably, without threatening or physically hurting anyone
- ◆ Complimenting and supporting family members
- ◆ Encouraging family members to benefit from new freedoms, agreeing upon limitations in order to be healthy and safe
- ◆ Encouraging social interaction, English instruction, and education in order to benefit from new opportunities
- ◆ Sharing information about finances and setting goals together
- ◆ Working together to adjust to the new country by encouraging community involvement
- ◆ Agreeing upon a safe, accessible place for important documents

**NEVER:**

- ◆ Threaten to embarrass a family member in front of the refugee community, causing them to be humiliated and lose respect in the community
- ◆ Threaten to send a family member back to the native country

**Step 3:** Review the information on pages 3 and 4 and the handout *Domestic Abuse* on page 5. Distribute the handouts on page 10 *Leaving Checklist* and page 15 *National Domestic Violence Hotline/Local Resources*. It is advisable to staple the handouts together with a generic cover that does not advertise that the packet is related to domestic abuse. Some individuals may not want anyone to see that they have the information. Distribute a copy to *everyone*, but do not be surprised if some individuals leave the packet behind when they leave. The topic is sensitive, and can be threatening to significant others.

# Characteristics of Healthy Relationships

- ❖ Open and spontaneous communication, including listening
- ❖ Clear boundaries, but encouragement in pursuing personal interests and activities
- ❖ Individual freedom
- ❖ Personal identity
- ❖ Making financial decisions together that are beneficial to all parties
- ❖ Enjoy doing things alone and together
- ❖ No attempts to “fix” or “control” the other
- ❖ Feelings and needs expressed and valued
- ❖ Conflict faced directly, rationally, with caring and consideration
- ❖ Privacy respected
- ❖ No secrets, hiding, disappearing, time gaps
- ❖ No pressure to conform, join in, try things that are uncomfortable
- ❖ Cultivation of personal growth
- ❖ Balance of closeness and separation
- ❖ Balance of giving and receiving
- ❖ Trust

# Leaving Checklist

Leaving an abusive relationship is difficult enough without leaving behind important papers and other items necessary for routine daily activities, such as enrolling children in school, applying for government assistance, or protecting finances.

**Leaving is stressful and scary, especially if there is no plan.**

**A crucial part of the plan for leaving is the collection of important items:**

- Medical records
- Medications
- Birth and Marriage certificates
- Bankbooks
- Keys for house, car, work
- Driver's License
- Social Security Card
- Health Insurance cards and paperwork
- Immigration Documents such as: Form I-765 Application for Employment Authorization, EAD (Employment Authorization Document), Form I-94 Arrival-Departure Record and other important papers
- Passports
- Work permits
- Lease or rental agreement, or house deed and mortgage
- Current unpaid bills
- Paid bill receipts with account numbers
- Credit cards/Account numbers
- Address book
- Pictures and other items of sentimental value
- Children's favorite toys, stuffed animals, blankets
- Change of clothing

# Maltreatment of Children

Child abuse and neglect, also referred to as maltreatment of children, is defined by the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act as:

- ◆ Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or
- ◆ An act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.

## Common Indicators of Abuse or Maltreatment

- ◆ injuries to the eyes or both sides of the head or body
- ◆ frequent injuries of any kind, such as bruises, cuts and/or burns especially if the child is unable to provide an adequate explanation of the cause
- ◆ passive, withdrawn, or emotionless behavior
- ◆ destructive, aggressive, or disruptive behavior
- ◆ fear of going home or fear of parent(s)
- ◆ symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases
- ◆ difficulty and/or pain when sitting or walking
- ◆ age-inappropriate knowledge of sexual relations; suggestive or promiscuous behavior
- ◆ malnourishment, fatigue, begging for food
- ◆ lack of personal hygiene; torn and dirty clothes
- ◆ untreated medical attention
- ◆ frequent absence from school
- ◆ lack of supervision

# Reporting Child Abuse or Maltreatment

Educators, health care workers, counselors, and other professionals are mandated reporters of child abuse or maltreatment.

The New York State Office of Children and Family Services provides detailed information in the Summary Guide for Mandated Reporters in New York State (Publication 1159)

<http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/publications/pub1159text.asp>

Mandated reporters are required to report suspected child abuse or maltreatment when they are presented with a reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or maltreatment in a situation where a child, parent, or other person legally responsible for the child is before the mandated reporter when the mandated reporter is acting in his or her official or professional capacity. See the OCFS Guide for specific information about mandated reporting.

## **To Report Abuse or Maltreatment**

Mandated Reporter: (800) 635-1522

Public Hotline: (800) 342-3720

In addition, county agencies may run child abuse hotlines.

Mandated reporters are required to submit a written report to the NY Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR). See the OCFS Guide for specific guidelines.

<http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/publications/pub1159text.asp>

# Resources

The following organizations provide valuable information on topics related to domestic abuse, and were used as resources for this module:

American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC)

<http://www.apsac.org>

Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services (BRYCS)

<http://www.brycs.org>

Child Abuse Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA)

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/capta2003>

Childhelp USA

<http://www.childhelp.org/>

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

<http://www.ncadv.org>

New York State Office of Children and Family Services

Summary Guide for Mandated Reporters in New York State (Publication 1159)

<http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/publications/pub1159text.asp>

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov>

Teen Challenge

<http://www.teenchallenge.com>

U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants

<http://refugees.org/>

Virginia Department of Social Services

Resources: Child Abuse and Neglect: Recognizing, Reporting, and Responding for Educators

<http://www.dss.state.va.us>

# Invite Local Experts

The topic of domestic abuse is extremely sensitive. It is important to consult with experts in the local community before discussing the topic with refugees. Invite speakers from domestic violence centers, county agencies, emergency shelters, and law enforcement, to share information about local resources. Make sure that you have prepared the speakers with information about the unique challenges of talking about the topic with refugees.

## Invite local experts to talk about:

### **Domestic Abuse Basic Information**

**Laws and Rights**

**Local Hotlines**

### **Information and Referral Services**

**Emergency Shelters**

**Orders of Protection**

**Financial Assistance**

**Family Court**

**Counseling Resources**

**Transitional Housing**

**Medical Resources**

**Crime Victims Compensation**

# Local Assistance

**NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE**

**1-800-799-SAFE**

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They will refer you to local organizations that can help.