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Susan M. Long

Lake Forest College, long@lakeforest.edu

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My House, My Rules

Susan M. Long, PhD

Traditionally, psychologists label the decision to leave an abusive partner as problem-focused coping, (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). This term implies that an actor solved a problem. Impoverished women often face homelessness when leaving an abusive partner and must make a forced choice between abuse and housing. Therefore, a better term for homeless abused mothers' actions is survival-focused coping (Goodman, Smyth, Borges, & Singer, 2009). The intersection of poverty and domestic violence (DV) for people with caretaking roles might mean that mothers who solve one problem

still experienced domestic violence. Interviews were coded and then analyzed using grounded theory, a research method that identifies patterns in data to determine what could be expected in other related sets of data.

Nearly all participants wanted their children to have relationships with their fathers, but these relationships were taxing. Eight out of the ten participants who reported having problems with their children's fathers described them as providing unreliable or irresponsible childcare, and being unsupportive emotionally and financially. Sharon (all names

The women in this study were able to set firm boundaries only after they had their own apartments through the TLP. These boundaries needed to be constantly maintained to reshape fathers' behaviors. For example, mothers closely monitored their children's phone conversations with fathers. Another mother, Tanya, said, "If my son wants to talk to [his father], I block my number and let my son talk to him. The first curse word [his father says], while talking to my son on the phone—I snatch the phone and I hang it up." Tanya would not allow bad language around her son, especially in her own home.

When mothers lived in shelters they did not maintain much contact with their former partners, and they were focused on following the shelter's rules. Such rules included when and where they should be and how their children should behave, but once women were in the TLP living in their own apartments, they were able to set their own rules. Mothers were able to refocus on building their children's relationships with their fathers. However, these men were often unreliable, in addition to setting a bad example. Participants also reported receiving little to no financial support from the fathers.

Ending the cycle of violence was impossible for these mothers while they resided with their abusive partners. These women experienced a combination of physical, verbal, sexual, and/or financial abuse, the effects of which were exacerbated by a lack of financial resources. When they lived with friends or in shelters, they followed others' rules. Women leaving an abusive relationship are often required by shelters to end contact with abusive partners. The women I interviewed expressed a sincere desire for their children to have involved fathers because some women did not know their own dads. Thus, once women were stably resettled, rebuilding the father-child relationship was permitted. However, it needed to be on the mothers' terms. This study highlighted how mothers facing abuse transitioned from survival-focused coping in shelters to problem-focused coping in their own homes. For most of these mothers, having stable housing allowed them to guide their children's relationships once they finally had a leg, and their own floor, to stand on.

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(DV) face new problems, including a lack of housing, while also trying to prioritize their children's well-being. Homeless families make up around 30% of the homeless population on any given night, and domestic violence is common among this group (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2014). Thus, understanding how homeless abused mothers protect their children is pressing to ensure that they receive the most relevant help.

Abused mothers face myriad challenges before, during, and after they are homeless. Here I describe how women attempted to involve formerly abusive partners in their children's lives during and following homelessness. In 2008-2009, I interviewed 14 black women housed in a transitional living program (TLP) in a large Midwestern city (Long, 2015). The TLP provided one year of housing to sober and employment-motivated shelter residents. Each woman experienced abuse and had been homeless with at least one or more of her children. Five women had completed one year in the TLP and one woman

referenced here are pseudonyms) lived in her own apartment with her new husband, and described how she suspected that her son's father (her former abusive partner) used firearms around their child. She said,

"[He] can see [his] child as long as [he] remains a man and is intelligent. ... Kids pick up things real fast and see things. I don't want [my son to be influenced] and bring it back home. There was a time when he left with his dad and then he came back and he kept saying, "Pow pow" [mimicking a gun]. I don't want it. Not a water gun, not a paper gun, none of it. I don't do that."

After this incident, Sharon reduced the amount of time her son spent with his father. She did not trust her former partner.

All women monitored their children's fathers' behavior. Like Sharon, all mothers set limits with the fathers when they were deemed a bad influence. Setting boundaries with formerly abusive partners is an important factor in ending abuse and protecting children (Wuest, Merritt-Gray, & Ford-Gilboe, 2004).



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Susan M. Long, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Lake Forest College. Contact: long@lakeforest.edu

