From Awareness to Action

BRIEF

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Intervening with Perpetrators Who Choose to Use Coercive Control Towards Their Families

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RESOLVE

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This brief is based on the presentation of Rhonda Dagg “Intervening with Perpetrators Who Choose to Use Coercive Control Towards Their Families” held on November 22, 2024, hosted by RESOLVE Manitoba. The webinar can be retrieved from: https://youtu.be/oBom1jk9cp8

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INTRODUCTION

Coercive control is a difficult form of abuse to recognize as it often masquerades as normal behaviour within intimate relationships, while systematically stripping victim-survivors of their autonomy and basic rights (Feresin et al., 2019; Stark, 2007). According to Evan Stark (2007, p. 171), coercive control generally includes "tactics to intimidate, isolate, humiliate, exploit, regulate, and micromanage women's enactment of everyday life." Specific examples of this include threatening or denigrating victim-survivors; impoverishing victim-survivors; depriving victim-survivors of necessities like food or medicine; enforcing rules for everyday conduct; and destroying parent-child bonds (Barbaro & Raghavan, 2018; Stark, 2007). Coercive control has been likened to capture crimes, such as hostage taking or kidnapping, due to similarities in techniques employed by perpetrators and the resulting entrapment of victim-survivors (Stark, 2007).

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief explores strategies for intervening with perpetrators who choose to use coercive control against their families using the Safe and Together model. The information in this brief is based on the webinar: *Intervening with Perpetrators Who Choose to Use Coercive Control Towards Their Families*, featuring Rhonda Dagg, a faculty member of the Safe and Together Institute and Program Specialist at the General Child and Family Services in Manitoba (Dagg, 2025). Key topics include recognizing the patterns of coercive control, understanding its broader implications within families and social systems, and employing intervention and engagement strategies that prioritize safety, accountability, and empathy. The goal is to equip practitioners with tools to challenge coercive behaviours while supporting the safety and wellbeing of affected families.

At the core of coercive control is patriarchal power, control, and domination over women (Stark, 2007). The emergence of coercive control in modern society has been linked to gains made by feminism and women's liberation movements, whereby "men have devised coercive control to offset the erosion of sex-based privilege" (Stark, 2007, p. 171). Thus, coercive control is used to challenge equality through the installment of patriarchal-like controls in personal life that discriminate against women through assignment to domesticity. Through undermining the autonomy of women, coercive control uses gendered roles to make the coercion appear normal (Williamson, 2010).

The notion of coercive control goes beyond an examination of physical injuries and impacts of what is commonly recognized as domestic violence by creating a space within which we can understand how everyday control and coercion are forms of violence (Williamson, 2010). However, the non-physical nature of coercive control often makes it more difficult to identify, document, and address, which often leaves victim-survivors isolated and unable to access support. The difficulty in recognizing and responding effectively to coercive control highlights a significant need for service providers to be equipped with frameworks and tools to work with perpetrators who choose to use coercive control towards their families.

The Safe and Together model provides a framework for addressing coercive control, and other acts of domestic violence, within families. The model acknowledges the connection between domestic violence and child safety, while also addressing the bureaucratic and conceptual barriers to linking the two in practice (Mandel, 2022). There are three principles that form the basis for the Safe and Together model, which include:

1) keeping children safe and together with their non-offending parent;
2) partnering with non-offending parents as the default position; and
3) intervening with perpetrators to reduce risk and harms to children (Mandel, 2013).

The model also aims to shift harmful assumptions that are often made when domestic violence occurs in families, such as the notion that a perpetrator's pattern of behaviour towards their adult partner does not impact their children (Mandel, 2013). Although the model was developed primarily for the child protection sector, it has also been used in adjacent sectors including addiction and mental health institutions, the family court system, and women's organizations (Safe & Together Institute, 2022).

UNDERSTANDING COERCIVE CONTROL AS A CHOICE

The Safe and Together model highlights the fact that coercive control is an intentional and deliberate choice made by perpetrators to dominate and manipulate their partners. It is critical to recognize that coercive control is not an unavoidable consequence of mental health issues, substance use, or unregulated anger. While these factors may coexist with abusive behaviour, they do not excuse or explain the use of coercive control. This distinction is vital in holding perpetrators accountable for their actions and shifting the focus from external factors to their intentional decision-making.

Coercive control is also a parenting choice that prioritizes maintaining power over the family unit rather than fostering a safe and nurturing environment. Perpetrators use coercive control to harm not only their partners, but also their children, often weaponizing parenting itself as a means of control. This may include undermining the other parent's authority, using children as tools of manipulation, instilling fear in children, and disrupting routines to keep the victim-survivor and children dependent on the perpetrator.

Recognizing coercive control as an intentional choice and a parenting choice is essential to reinforce accountability and hold perpetrators responsible for their actions, rather than attributing them to external factors. This also supports victim-survivors through the acknowledgement that the harm they endured was purposeful and undeserved. Additionally, recognizing coercive control as a choice informs intervention strategies through centering intervention efforts on disrupting the perpetrator's patterns of control, rather than focusing solely on the victim-survivors' behaviours and responses.

RECOGNIZING PERPETRATORS' USE OF COERCIVE CONTROL

One of the first facets of the Safe and Together model is recognizing the perpetrator's use of coercive control. Perpetrators of abuse employ a wide range of tactics to exert control, manipulate their victims, and maintain power (Crossman & Hardesty, 2018). These tactics are designed to create dependency, confusion, fear, humiliation, and harm, often making victim-survivors feel isolated and powerless. While physical abuse is a visible and serious aspect of domestic violence, it is equally important to recognize the non-physical tactics that perpetrators use to exert coercive control. These tactics can be subtle, diverse, and constantly evolving, making it challenging for service providers to identify patterns and intervene effectively (Stark, 2007).

PERPETRATOR PATTERN-BASED APPROACH

The *Perpetrator Pattern-Based Approach* is a critical component of the Safe and Together model and provides a framework for understanding and addressing coercive control. This approach offers a structured method for recognizing the patterns of coercive control through focusing on the perpetrator's behaviours, rather than solely focusing on the victim-survivor's responses.

IDENTIFYING THE PERPETRATOR

A key element of the *Perpetrator Pattern-Based Approach* is identifying the individual causing harm. While both partners in a relationship may exhibit violent behaviours, it is essential to examine the context and purpose of these actions. Victim-survivors often use violence as a defensive response to ongoing abuse, while perpetrators employ violence and other tactics to dominate, intimidate, and maintain control. Looking at the pattern of separation between the victim-survivor and perpetrator is also important, as violence from the perpetrator has been known to increase after separation (Brownridge, 2006; Crossman & Hardesty, 2018). In fact, this is often the most dangerous time for victim-survivors, as separation is a significant risk factor for domestic homicide (Dawson, 2021). Assessing these factors may help identify the person causing harm in the relationship.

PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR

After the perpetrator is correctly identified, this approach also considers the patterns of behaviour in other relationships in the perpetrator's life. This may include examining their interactions with previous intimate partners to recognize how their pattern of coercive control has persisted across relationships (Barbaro & Raghavan, 2018). Unless a perpetrator has engaged in previous interventions, it is likely that coercive control was used with previous intimate partners (Eckhardt et al., 2013). Additionally, it is also imperative to assess how the perpetrator manipulates or harms their children as part of their control strategy. If there are pets present in the home, the perpetrator may also use tactics of animal cruelty in the coercive dynamic. Outside of the home, the perpetrator likely uses tactics of coercive control in broader social networks, including their family, friends, and coworkers. As perpetrators may not recognize their harmful behaviours or may not know how to exhibit positive behaviours, they are prone to use tactics of coercive control in many of the different relationships in their life (Stark, 2007).

In this way, perpetrators often extend their coercive tactics to manipulate systems and professionals, such as child welfare workers, police, courts, and therapists. They may present themselves as victims, distort facts, or strategically exploit biases to gain sympathy or discredit the victim-survivor (Stark, 2007). Service providers must remain vigilant to question and recognize the manipulation in the narratives presented to them. Developing case plans and intervention strategies that consider these tactics is crucial for service providers to avoid being complicit in the perpetrator's control. To effectively intervene, the Perpetrator Pattern-Based Approach highlights how service providers must delve into the "story" of the perpetrator's pattern of coercive control. This includes analyzing the frequency of the behaviours, the specific tactics employed, and how coercive control manifests in the victim-survivor's daily life. By thoroughly understanding and documenting these details, professionals can engage perpetrators in conversations about their behaviour and develop targeted intervention plans that address the underlying patterns of control.

KEY INSIGHTS

A critical insight of the *Perpetrator Pattern-Based Approach* is that proximity to the victim-survivor does not limit a perpetrator's ability to exert coercive control. As mentioned previously, the period following separation from an abusive partner is often the most dangerous, as tactics of control and violence frequently escalate during this time (Brownridge, 2006). Coercive control can also persist post-separation, even in instances when the perpetrator is incarcerated (Stark, 2007). Post-separation coercive control may be facilitated through technology, including stalking, harassment or digital monitoring (Dragiewicz et al., 2018), as well as through using custody arrangements or visitation to maintain control (Jeffries, 2016). Perpetrators may even leverage family members or friends to continually intimidate and manipulate the victim-survivor. This highlights how separation alone is not a definitive solution to addressing coercive control. Rather, interventions must focus on addressing the perpetrator's patterns of behaviour to disrupt their ability to exert power over the victim-survivor.

INTERVENING IN CASES OF COERCIVE CONTROL: RESPONDING AND ENGAGING

Perpetrators require targeted intervention to address their use of coercive control and disrupt the patterns of harm that they perpetuate. While some perpetrators may have a degree of awareness about their behaviours or express a desire to change, these behaviours must be challenged through intervention strategies.

RESPONDING

The first step to intervening in cases involving coercive control is responding to the situation. Responding to coercive control requires calling out perpetrators actions and holding them accountable for the harm they have caused. Shifting the accountability to perpetrators is important because they are the source of harm in the family and their actions determine if the family is safe. Responding to perpetrators serves as the first step toward meaningful intervention and behaviour change (Eckhardt et al., 2013).

ENGAGING

Engaging with perpetrators who use coercive control is also important. Effective engagement strategies with perpetrators require a careful balance of holding them accountable for their actions, connecting their behaviours to their impacts, and assessing their readiness and willingness to change (Butters et al., 2021). Engagement strategies with perpetrators must challenge the perpetrator's choices while maintaining a professional stance that avoids collusion or enables their behaviour. Accountability begins with addressing their actions directly and linking their behaviours of coercive control to the harm experienced by their partners, children, and other relationships. This may lead the perpetrator to acknowledge the consequences of their choices, while setting the groundwork for further intervention.

Understanding what motivates a perpetrator to change is the second critical element of engagement (Butters et al., 2021). The motivation to change may stem from various sources, including a desire to maintain a relationship with their children, recognition of the negative impacts of their actions on their family, or the fear of criminal repercussions. Identifying the motivators allows service providers to tailor interventions that emphasize the driving forces behind behaviour change.

Engaging with perpetrators also requires a specific examination of their behaviours and consequences. Service providers should avoid general statements regarding their behaviours and focus on specific examples of how their actions contribute to harm and control. Specificity may help perpetrators recognize the patterns of their actions, while reinforcing accountability for these behaviours.

It is ***important to note*** that when engaging with perpetrators, service providers must be diligent to avoid certain pitfalls during this stage. This includes: colluding with the perpetrator, entering power struggles, searching for "triggers," pressuring them to admit their actions, and humiliating them. These interactions can reinforce harmful dynamics or escalate resistance. Instead, engagement should be focused on fostering awareness, exploring accountability, and facilitating constructive pathways for change.

IMPACT

The Safe and Together model also emphasizes the importance of addressing the impact of a perpetrator's actions on multiple levels. This includes the impact of the perpetrator's abuse on their partner, children, and family functioning as whole. For instance, abuse can impact a victim-survivor's health in several ways, including physical health (broken bones, brain injury, various chronic pain syndromes), mental health (post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression), and changes in alcohol or drug use (Wathen, 2012). Children who witness violence can also be impacted by various psychological, social, emotional, and behavioural problems, and may engage in intergenerational cycles of violence in adulthood (Wathen, 2012). However, it is crucial to note that children do not have to directly witness violence of one parent to the other in order to be impacted by it, as the stress caused by hearing violence, or being aware of it, can be just as impactful. Additionally, abuse often impacts other aspects of family functioning as whole, such as finances, housing, and one's ability to parent. Understanding the full extent of a perpetrator's impact on their family is necessary in order to effect change.

CHANGE

For change to occur, the perpetrator's behaviour must have a meaningful impact on the family. Change efforts should not be dictated solely by what professionals or systems believe is important, but instead by the needs and wellbeing of the family. Asking the victim-survivor what changes would create the most meaningful difference for their family provides valuable insights into what behaviours need to be addressed and adjusted. This victim-survivor centred approach ensures that the interventions are relevant and responsive to the family's unique circumstances (Vall et al., 2023).

Additionally, perpetrators changing their behaviours must have a meaningful impact on their parenting skills through recognition of how their behaviour impacts their children and the emotional safety of the home. Fostering the development of empathy is a crucial part of this process, as it encourages the perpetrator to consider the perspectives of their partner and children. Building empathy may help them see the harm their actions have caused their family. By focusing on this child-centred outcome, perpetrators can be guided to make safer parenting choices, set positive examples, and prioritize the wellbeing of their family (Meyer, 2018).

SAFETY

When working with perpetrators, service providers must prioritize their own physical and emotional safety, as perpetrators who engage in violence and coercive control may pose significant risks to those attempting to intervene. Physical safety strategies include situational awareness, such as sitting near an exit; leaving the door open during meetings; or involving a second worker in the session. Emotional safety is equally important for service providers, as perpetrators often extend their tactics of manipulation, intimidation, and emotional abuse towards professionals working with them. This

> can include attempts to undermine the worker's confidence, deflect responsibility, or create conflict within teams. To safeguard their emotional wellbeing, service providers can regularly debrief with colleagues or supervisors to share their experiences and seek support. Having open communication and mutual support with coworkers may help counteract the isolating and destabilizing effects of working with perpetrators who use coercive control (Tsantefski et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Addressing coercive control requires a multifaceted approach that prioritizes accountability for perpetrators while centering the voices and needs of their partners and children. The Safe and Together model provides a framework for identifying and intervening in coercive control by focusing on the behaviours and choices of the perpetrator rather than examining only the victim-survivor responses. Through the recognition of coercive control as a choice made by perpetrators, interventions can respond to, and engage with, the perpetrator to hold them accountable for their behaviours, address the harm caused, and connect their behaviour change to meaningful outcomes for the family.

MORE INFORMATION

- Webinar recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBom1jk9cp8
- Presentation slides: https://umanitoba.ca/sites/resolve/files/2024-11/intervening-with-perpetrators-webinar.pdf

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