

Regenerating Family Strengthening the Emotional Health of Mothers and Children in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence

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Although concern for their children's well-being is pivotal in mothers' decisions to leave abusive partners, rarely is lone-parent family life after leaving framed as beneficial for family members' emotional health. In this feminist grounded theory study of family health promotion in the aftermath of intimate partner violence, we learned that families strengthen their emotional health by purposefully replacing previously destructive patterns of interaction with predictable, supportive ways of getting along in a process called *regenerating family*. These findings add to our knowledge of family development and how families promote their health when they have experienced intimate partner violence. **Key words:** *child health, custody, domestic violence, emotional health, feminist grounded theory, health promotion, intimate partner violence, mental health, recovery, single-parent family, women's health*

A major catalyst for women making the decision to leave an abusive partner is persistent worry that living in the abusive environment is detrimental to their own and their children's emotional health and development. Leaving is largely motivated by a desire to secure a better and healthier future for their children. However, existing theory

and research rarely consider the possibility that single-parent family (SPF) life after leaving may be *beneficial* for the emotional health of both mothers and their children. Rather, most research examining family structure and relationships positions SPFs as deficient in comparison with 2-parent families.^{1,2} In this study, we set out to study family health-promotion processes after leaving abusive male partners. We learned that one of the key processes for strengthening family health was their persistent, proactive efforts to change family climate. This health-promotion process, named *regenerating family*, depicts how the mother and her children purposefully work toward replacing previously destructive patterns of interaction with constructive, supportive ways of getting along. The family establishes a predictable, respectful environment that provides a foundation for strengthening family members' emotional health. Our findings illuminate the social context of SPF health promotion processes, adding to understandings of emotional health, family structure, and family relationships when intimate partner

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violence (IPV) is a factor in separation. These insights offer a previously unavailable perspective of family health promotion, and are useful in guiding nurses and other clinicians working with SPFs with a history of woman abuse.

THE STUDY BACKGROUND

Intimate partner violence is a pattern of physical, sexual, and/or emotional violence by an intimate partner in the context of coercive control.³ One in 4 Canadian women experiences violence at the hands of a conjugal male partner.⁴ Intimate partner violence is a public health concern that has long-lasting negative physical and mental health consequences for women and their children.^{5–8} The dominant, socially sanctioned remedy for IPV and its health consequences is leaving the abusive partner.⁹ Yet, violence continues long after leaving, often intensifying and placing family members' emotional and physical health in greater jeopardy.^{10–12} Research related to the health of women and children after leaving is limited and has rarely been carried out from a family perspective. A small number of qualitative research studies have begun to focus on women as "survivors," not "victims," documenting their strengths and the growth that occurs after leaving.^{10,13–17} However, the strengths of diverse SPFs have rarely been examined.² Family strengths may moderate the relationship between abuse and the development of mental health problems.¹⁶ However, little is known about how families themselves promote their health after leaving abusive partners in the context of their everyday lives, including the ways in which public policy and resources influence their efforts. The purpose of our study was to develop a substantive theory to explain the social processes of family health promotion after leaving an abusive male partner.

THE METHOD

Grounded theory^{18,19} is a qualitative method useful for understanding social

process within social structure. Grounded theory is particularly useful for developing substantive theory that offers direction for practice because patterns of action are accounted for and interpreted at a conceptual level.²⁰ Data sources may include interviews, observations, and text that are selected to illuminate the domain of study. In grounded theory, data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously. Emerging findings guide the selection of future data sources in a process called theoretical sampling.¹⁸ Using constant comparative analysis, data are first coded substantively, then categorized, and finally coded theoretically to identify properties of, and relationships among, categories.¹⁸ The goal is constructing a substantive theory or basic social process that explains what is going on in the scene under study.²¹ Literature is theoretically sampled to reveal linkages with the generated substantive theory and to increase theoretical sensitivity in the continuing analysis.²⁰ When grounded theory and feminist theory are used together, theoretical sensitivity is influenced by feminism: investigators are responsive to the ways that gender, culture, class, ability, age, and sexual orientation are revealed in the data and influence the variation in emerging theoretical concepts.^{22,23} A feminist grounded theory method allows for the key issues and sociopsychological processes in the family and social context to be identified inductively, without being constrained by extant theory as the data are interpreted. The tenets of feminist theory, such as respect for participants, avoidance of oppression, and reflexivity and usefulness of findings in promoting personal or system change, guide the research process. Grounded theory results in a context-specific substantive theory that can be readily modified to fit the situational reality through constant comparison.^{18,19} Discussion of processes and context as well as connections with existing literature included here will assist readers to decide whether the findings are transferable to their environment.^{24,25}

This study was carried out in 2 Canadian provinces, New Brunswick and Ontario. Forty

mother-headed SPFs (40 mothers and 11 children) who had left abusive partners 1 to 20 years prior to the study were interviewed twice over a 3-year period in a location of their preference, most often their home. According to the preference of the family and the age of the children, some interviews were conducted with the family as a group, while others were conducted individually with mothers or children. Four families were First Nations living off-reserve, 3 were French Canadian, 2 were new immigrants, and the remainder were white, English-speaking Canadians. Details of the sample demographics can be found elsewhere.²⁶

Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the constant comparative methods of grounded theory. Because interviews took place concurrently in 2 distant provinces, we coded initial interviews together as a team, and consulted frequently about emerging findings and evolving codes. Our goal was to develop a substantive theory to explain health promotion processes in these families. Early in our interviews, relationships among family members emerged as a recurrent code that, through constant comparison, theoretical coding, and reduction, became the subprocess *regenerating family*. On the basis of the identification of influencing conditions from the data, we conducted a follow-up policy study that included more than 100 interviews with frontline workers and policymakers in the fields of child custody and support, housing, children's mental health, and preschool development. Our goal was to understand the interplay between key policy domains and family health promotion processes.²⁷ While the analysis of these data is not the focus of this article, it informed our understanding of the contextual influences on the emerging social process.

THE FINDINGS

The basic problem for families attempting to promote their health after leaving is

intrusion; that is, "external control or interference that demands attention, diverts energy away from family priorities, and limits choices."^{28(p600)} Intrusion stems from (a) harassment and abuse from the ex-partner, commonly related to custody and access; (b) health outcomes associated with past and ongoing abuse; (c) the costs or "strings attached" to seeking and obtaining help; and (d) undesirable changes to patterns of living consequent to leaving the abusive partner. Families promote their health in short- and long-term by *strengthening capacity to limit intrusion*.²⁶ The extent to which families are able to go beyond merely surviving, that is, meeting basic needs on a daily basis, to positioning for the future through proactive efforts to lead more productive lives in the long-term, depends on the intensity of intrusion. Families strengthen capacity to limit intrusion through 4 concurrent, interacting subprocesses: providing, renewing self, rebuilding security, and regenerating family.²⁶ *Providing* is a process of the family acquiring the material resources, energy, and skills needed to sustain them. The focus of *renewing self* is individual restoration and actualization of potential. *Rebuilding security* involves creating a family life characterized by safety and belonging, as opposed to the risks, fear, and isolation of past abuse. The focus of this discussion is family health promotion through regenerating family. *Regenerating family* is a process of the family reframing the single-parent unit as a viable team that both functions differently and is guided by different standards for relationships than the former 2-parent unit.²⁶ The goal of regenerating family is to replace the previously destructive family environment with open and safe patterns of family interaction.

THE FAMILY BEFORE LEAVING THE ABUSIVE PARTNER

How the family begins to alter family relationships after leaving is influenced by the age

of the children and the extent to which they were aware of the abuse. Some mothers described their family environments as "tense," believing that the abuse had been a secret and that their children had not been directly exposed to the violence. When the abuse was overt but their children very young, mothers were uncertain about the consequences for their children's emotional well-being. Sometimes ex-partners were jealous of their children's relationships with their mothers; for example, breastfeeding often evoked anger or efforts to control the mother's behavior. Mothers recalled increasing fear of leaving infants or toddlers with fathers who were unreliable and verbally abusive to their children, particularly if alcohol, drug, or gambling addictions were factors. One mother worked 10-hour shifts while her unemployed husband cared for their 2-year-old. "He was playing Nintendo 24 hours a day. He was neglecting her. She was going to the fridge and getting her own food." Another mother recalled her ex-partner calling their 6-month-old son "a stupid little prick" because he could not feed himself cereal.

When children were older and the abuse overt, children were sometimes drawn into the abusive interactions. Some fathers encouraged their children to follow their example by calling their mothers demeaning names. One child who witnessed her parents fighting noted, "It was battle after battle, fight after fight, yelling after yelling." A mother spoke of her ex-partner attacking her when she was comforting her son after his father had disciplined him roughly.

I was sort of whispering. My husband heard me, came up the stairs in a rage, picked me up, and tried to throw me down the stairs. I held onto the banister with all my might, and this time, he didn't just try and then stop, he kept on for about 10 minutes. I felt if I had gone down I would have broken my back or my neck. It was very frightening. My son was within two feet of me on the other side of the door and he could hear me begging.

In many families, the climate was volatile, with mothers and children working hard to avoid inciting explosive behavior. Fathers hid food or threw it out, locked mothers and children out of the house in their pajamas, threw dangerous objects at family members, and verbally cursed or humiliated mothers and children. One mother described her daughter's fear, "He had her so scared . . . to the point where she was scared to come down to go to the washroom so she ended up using the closet in her room to go to the bathroom." In these families, abuse was not a secret. Sometimes children encouraged and supported their mothers to take action to change the situation; in other situations, children remained bewildered and uncertain about their loyalties despite their father's behavior.

Determination to change the family climate is rooted in the mother's experience of trying to live and raise children in a chaotic, oppressive family environment where she and her children have witnessed and experienced abusive interactions.

I would sit there and think, how long will it be, about two hours, before I tick him off and I'm going to get a backhand in the mouth, and think OK it's only a backhand. Then the next time I might get pushed down the stairs, and then the next time, and the next time. And what is going to happen when my girls are constantly seeing that? Are they going to walk into situations like that. I don't want them thinking that this is the way they should be treated.

Thus, mothers confront the realization that their children's emotional and physical health and safety are at risk from (a) witnessing abuse of their mother, (b) living in an unsafe, chaotic, tightly controlled environment, (c) being belittled and manipulated, and (d) having a mother who is preoccupied with counteracting abuse on a day-to-day basis. This realization is a catalyst for leaving and provides direction for changing the standards of interaction in the new family unit to counteract the abuse experience. Against this

backdrop, the process of regenerating family takes place.

THE PROCESS OF REGENERATING FAMILY

The ideals of the mother and the developmental stages of the children influence how the goal of regenerating family is accomplished. Upon leaving, mothers and older children position for the future by *living together differently*, attempting to replace past destructive family relationships with constructive interactions that mirror their ideals about how families should get along together. For most families, the harsh realities of limited material resources and increasing harassment from the ex-partner, aggravated by members' health issues, intrude and demand that the family attend to current crises rather than position for the future. To survive, the family concentrates on *working as a team* so as to reduce chaos and ensure that everyday basic activities such as meal preparation, homework, laundry, and shopping are accomplished. The outcome of working as a team is strengthened capacity to function together in a predictable way on a day-to-day basis, which, in turn, enhances stability and family member's emotional well-being. Consequently, family members refocus on positioning for the future and take risks to improve the family environment by living together dif-

ferently. Paradoxically, these future-oriented efforts often expose them to additional intrusion that disturbs their fragile equilibrium. As demands increase, family goals may return again to *working as a team*. Over time, family priorities shift back and forth from meeting day-to-day demands to focusing on the future, depending upon levels of intrusion. One mother framed this shift in this way:

Sometimes you can feel like you are gaining but it doesn't take much to get right back. Like you get a flat tire, and you can be right back in the bottom. Then it will take you two more months to get that strength again. So, I guess it is back and forth.

By working toward a genial family environment where people work together, care for and count on one another, the family creates a foundation for improving their emotional health over time (Table 1).

WORKING AS A TEAM

Working as a team is a process of surviving driven by daily demands and by the mother's belief that past abusive family relationships must be replaced by more positive ways of interacting. Working as a team involves developing functional ways of working together to ensure that the everyday needs are met in a predictable way, despite ongoing abuse,

Table 1. Subprocesses of regenerating family

Working as a team	Constructing a storyline Creating new expectations	Making rules Establishing new routines Taking on new roles
Living together differently	Paying attention and reflecting Buying in Enacting new standards	Fostering open communication Creating space Shielding Seeking help Taking a stand
	Letting standards evolve	

financial strain, and custody and access issues. Mothers initiate working as a team, "I have to show them we can do it!" Working as a team is facilitated by constructing a storyline and creating new expectations of one another.

Constructing a storyline

Constructing a storyline is a process of explaining why they are living without the ex-partner and why they must work as a team. Initially, mothers put forward the storyline, especially if children are young. Over time, children add to the storyline and it becomes an evolving family history. The storyline assists family members to make sense of their situation and to resist the conflicting ways others may describe them. Constructing a storyline is similar to the process of personally constructing and historically situating one's story of trauma as part of a recovery process.²⁹ Constructing a storyline occurs as a *family* process, not only at the individual level. Storylines reflect 2 dominant themes: "escape/rescue" or "conflict" between parents.

A storyline of escape emphasizes the ex-partner's abusive behavior as the reason for separation, while positioning mothers as guardians of the family who are "doing the right thing" for themselves and their children. A storyline of escape is more likely when (a) the children are very young and the father has little bond with them; (b) a child has been physically, emotionally, or sexually abused by his or her father; (c) the family relocates to another community; (d) the father's abuse and harassment endanger all family members; or (e) the father has been jailed. When children savor the improvement in their family relationships, despite their material losses, the storyline gains credibility. "We are survivors, not victims anymore." The storyline of escape is further reinforced when ex-partners stalk, harass, or assault mothers and their children.

In contrast, constructing the reason for separation as "conflict" between parents places responsibility on both parents for living apart, allows fathers to remain involved in their chil-

dren's lives, and minimizes the abuse that mothers have experienced. One mother explained to her daughter, "I'm still angry with your father, but we both love you." When family ties are a strong cultural norm, mothers strive for inclusion, "She has a right to know her father and her family on that side." The ideal that children need fathers and, conversely, that not knowing them could adversely affect children's well-being, sometimes results in mothers making extraordinary efforts to sustain an inclusive storyline. Pressure to allow the ex-partner to remain part of the children's lives also stems from custody and access decisions. When fathers have been granted access to children, mothers feel that they must create an inclusive storyline that focuses on his good qualities to protect their children's emotional well-being. Likewise, mothers seeking custody are often advised not to deny ex-partners access to their children. The Canadian Divorce Act contains a "friendly parent rule" that requires the court, when ruling on custody, to consider which parent will facilitate continuing contact with the other parent.³⁰ In addition, some fathers who are initially disinterested in their young children reappear as children grow older and may then gain legal access, requiring the storyline to shift from escape to inclusion.

Often visits with "Dad" are opportunities for continuing harassment by the abusive ex-partner.²⁸ Many fathers are unreliable in their visiting patterns, expose their children to unsavory environments, or use their contact with children as a way to harass mothers. The detrimental effects of such actions on children may lead to mothers modifying the storyline.

You're not supposed to talk ill of the other partner, but when he's done so much violence to her, and she already knows, I can't say, "oh honey, he's a good man but." I tell her he's mean and loses his temper and "that's why you don't see him much"

When visitation is mandated by the courts but the father is emotionally abusive to the child, mothers and children find it hard to

construct a storyline that accounts for their situation. Emotional abuse is hard to prove—women rarely have the financial resources to hire a lawyer to obtain variation in a custody order—and seeking custody variation carries the risk of having custody rescinded. Thus, the storyline becomes muddled; it must remain inclusive by law, but mothers no longer are supportive of father's inclusion. Children are caught in an untenable situation and the mother's priority shifts to keeping children safe by rebuilding security.

Constructing a storyline is particularly difficult when the conditions around leaving, or the abuse itself, fall outside expected norms. When the ex-partner, rather than the mother, initiates leaving and the children are unaware of the abuse, mothers are particularly challenged to create an explanation that justifies the urgent need to change the climate in their new family. One woman's husband committed suicide while she was in the midst of the separation process. Shocked by being suddenly alone, and uncertain about whether she would have left, she struggled to construct an authentic, yet publicly acceptable, storyline. Storylines are equally difficult to construct when women themselves are unsure about what happened. One mother, whose husband became abusive after a brain injury, felt torn between feeling justified for fleeing "abuse" and guilty for leaving her partner who was disabled and perhaps not completely responsible for his "anger."

Storylines include a constructive dimension of secrecy. Sometimes IPV is the mother's secret. Even when children are aware of the abuse, families decide which aspects of their storyline will be shared outside the family. When mothers view the abuse history as potentially stigmatizing, they often teach their children that, while the storyline is public, the details of abuse are private. Thus, families in our study used secrecy protectively, similar to the ways abused women in rural families protect themselves against public visibility by cautiously disclosing their abuse.³¹ While secrets among family members may increase emotional intensity and chronic anxiety in the

family unit,³² in the present study, family construction and talk of the private/public storyline helped to mitigate distress. The sharing of a secret involves trust and relational intimacy.³³ However, secrecy in the public storyline limits family access to needed resources, such as low-cost housing or legal aid that often require disclosure of abuse.

When children rarely see their fathers, they more readily accept the mother's storyline, especially if it is consistent with their memories. Access to children allows fathers to tell conflicting stories, leaving children torn in their loyalties to parents, a finding supported by Emery and Dillon.³⁴ Loyalty conflicts have been found to be the best predictor of poor child adjustment after separation.³⁵ The SPF's ability to deal with such discrepancies depends largely on the openness of their communication. Even with open communication, children may not accept the storyline of abuse or rescue and choose to live with their fathers. Such choices are often facilitated by fathers and extended family members who reinforce alternate storylines, harass mothers, and offer children material resources that mothers cannot provide. As children get older, they develop their own storylines reflecting their experiences with both parents. One son of an immigrant woman reflected that his father had left his mother "with nothing," but she took control and got a good job. He was clearly proud of her survival skills.

Despite the variation in the constructed storylines, all included a sense of optimism for the future based on the family's working together to change the quality of their relationships and their home environments. Although the storyline is initially constructed as justification for *working as a team*, it forms the foundation for the family health promotion subprocesses of providing, renewing self, and rebuilding security.²⁶

Creating new expectations of one another

Creating new expectations of one another involves establishing ways of working

together that draw upon each family member's capabilities while incorporating ideals about how parent-child relationships and family time *should* be. New expectations are created by making rules, establishing new routines, and taking on new roles.

Making rules is a strategy usually initiated by mothers in periods of high intrusion to facilitate family functioning and reduce chaos, thus increasing predictability. Many mothers relax their control in an effort to compensate for what children have been through. Rules introduce basic individual responsibilities such as cleaning up toys, tidying up after snacks, or finishing homework before going out to play. "This is a big house, there are a lot of tasks that need to be done. I'm not Cinderella, so we all have to pull our weight." Rules take on a unique function in families after leaving—creating order and a sense of fair play that were violated in their abusive past.

Strained finances lead to rules about how money may be spent, often curtailing daily hassles between mothers and children. Referring to fees for participation in sports, one mother said, "They just know—don't even ask because I don't have the money." Another family, developed the rule "work hard and wait" to get the things you want. As children become old enough to work, rules are made regarding their financial contributions to the family sometimes despite children's objections. "He didn't like that [taking some of his money for rent] very much, but you know, I'm sorry, but you like a roof over your head." When the family storyline does not acknowledge the abuse, children are less inclined to follow new rules. Rules provide anchors for guiding family functioning such that some aspects of life become more settled for mothers and children. Others have suggested that following separation, reestablishing consistent rules and predictable expectations is important for restoring warm relationships.³⁶ Because many of our study families had not experienced warm family relationships for many years, if ever, rules were even more important for changing the family environment.

In contrast to the structured nature of making rules, *establishing new routines* is a process of arriving informally at new patterns of daily activity that are both practical and fun. Family members, including very young children, develop habitual ways of working together to do daily chores and to establish flexible routines for homework and recreational activities. Mothers who work in jobs requiring on-call, rotating shifts or short contracts are often more challenged to create routines. Speaking of her 4- and 6-year-old children, one mother said,

We need to work together as a team. They know, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, they know it's a quick day. "It's a quick morning, Mommy, here we get out of bed." We roll out of bed and go, sort of thing. And they know that, and they work with it.

Intrusion from health problems related to IPV influences how family routines develop. One family, in which the mother had chronic bowel disease, organized routines around her need to be near a bathroom and take daily naps. Its custom was to invite friends over rather than go out. Availability of community resources such as transportation, parks, or low-cost recreational programs expands the scope and variety of family routines that can be developed.

Routines that get the work done but also facilitate family members spending time together help mothers manage multiple demands. "It's hard being a single parent and trying to be everything to everybody." Moreover, routines create stability for children who are experiencing multiple changes. One mother used routines to create stability for her children as they moved from their home to a shelter and finally to a new apartment, "I tried to keep their entire life the same, just the bed different." Regular family time helped children to deal with being uprooted and leaving friends. One boy in middle school observed, "Friday nights we watch a movie and get a pizza." Another mother said routine family time remained an important anchor for her children over the years, and that

her teenage children "reeled her in" if she neglected it.

Families vary in their need for assistance in developing routines. While some women learned about routines in their families of origin, others had little idea about organizing family life, particularly if they had experienced a lifetime pattern of emotional abuse. Some mothers sought help from child protection services, anticipating that their inability to manage might result in losing custody of their children. Encouragement from a mother's helper transformed one such woman's life. "I'm on a schedule with the kids, we brush our teeth after meals and have supper at a certain time. It's helped a lot with the chaos." This finding is supported by Denham^{37,38} who suggested that family routines are strengths that may be drawn upon to deal with challenges. Child protection agencies were most effective with study families when mothers felt supported by practical assistance in organizing life, rather than threatened or placed under surveillance. Routines make family life more orderly, children gain a sense of responsibility, mothers get constructive help, the family has fun together, and everyone feels part of a team. When family members can be counted on to maintain routines, families have increased capacity to deal with crises or increased intrusion. In addition, this structural stability sets the stage for taking on new challenges. The creation of such structure is reminiscent of the individual work that Herman²⁹ described as the first stage of a survivor's recovery from trauma. Our findings suggest that strengthening family structure through establishing rules and routines complements the individual work needed postabuse.

As family members develop new routines, they engage in *taking on new roles* within the family. In some families, the groundwork for new roles was established in the previous abusive environment where mothers assumed most parenting responsibilities and children shouldered expanded roles such as protector, baby-sitter, cook, or cleaner. However, in regenerating family, taking on new roles is less

burdensome and more of a mutual effort in which family members feel the rewards of increased competence and skill. Nonetheless, taking on new roles is not without challenges.

Becoming a single parent is a particularly difficult transition after leaving an abusive partner. "I feel like I have to juggle everything. How many plates am I going to have to spin today?" Central to the change in roles is a shift in decision making from a purely parental responsibility to a family responsibility. Elkind³⁹ reported a similar trend in the postmodern family where unilateral parental authority is replaced with more equality, and children take on expanded roles. By involving children in daily decision making, children's engagement in the family team is encouraged. "We're not just mother and daughter. I'm not giving the orders and she's not following them sort of thing. She's on my level for a lot of things." One 12 year-old commented that being included in family decisions "feels excellent!" Similarly, Arditti¹ found that children of divorced parents enjoyed the increased self-sufficiency derived from role shifts based upon equity and the expectation that children would be more self-reliant. Shared decision making requires mothers to engage children in discussions about the family's future direction. With expanded roles, children quickly became aware of family's financial limitations, sometimes prompting older children to voluntarily contribute monies from paper routes or part-time jobs to pay for family basics or things they want for themselves. The extent to which mothers can relinquish roles to older children depends in part on the level and type of intrusion faced. For example, ex-partners who discovered that older children were providing childcare for younger siblings threatened to use this as evidence of the mother's poor parenting. The developmental stage and age of the child influences taking on new roles. School-age children are often eager to expand their roles, but in adolescence, such roles can become oppressive. The realization that baby-sitting siblings for free was preventing her daughter from earning her own money for wanted clothing or activities led

one mother to rebalance her expectations of her daughter's and the family's needs.

Summary

The extent to which the family operates as a team varies according to the age of the children, the relationship with the ex-partner, and children's feelings about their changed family situation. Working as a team varies on a day-to-day basis according to normal family ups and downs. One 9-year-old said, "some days it feels as if we are not really a family because we are fighting; other days we are just acting like a normal family." A consequence of working as a team is the emergence of a family norm of helping one another and a confidence in family capability, "We stick together." Families who have survived physical battering or sexual abuse often feel even stronger obligations to one another. "We are all we have together. It will always bind us through life." Working as a team strengthens the family's capacity by increasing the day-to-day order and stability in their lives, thereby freeing up time and emotional energy to focus more proactively on their future. Mothers are determined that their children will learn different ways of getting along so that their futures will not be characterized by the abusive relationships of their past. Working as a team shifts to the background, and positioning for the future by living together differently takes priority.

LIVING TOGETHER DIFFERENTLY

Living together differently involves purposefully developing and enacting new standards for relationships, supported by the cooperation developed while working as a team. While families may readily name new standards, living by them is more difficult, particularly in the context of ongoing intrusion and family members' changing developmental challenges. The process of living together differently is dynamic, not linear, with each new experience informing the next. The extent to which the newly established standards

are supported by the children's father is a key factor that shapes how this process unfolds. Families live together differently by paying attention and reflecting; buying in; enacting standards; and letting standards evolve.

Paying attention and reflecting

Changing standards within relationships depends on family members being aware of their current patterns of functioning, interaction, emotions, and health. *Paying attention and reflecting* are concurrent processes of gathering and considering information about individual behaviors and how family members work together. Paying attention includes observing, comparing, and seeking other opinions. Family members compared their families with other families they knew, including their families of origin. The consequence of paying attention and reflecting is increased awareness of family patterns, which facilitates understanding what they want their family to be like and what needs to change in the family to meet these new standards. By comparing the outcomes of disciplinary practices during her own upbringing in an abusive, alcoholic family with the effects of her ex-partner's physical disciplining of her son, one mother concluded that spanking was assault, and decided that this would not be permitted in her new family. When harassment from ex-partners is intense, mothers monitor the effects on the family. Reflecting on children's behavior after visits leads to mothers reconsidering the value of including fathers in children's lives, especially when fathers repeatedly violate the emerging family standards. For example, one mother was outraged to learn that her ex-partner was making plans for children to live with him while telling her daughter to "keep it a secret from mom."

Paying attention to similarities and differences between their own and other families helps children understand abuse as a collective social issue that affects other families beyond their own. Older children reflect on their parents' relationships as a way of

considering what they want in a partner relationship. Speaking of his parents' arguments, one teenage remarked that he wanted to be a good husband some day, "you should actually listen to each other before screaming." While children may compare themselves to their fathers, wondering about their own potential to abuse others, mothers also watch for similarities between children's actions and those of their fathers and observe the relationships children develop with others, "she attracts unhealthy relationships." Feedback from friends, teachers, or coaches is especially useful in helping women interpret their observations and make decisions about how to change standards.

For mothers, another focus for paying attention and reflecting relates to their assessments of potential new partners/fathers. Women establish criteria for new partners that are consistent with their emerging standards for family relationships such as being kind, trustworthy, and respectful; accepting them as they are; and being nonviolent. Often, they and their children discuss criteria for a new father, contrasting their emerging ideal with their previous experience. Women scrutinize their pattern of past relationships and may develop a new awareness of how such relationships fall short of their new criteria. "I've always been attracted to men in dangerous lifestyles. I'm always trying to go back to those I'm used to. But that's a vicious circle and you gotta get out of there."

Paying attention and reflecting helps families name and reinforce the standards that are important to them. While there is some variation among families, most desire non-violence, closeness, caring, open communication, respectfulness, predictability, confidentiality, and free expression of feelings. Moving from naming to integrating these standards into family life proves to be more challenging.

Buying in

Buying in refers to how the family accepts new standards for relationships. A critical pre-

requisite to buying in is building trust. Mothers take the lead in demonstrating trustworthiness by trying to consistently respect new standards. Children who have experienced IPV need to believe that the family climate will not return to its former state. When the ex-partner continues to harass, such assurance is difficult to provide. In addition, the history of the mother-child relationship may be a barrier. If mothers were previously emotionally unavailable to children, or indulged in drug or alcohol abuse, children are wary. One mother who had voluntarily put her child into care while she sought help for addiction, struggled to rebuild their relationship, "She is marked mentally by what she lived in the past. I need to prove it's not going to be like it used to be . . . It's my fault, I can't change the past. I can just try to be better."

The development of trust is further restricted by children's worries that their mothers may abandon them and by the sense of responsibility family members may feel for not leaving sooner or failing to protect one another. For example, in one family where children had been sexually abused, the mother commented, "We all felt so uncomfortable and mad at everybody. We didn't know who to take it out on, so we took it out on each other." However, success in working as a team combined with consistent behavior from the mother helps children to feel more secure about emerging family standards and to *buy in* to new standards. As well, opportunity to vicariously experience a nonabusive family climate in other family units reinforces what is possible in family relationships.

Although living together differently focuses on enacting new standards for family relationships, it has implications for relationships outside the family. While women work to build trust with their children, those who tentatively reach out to new partners in their attempts to belong and *rebuild security* are reluctant to trust. One woman said, "I don't trust myself, let alone worry about trusting someone else." Against a history of abuse,

women find it hard to accept respect, patience, kindness, and concern as an expression of caring, rather than an effort to control. "I get tired and I want to be by myself but he's always checking to see if I am OK. It makes me feel good but it's scary too. Sometimes it bugs me."

Families also engage in buying in by reinforcing what is acceptable in the new family. Family members constantly remind each other not to be mean, call each other names, or hit each other, increasing their awareness of their behaviors. One woman noted her daughter's "horrific temper" and the need to continually reinforce acceptable ways to express anger. At the same time, the demands of single parenting often exhaust mothers and test their capacity to be consistent and respond in a way that meets new standards. Consequently, mothers develop strategies to avoid losing their tempers such as forcing themselves to "count to 10" or "take a deep breath." One mother recalled her efforts to reinforce the notion of respect by telling her daughter not to speak in "that tone of voice." Suddenly, she realized that she herself was using "that tone of voice" with her daughter.

As children grow older, reinforcing standards for relationships between males and females becomes critical as a guide for children's future relationships with partners. One mother helped her 10 year old understand why his and his friends' new practice of making lewd remarks to young girls was not tolerable. Another woman reinforced the notion of nonviolence with her adolescent daughter and her boyfriend who were wrestling hard enough to leave bruises on each other. Building trust and reinforcing what is acceptable are tactics that help family members *buy in* to new standards and set the stage for purposeful enactment of new standards.

Enacting new standards

Enacting standards depends on the mother's ideals for family life and her history of abuse. One mother who had never experi-

enced physical touching and hugging in her family of origin established this as one of their new standards. Children's capacity to make sense of and apply new standards varies according to how much fathers interfere with these efforts. The ability to enact new standards can be challenged by community norms. One mother who could only afford housing in a neighborhood she considered "rough" discovered her son was being hurt by bullies because she had taught him not to hit. For most families, persistence is key in enacting new standards. "It takes a lot of wanting and perseverance. You can't stop." Families enacted standards by fostering open communication, creating space, shielding, seeking help, and taking a stand against interference.

Families engage in *fostering open communication* through strategies such as setting time aside to talk as a family or building conversation into mealtime. In one immigrant family where meal time had previously been so abusive that the mother and her sons continued even after leaving to find it impossible to sit at the table together, the mother said, "The times that I have to sit in the car and teach them to drive was something special that I built with each. I believe this time is important for me to build the relationships." Open communication affords opportunities for individuals to voice their opinions, to say how they feel, and to develop other ways of dealing with conflict, "If you want respect you have to earn it." Lapses in enacting standards may be addressed by open communication. Struggling with depression and recovering from alcoholism, one mother acknowledged "flying off the deep end." Admitting she was wrong and apologizing helped to get the family back on track. Acknowledging an error in judgment was rare in their rigidly controlled abusive past.

Open communication is challenged when custody and access negotiations are ongoing. One mother kept her children informed about custody negotiations despite her lawyer's warnings that she might be seen as trying to

influence, "I've always been honest." Another mother said,

Some people say why do you let them know, but I think, they have to know what's going on. They hear me on the phone. At one point somebody said why did you tell your daughter that he [ex-partner] was going to take you back to court. I said they've got to understand. So yes, daddy is taking me to court, but it is for more visitation.

Many mothers try to discuss abuse in a constructive way, either as a parental problem or as a family problem, depending on the storyline, the level of continuing harassment, and the relationship that children have with the father. Most women attempted to be honest without putting the father down, particularly about the unlikelihood of reconciliation, while acknowledging children's many losses. One woman said, "I don't want him [teenage son] to think badly of me or his father. I was a miserable woman, I was drinking a lot. We fought a lot. It was not a good marriage." Open communication helps children come to terms with their bewildering past and present experiences. In some families, siblings learned to talk with one another openly. Creating opportunities for open communication is not easy for mothers who are simultaneously struggling with providing necessities, renewing self, and rebuilding security.²⁶

The outcome of open, honest communication is family closeness. "Everything is open with us. We are comfortable here. We are finally really comfortable." Although families continue to have conflicts, open communication allows the family to express feelings and resolve difficulties. Other research supports the importance of close and supportive mother-child relationships in children's post-divorce adjustment.³⁵ Frequently, the mother-child relationship is more like that between peers. "I try to treat them like adults, partners, not like kids," said one woman of her teenagers. Children may also become confidantes, especially when families are isolated in new communities. One mother referred to her son as her best friend. "We do every-

thing together." Arditti's retrospective qualitative study¹ of children of divorce supports the view that such children have close, confiding, satisfying relationships with their mothers, based on equality, not control. At times, mothers are challenged to maintain the role of parent in this environment of equality and reciprocity. Closeness between mothers and children can undermine parent and child roles when children fail to respect parental judgment or mothers inappropriately tell children about intimate personal problems. However, openness allows all family members to set things straight. One mother said that when she spoke of her qualms about relationships with new partners, her teen said, "Mom, I don't want to hear about that!"

Mothers work hard to balance close, reciprocal relationships with respect for individual autonomy and privacy by *creating space*. Family theory has identified the shift from hierarchical to more egalitarian parent-child relationships as a violation of intimacy boundaries.^{40,41} In contrast, our research suggests that, over time, family members learn to balance openness with the need for personal space and clear roles. In general, divorced families are less hierarchical and their subsystem boundaries are less well-defined than are intact families.⁴² Koerner et al⁴¹ studied the outcomes of peer-like relationships between mothers and adolescent daughters postdivorce and found that psychological stress or problem behavior in daughters was linked to disclosure of serious financial or emotional problems, but not to intimacy related to everyday activities, relationships, or social activity. In our study, keeping children apprised of issues with ex-partners and financial constraints was often essential for children's safety and well-being.

Creating space is an important component of living together differently. In the previous family environment, there was little respect for individual family member's rights to personal space or privacy. The need for space may be more intense for mothers who have histories of childhood abuse or incest.

Older children need space to create lives separate from the family. Siblings, who are often very close, also have to learn to give each other space. The most difficult challenge for mothers is allowing their children to develop their own relationships with their fathers. One mother resisted prying when her daughter chose to spend Christmas with her father, "I didn't ask her how it went with her father . . . if she has something to say, she'll tell me." Another mother who was in hiding from her ex-partner found a way to allow her son to send his father a Father's Day card without revealing their location. Mothers who want children to make up their own minds about the validity of their father's storyline must step back and let older children work out their relationships with their fathers, while being available to them. Although worried about her ex-partner's abusive nature, one mother allowed her son to choose when and for how long he visited, and let him know that she would support his choice. The challenge of giving children space to reach their own conclusions regarding their fathers persists over many years. When 15 years after leaving, one ex-partner offered his daughter university tuition only if she lived with him, one mother struggled but did not interfere.

Along with a commitment to openness, many families enact their caring for one another by *shielding*. For mothers, *shielding* is a strategy of protecting children from harsh realities such as illness, severe financial hardship, or father's harassment. Protecting children is an ideal, particularly cherished if mothers feel they previously failed to protect young children. Mothers are concerned about children worrying or growing up "bitter." However, as some mothers reflect on the consequences of fathers' behavior during visits, they are less willing to shield children, especially if the child is at risk. For example, one mother enlisted her son to help shield his sister from their Dad's anger by teaching him which behaviors to avoid and what to do if he felt threatened. Similarly, children, who understand that violations of new standards by fathers upset their mothers, sometimes at-

tempt to shield their mothers. "She [daughter] will talk to me but sometimes she doesn't want to upset me because it's about her dad. Sometimes she says, 'well I won't tell dad because I don't want him to get mad at you or us.'" Shielding behavior changes over time according to the degree of intrusion from violence or the system. A consequence of shielding is that it violates the standard of openness and children may feel betrayed when they learn that they have not been informed of important events, such as illness in the mother. As children grow older, shielding may decline as mothers and their children engage in more open communication and realize each other's capability for handling more.

To learn new strategies for enacting standards for living together differently, many families also engage in *seeking help* through support groups or counseling. Such help is most valued when it validates the families' new standards and reinforces their efforts to change behavior, and when those helping are knowledgeable about IPV. Families who live in second-stage housing have the benefit of access to many useful resources. For some children, new standards are supported when they receive individual counseling or attend special groups for children of divorce, or attend anger management sessions. One mother described her help-seeking efforts.

My middle one is very angry and she shows it. She is not afraid to show her emotions. So I called about six months ago and that's how long the waiting list is. But that program, the mother gets to do it with them. We learn about kids and she knows how to bring out her anger and how I'm supposed to accept it. So I'm waiting for that.

While such intervention reinforces family efforts to enact new standards for relationships, the paucity of services available, particularly preventive programs for children, is a barrier. Mothers are frequently told that their children are "not sick enough" to be eligible. Women with chronic health problems such as alcoholism or depression attended self-help or support groups. Such

assistance is particularly useful during periods of high intrusion. One woman noted how her Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor helped her to stay clean and resist sliding into "old patterns" of interaction. When help is delivered by volunteers, it may lack necessary stability. Speaking of her daughter's experience with Big Sisters, this mother said.

Well the first one [Big Sister] quit after the first meeting. Then she [daughter] got another one. She really enjoyed her, and seemed to really bond with her. But she [Big Sister] was going to Teachers' College, so in the fall she quit. So that was very devastating.

The final way that mothers enact standards is by *taking a stand* against intrusion that threatens the new standards. Much of this intrusion stems from extended family or friends who have provided help after leaving and now think they "know best." One woman who had accepted considerable help from parents and siblings when she first left struggled to meet their expectations but, by enacting her own standards, recognized that she needed to make her own decisions. Taking a stand with ex-partners evolves in response to father's lack of accountability and reliability, particularly around visiting and reflected in mothers no longer providing food or supplies for visits, or making excuses for fathers' erratic visiting patterns. Children may also take a stand with their fathers by holding them accountable for their responsibilities or promises. One mother quoted her son as telling his father when he saw him for the first time in a year, "You should have been at my birthday last week." Similar to other findings,¹⁵ women take a stand in new partner relationships by identifying and responding to problematic behavior, especially if it mirrors a pattern in the previous relationship. One woman responded to new partner's criticism of her activities with, "You're not going to run my life . . . nobody, nobody is going to tell me what to do." The consequence of taking a stand is that new standards are supported and living together differently is reinforced.

Evolving standards

Standards are not static but evolve in response to the developmental changes among family members and the degree of intrusion they are experiencing. When children or mother have intrusive health or behavioral problems related to abuse, standards may initially be quite rigidly enacted as a way of ensuring that things are different in the new family. Allowing standards to evolve is particularly difficult because families have had to fight so hard to establish them in the first place. However, as family members develop confidence in their ability to deal with the challenges of their relationships, they relax and become more flexible in the way they enact standards. For example, one mother became more open to new patterns of family interaction when she realized that "what works for others does not necessarily work for me" and that she was always "fighting against norms and ideals of what a family should be." Standards that work when the children are younger may not be effective as they mature. When mothers recognize that children are going through normal teenage issues, they try to be "tolerant" and give them more freedom. As one daughter grew older, she and her mother were able to overcome past conflict and establish standards for their relationship in a way that worked for both of them.

SUMMARY

Regenerating family is a health-promotion process that strengthens the emotional health of mothers and children by helping them construct a common understanding of their past, create a predictable family climate to replace the formerly chaotic, oppressive environment, and purposefully develop new respectful, caring ways of getting along.

IMPLICATIONS

Most research focusing on emotional health and relationships in SPFs after separation glosses over the heterogeneity of

these families and evaluates their functioning relative to “standards” developed for 2-parent families. The impact of IPV on postseparation family relationships and health has rarely been considered. More recently, researchers have identified that children’s well-being is linked more to the degree of conflict between parents than to whether they live in a 1- or 2-parent family. When IPV is present, child health is often compromised by witnessing the violence, living in an unsettled environment, and having a mother preoccupied with counteracting the abuse.⁴³ In families where conflict was high preseparation, children’s well-being improved after separation.^{44,45} Recognition of these effects of conflict and IPV has begun to influence the clinical assessment of family health postseparation.

Our findings demonstrate that, after leaving an abusive partner, families identify an urgent need to establish new ways of interacting and altering the family climate to promote the emotional and physical health of all family members. Contrary to dominant views that leaving an abusive partner eliminates exposure to abuse and allows family members to heal or recover, we discovered that there is a continuing intrusive pattern of harassment for as long as 20 years.²⁸ Thus, while family members may no longer be subject to continuous abuse or harassment, they are not completely free of it. Therefore, the challenge in leaving is not limited to recovery from the abuse but extends to building new patterns of interaction that support their emotional health by fostering a more open and predictable family climate, and enacting new relational standards inside and outside of the family unit. These new patterns of interaction help families to address intrusion that may never go away. Thus regenerating family contributes to the process of strengthening capacity to limit intrusion.

Although much of the literature addressing the trauma of abuse focuses on individual recovery,^{16,29} our findings demonstrate that for families who have left abusive male partners, recovery also takes place at a *family* level through processes of health promotion. Constructing a storyline that evolves over

time is a critical protective strategy that assists families to make sense of their experience both publicly and privately. This finding may help nurses to interpret shifting storylines of families who have left abusive partners as constructive efforts to manage ongoing intrusion, and prevent stigmatization. Nurses can support families in developing and modifying storylines that are protective. In particular, our data suggest that mothers may need support in helping their children make sense of the evolving public versus private storylines.

One important finding is that, when intrusion is high, families concentrate on stabilizing family life by establishing rules and routines and taking on new roles. Working as a team increases predictability in day-to-day life and builds family members’ confidence, thus strengthening family capacity. Too often, this focus on the immediate is discounted by clinicians who encourage families to focus on the future. Our findings suggest that focusing on the present is necessary in creating a stable family climate that fosters emotional health and, in the context of shifting levels of intrusion, is as important to strengthening capacity as activities that position for the future. The family’s ideal of creating a nonabusive family climate is a valuable guide to clinician’s work with families struggling to survive or positioning for the future.

The process of regenerating family sheds additional light on the complexity of issues of openness and closeness among family members in SPFs who have been exposed to IPV. Our findings indicate that closeness among family members is key in creating a new, supportive family climate. In many cases, closeness and teamwork result in relationships between parents and children that, when viewed through a traditional lens, are most consistent with that of “peers.” While family members struggle to balance openness with necessary boundaries of parent versus child, our findings suggest the need for cautious assessments of such relationships and recognition of their benefits in families with a history of IPV.

Finally, success in regenerating family does not depend solely on family capacity but is

shaped by broader system factors such as custody rulings, access to legal aid, educational resources and counseling services, and child protection polices. Many families seek help after leaving to assist them with the many challenges that they face. The process of regenerating family suggests that assisting families in the process of identifying the new standards for their interaction is important.

However, many programs and services focus on individual strategies for healing, parenting, or increasing self-awareness, neglecting this important family work. Our findings demonstrate the importance of supporting the family unit in setting and working toward purposeful goals for changing family interaction, and reducing intrusion that interferes with these efforts to build a healthy family environment.

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