



Repairing the Harm:

How Family and Friends Can Help Battered Mothers and their Children

Developed by Praxis International in partnership with the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice.

REPAIRING THE HARM: How Family and Friends Can Help Battered Mothers and their Children

healing

Many children who live with a battering father or stepfather grow up grieving the loss of the comfort and nurturing they wanted from their mothers. The intimidation, threats, and insults that go along with physical violence wear away at a woman's body and spirit and too often leave her emotionally and physically unavailable to her children. **Battering drives a wedge between a mother and her children. Battering harms women, it harms children, and it harms their relationship.**

What does “battering” mean? It's a pattern of physical and sexual violence, emotional abuse and intimidation used by one person to dominate another. Someone who batters uses a variety of behaviors to instill fear and control, such as a man who keeps his partner from seeing her friends or family, threatens to take the children away if she tries to leave him, insults her, calls her names, makes degrading sexual comments, and makes or carries out threats to hurt her or the children.

Most likely it will be you, a family member or friend, who a woman turns to if she needs help, but you might not know what to say or do. The stories shared in this guide will help you understand what battered women and children experience when living with a batterer and provide insights about **how your response can help or how it can drive the wedge deeper.** It is a result of nationwide discussions with battered women, adults who as children lived with a father or stepfather who battered their mother, and child advocates who have worked directly with children.

As you think about how to help someone you care about, it's important to understand the reasons a woman stays with someone who batters her. She stays for many of the same reasons you might care about a man you know who is also a batterer: you love him, he's not abusive all of the time, it's hard to believe it's as bad as it is, you hope that things will change, he's family, he's a father. She also stays because the children need a home and clothing and food, which she might not be able to provide on her own. She may stay to protect the children or to avoid uprooting them from all that's familiar. Most importantly, leaving can be more dangerous than staying: “If you leave I'll kill you... if you leave you'll never see your children again.” We know from looking back at women who have been killed that such threats can come true.

Repairing the Harm: How Family and Friends

Your daughter, sister, mother, niece, cousin, aunt, or friend may be too terrified, controlled, broken in spirit, or ashamed to tell you how bad it really is. Looking in from the outside, it can be difficult to accept that a woman who is being battered is making the best possible decision for her and her children. Her decisions, however, are based on many factors, including a legitimate fear for her safety and that of her children.

Your response can unintentionally treat her the way she's being treated by her abusive partner, leaving her feeling even more alone and trapped. Too often our first response is to ask, "Why doesn't she just leave?" A better question might be "**Why doesn't he stop battering?**" Why doesn't he treat this woman, this mother, with dignity and respect?

Is it really okay for me to look the other way?

How can I criticize anyone who blamed Mom for 'putting up' with my dad's abuse, when I did the same for years? Now that I'm grown I see things differently. We don't blame a prisoner of war or a child for 'putting up' with the abuse they endured. I realize now that it was Dad's violence that drove my mom away from me; that's what I resent. I resent all those years I wanted to be close to her and could have been if it weren't for his violence. Now that I can step back and see exactly how he controlled her every move, I feel only a deep sense of loss and sadness...

...and I see all the things she put up with for us kids. I don't blame my mom anymore, but I lost a lot of good years with her. As I understand what she went through I regret that I ever found fault with her for what happened.

**positive
support
listening**

You can help repair the harm caused by a battering father or step-father.

You can help prevent or minimize the harm and ease the grief and loss many children carry into adulthood. The following stories from battered women and children teach us about their experiences, show how battering harms the mother-child relationship, and suggest responses from friends and family that hurt and those that helped.

Can Help Battered Mothers and their Children



WORTHLESS

Look at your mother... she can't even take care of you...

A mother who is beaten and put down on a daily basis has a hard time being available to her children in ways she wants or in ways her children need. It may take all her energy just to get through the day. Children are unaware of the full extent of the abuse and frequently feel neglected, even unloved, by their mother.

After my step-dad beat my mother she would just sit alone in her room and cry.

When my husband was beating me my son would take his brother and sit in his dad's truck. I was fighting for my life and didn't even realize that's what the kids were doing.

encourage

Hurtful Responses

I called my dad because I wanted to get the kids out of there and he said, 'yeah right, we've heard that before', and he hung up on me.

My sister heard my husband put me down in front of the kids and it hurt because she never said anything, to him or the kids.

I ran to the neighbors for help, but she made excuses for him and said I should be a better wife.

HELPFUL RESPONSES

Listen with support and without judgment. Ask "what can I do to help?" and be prepared to respond with supportive words and in practical ways, such as changing the locks on the door or caring for the children.

Disagree with negative things said about a child's mother. Say things such as "I don't think that's true; your mom is a good cook and this tastes very good." It helps children think more positively about their mother.

Provide support during a time of crisis. Sometimes it's better to say nothing at all than to say something that is hurtful or that may further jeopardize safety. Saying "I'll be here if you need me" might be enough and it opens the door to help.

positive
compassion

Repairing the Harm: How Family and Friends

I work hard all day to put bread on the table. When I come home I expect this house clean and at least something to eat on time!

Battering fathers or stepfathers use a variety of words and actions to prevent mothers from tending to the needs of children: e.g., demanding their needs be met before the needs of children, enforcing harsh household rules, changing household rules frequently, or using different threats. These actions prevent a mother from caring for the children and results in children feeling ignored and angry, and blaming their mother.

My dad would get really jealous when the attention was taken away from him. When he came home, mom would drop everything for him and sometimes he wouldn't even let her nurse the baby.

Hurtful Responses

My mom and dad supported the kids, but I knew they didn't believe me or support me.

My mother said, 'keep quiet, it will get better'. But... it got worse.

My friends and family thought he was such a wonderful father but they didn't see... they refused to see, how he hurt me and how he hurt the kids.



You learn the signs... how to keep your mouth shut... when and how to keep the kids really quiet... when to let them know when they can approach him...

My twenties were spent grieving the loss of childhood and the loss of emotional connection with my mother because my dad always demanded all her attention.

HELPFUL RESPONSES

Try to pay attention to what's really going on. Is he overly critical, demanding or making sarcastic and hurtful comments in front of others? If so, the behaviors may be even worse in the privacy of the home.

Be thoughtful in your responses. If you say, "He seems like a good dad. Is he always so attentive with the children?" you are not blaming or denying, but you will provide an opportunity for a woman to talk about what's really going on.

thoughtful

Can Help Battered Mothers and their Children



The whole time growing up I saw my mother as tired, weak... inept. Now as an adult I realize how I took on my father's perception of her.

My husband constantly told me I couldn't do anything right, so now my son believes that about me... that basically, I'm useless.

My husband never went to school conferences until after we separated; then all of a sudden he became the good, attentive father.

Hurtful Responses

My parents would shame me in front of the kids. They'd say, 'What's the matter with you? Can't you do anything right? I didn't raise you that way!' That's just what my husband would do and it is so humiliating.

My dad was so mean and when my mom left him grandma let us stay with her. I could tell though... grandma thought everything was my mom's fault.

Look at your mother... she can't do anything right.

Battering fathers leave children with mixed messages about their mother. Children may start out seeing her as capable and worthy, while their father or stepfather insults, ridicules, and assaults her, undermines her parenting decisions, or appears attentive to the children when he knows someone is watching. The mother-child relationship is harmed when children take on his negative attitude and behavior toward their mother. They direct their anger at her or blame her, sometimes for years, for the distress in the home.

respectful
kindness

HELPFUL RESPONSES

Show respect to a battered mother around her children. Even if you disagree or are angry, talk with her privately, not in front of the children.

Tell children positive things about their mother. Children need help in thinking differently, so saying something like, "Your mom worked so hard today, should we see if she'd like to take an ice cream break with us and rest?" helps undo negative messages they might be getting from a battering father.

Repairing the Harm: How Family and Friends

I'm not the one lying here! Your mother is the one sneaking around and spending all the money.

Battering fathers commonly distort the truth or lie to take the focus off their own behaviors or to get what they want. This can turn children against their mother, causing them to distrust what she says or does. Sometimes they blame her for not having enough money or believe she can't take care of them or protect them.

My boyfriend would make the kids lie for him and he made me lie for him. Some things I ignored because I thought it would protect my children.

They wanted me to be a safe person, but they weren't sure that I could be counted on because of the things he'd tell them about me.



The kids were lied to, manipulated... again and again... they watched the violence, the twisted part, the aftermath... it absolutely affected their psyche.

HELPFUL RESPONSES

Think seriously about how battering harms women and children. Battering is not okay in any culture. Support her by saying, "In our culture, women should be treated with respect. We could try to get him some help so he isn't so mean."

Recognize how a batterer lies to keep his secrets or to get what he wants. Understand why a battered woman might lie in response. Sometimes it's to protect him. Most often it's to protect her children or herself from further abuse. You can say, in a gentle way, "I know you're covering up for him because you care about him, but you don't deserve to be treated like that."

Hurtful Responses

My uncle thought my boyfriend was such a good guy – that I should be thankful to have such a good man.

My mother thought I should go back to my husband because it was part of our culture... she thought people would think that I couldn't keep a man or keep a home.

After I left my husband my mother looked and looked for him and managed to find him... after that I suffered so much more violence!

Can Help Battered Mothers and their Children



My dad threw my brother across the room and said 'this is what your mom wants me to do... this is what she wants.' We screamed and he hit the baby... we were terrified!

Hurtful Responses

My mother-in-law did a total 180°... all of a sudden everything was my fault... she accused me of trying to start a custody battle.

Growing up... I don't remember anyone ever saying anything to my dad. Instead it seemed like they made excuses for him.

believe
protect

If you leave, you'll never see these kids again! Who's going to believe you anyway?

A battering father or stepfather might use children to instill fear and control a mother. She will give in to his demands and abuse out of fear for her children.

As a kid, I remember dad had just bashed my mother and he'd scream and tell us how she deserved it... and then he'd tell her we'd be 'getting it' next.

We go back out of fear that we're going to get killed. That's certainly why I went back, but I was more afraid of what would happen to my son if I didn't."

HELPFUL RESPONSES

Believe that a father or stepfather is capable of harming children. Many children are hurt directly or caught in the crossfire. It's safest to believe a battered mother if she says her children are being threatened or harmed, and see what you can do to help.

Help children unlearn violence. They may be violent with their siblings, their mother, or friends because violence is what they've lived with. If you see siblings fighting, gently stop it and talk about ways they can settle things without hurting each other. You could say, "Marie, when you pull your sister's hair it hurts her. It's much better to walk away instead of hurting each other."

Repairing the Harm: How Family and Friends

Your mother is such high maintenance... she's fat, she's lazy... just no good...

A battering father models disrespect towards his children's mother and women in general. Sometimes he rewards children with his attention or praise for disrespecting their mother. When children hear their mother called "fat" or "lazy" or worse they lose respect for her and question her worth as a mother and as a woman.

My son smacked me over the head with a spade and he'd whip my legs with a belt. This is what he saw his dad do to me.

My kids lost respect for me because it was their father doing this to me and they thought he must be right.

Hurtful Responses

My daughter picks and picks and picks at me... just the way her father did... and my brother and sisters would just look the other way. They never said a word to correct her.

As a kid I would hear people say mean things about my mother and I hated it. I knew she was a good mom, but my dad made her feel so bad.

My aunts would say, 'It's a couple's problem.' My one aunt told my children, 'this happens to your mother because she looks for it.'



kindness

HELPFUL RESPONSES

Give children messages that their mother is worthy of respect. Such as, "So many people in our community look up to your mother. Did you know everyone thinks she is a hard worker and a good mother?"

Help a battered mother teach and guide her children. Help discipline in loving ways. "I see your son treating you with disrespect. Would you mind if I talked to him, because I don't think you deserve to be treated like that?"

Talk with children and listen carefully. Help them understand that they don't deserve to be abused and neither does their mother. Children grow up quickly and we can lose the opportunity to help them be close to their mother and undo the harm.

respect

Can Help Battered Mothers and their Children



WHO WAS HERE?

My boyfriend would twist everything and put doubt in my kids' heads... the lies he'd tell put credibility, put honesty on the table to be questioned.

Hurtful Responses

Now my husband is telling the kids that they are the reason why I left... and my family says nothing. They don't stand up for me, and the kids get the message that something is wrong with them or that I don't love them.

My dad battered us economically, too. He never paid child support and we lived in poverty... but it's like my family believes him... they believe Mom just threw money away.

I wanted to leave my husband but my mother would tell me to go back to their father for the good of the children.

**What did your mother do today?
Did she have someone over here?**

Battering fathers frequently manipulate children into blaming their mother – for spending too much money, for cheating on him, for the violence, and other “faults” or problems. Even after a separation, a batterer may pressure children to spy on their mother and report back to him. Children become confused and don't know what or who to trust. This causes further strain between a mother and her children and often takes years to repair.

When my son and I realized that we had been so played and so manipulated by my boyfriend... we just hugged each other and cried together.

HELPFUL RESPONSES

Tell children the abuse is not their fault and there is nothing wrong with them. Children sometimes blame themselves and it's important for them to hear from friends and family that the abuse is not their fault and not their mother's fault either.

Let children know the good things their mother does. Help them turn the negative messages around and think more positively about their mother by saying things like, “Wasn't Ciana's birthday party fun? Remember how your mom did all the cooking and made that beautiful cake?”

Repairing the Harm: How Family and Friends

Your mother thinks she can call the shots. I'm the one who wears the pants in this family. You will listen to me!

Battering fathers often demand complete control over the household, including how boys and girls should be raised. Mothers are ridiculed for nurturing sons or for not making girls do more household chores. A mother's energy is drained away when she is badgered every day to make the children comply and it seems she can't do anything right. Children end up blaming their mother as the one who insists they keep everything in a certain rigid order.

The bus would come and it was... the kids have to be presentable... their room cleaned and the bed made... otherwise he had a fit... but it made me look like the bad one because I was the one who had to make them do it.

Hurtful Responses

It seemed like people would push my kids to be close to their dad and yet he was so abusive.

My uncle rarely saw my dad and when he did he said, 'you have good kids'. My dad said 'thank you'. I remember thinking... you weren't there for us... my uncle didn't even know what was really going on in our home.

My mother gave me advice: 'you do not leave because of what people will say... it is God's wish and only death separates you.'



I would be criticized for not having our son do more rugged things... 'man stuff'... or for turning him into a weakling.

HELPFUL RESPONSES

Respect the wishes of children. If they appear fearful or don't want to be close to their father or stepfather there may be good reason.

Respect the wishes of battered women. She knows when it is safe and when she is able to finally take action. It will mean a lot if you help identify exactly what it is she needs.

safety

Can Help Battered Mothers and their Children



YOUR
FAULT!

As a teen I blamed mom, hated dad... went off the deep end for a while...

I know now that mom got nothing for herself – everything was for us kids.

Hurtful Responses

My family just didn't realize... it was way more than just a slap once in a while... and it hurts that they couldn't or refused to see the whole picture and how our kids were hurt... are still hurting.

Now that I've left my husband, my family doesn't realize that I alone have to deal with everything... the kids... my son pulls his hair out and has nightmares, my daughter started wetting the bed again... they play really rough all the time... now I don't have his income and I have no one to watch the kids while I go to work. It's hard.

It's your mother's fault this family is breaking up.

A batterer harms the mother-child relationship with words and actions. A mother gets worn down physically, emotionally, and financially, which strains her relationship with her children. Children react in many different ways: anger, blame, acting out, skipping school, running away, or using drugs and alcohol.

I was angry when we had to move (to escape his violence). I missed family, friends, school... we even started 'naming' the houses we lived in... but we were helpless and couldn't do anything about the situation.

HELPFUL RESPONSES

Offer to watch the children. Ask first, because some women feel better when their children are close. You could offer to take the kids for the afternoon so she can have some time to rest and regain her strength.

Recognize how battering exhausts a mother's energy. Tell her it's okay to let things go for a while and to go have fun with her children. Mothers struggle during the time they're battered and they have additional challenges after separation.

Help a battered mother and her children spend stress-free time together. Invite them for a "sleep-over." Rent movies, buy some popcorn, and let them just have fun together.

TAKE A STAND: REPAIR THE HARM

Your support can mean everything to a battered woman and her children. Take a stand and let them know you are there for them.

— *The most significant, concrete way family or friends can respond is to listen thoroughly and supportively, not judgmentally.*

Ask battered mothers and their children what they need

When women and children are in crisis, you can help them identify the kind of support and action that will help.

— *My cousin would say, 'you're going to be fine, you're going to do this.' A part of me needed to be led. At the time, that's exactly the kind of support I needed.*

Help mothers and children spend time together

Mothers and children need a chance to create a different experience together.

— *We went to my friends' house and we watched TV and ate cookies and ice cream. It was like a sleepover... we all slept together on the floor. It was so fun because we were never allowed to do anything like this at home.*

Talk with mothers about the harm caused by battering

Mothers begin to doubt themselves and they desperately want to believe things will change. Most believe the children need a father, want to keep their family intact, and simply want the abuse to stop. In most cases, the abuse does not simply stop.

— *I kept thinking... hoping things would change. I knew I had to get out when I saw how the kids were hurting, and I was always afraid he'd hurt them, too.*

Talk with children about the harm caused by battering

Children who live with a battering father get confusing and harmful messages about their mother's worth. They grieve the loss of closeness caused by a batterer's abusive tactics and need support in restoring the intimacy they have lost.

— *My uncles would tell me, 'it's wrong for your dad to hit your mom.' It gave me a different message about my mom.*

support

Can Help Battered Mothers and their Children

PROVIDE PRACTICAL SUPPORT

There are many practical ways friends and family can help a battered mother and her children. Ask her how you can help. Be respectful and caring in how you make suggestions.

- Help her move or relocate
- Provide housing
- Watch the children if she needs time alone or to rest, or to attend a meeting, go shopping or to a job interview
- Provide transportation to appointments or the grocery store; take the children to school
- Help change the locks on her door
- Bring a meal to her or invite her and the children over for a meal
- Invite her and her children to share holiday celebrations with you
- Acknowledge and celebrate Mother's Day with her and her children
- Fix her car
- Provide phone cards or a cell phone
- Provide financial support

provide
practical
support

REPAIRING THE HARM

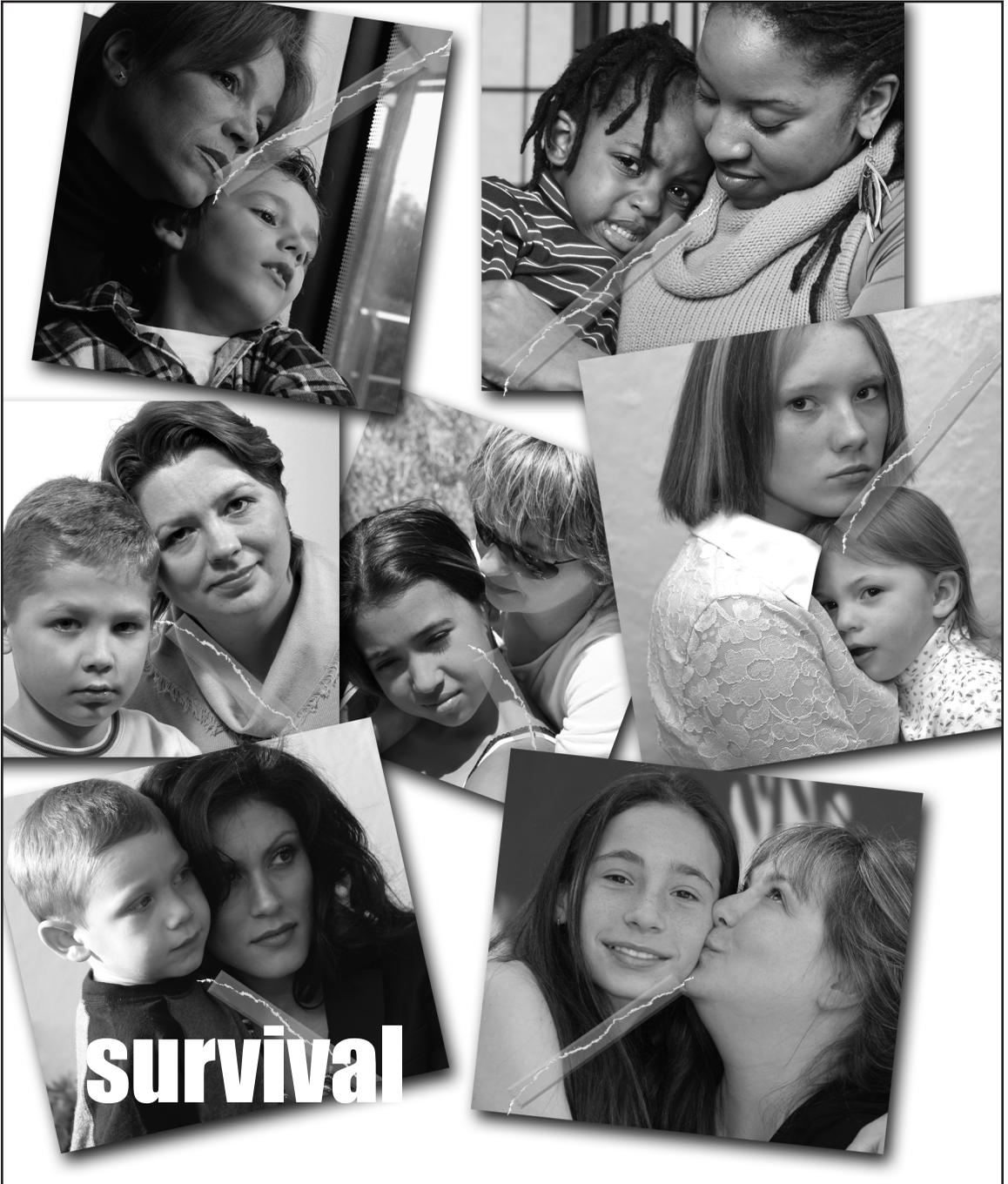
Many adults who as children lived with a battering father express sadness and loss at missing the kind of relationship with their mother that they craved. They lived in fear in their own home. Some were forced to retreat to their rooms while their mother was beaten. Others snuck out of windows or tiptoed around the house, “walking on eggshells.” Some withdrew, had strained relationships with their siblings, or developed unhealthy coping skills or risk-taking behaviors around alcohol, drugs, and sex; many lived with economic hardships. For children who are now adults it’s clear that the harm done to their relationship with their mother had a long-term impact.

You can see the joy on the face of the child on the back cover of this guide. This feeling of delight and comfort in the arms of a mother is what every child wants and deserves. Your helpful words and actions can be the “tape” that helps repair the divide opened between a mother and her children by a battering father or stepfather.

This is not to say that your words and actions are the only things that will help, or that all relationships between a mother and her children can or will be repaired. But your efforts are worth it. The actions of family and friends can tip the balance for many women. You will honor every battered woman who grieves the harm done to her children, and honor every child who grieves the loss of safety and joy caused by a father who battered their mother.



Can Help Battered Mothers and their Children



Repairing the Harm: How Family and Friends

LEARN MORE ...

How do women and children survive?

Battered women and their children use strategies of **resistance** and **resilience** to survive the abuse. As a concerned family member or friend, they will benefit if you are able to help them both resist and become more resilient. It doesn't require a special degree or even a great deal of time. It requires a thoughtful response which can be delivered in as little as a few moments.

Resistance: A battered woman interacts with and, most importantly, disagrees with and challenges her partner, knowing he might hurt her, take the children, or make life more difficult for her and the children. We all would like to believe that we would resist this type of abuse but, resisting ongoing intimidation, threats, and violence is not an automatic means of ending abuse, but a strategy that involves continually weighing whether resistance will improve matters or make them worse. It takes tremendous strength and energy to hold one's own in a battering relationship, particularly over a long period of time. A batterer constantly tries to undermine a woman's survival strategies.

Resilience: Resilience enables us to survive adverse circumstances. It is how we "bounce back" from bad times and experiences. Resilience enables women and children, individually and as a unit, to survive the abuse. A helpful response strengthens the relationship between a mother and her children and undoes the harm caused by battering.

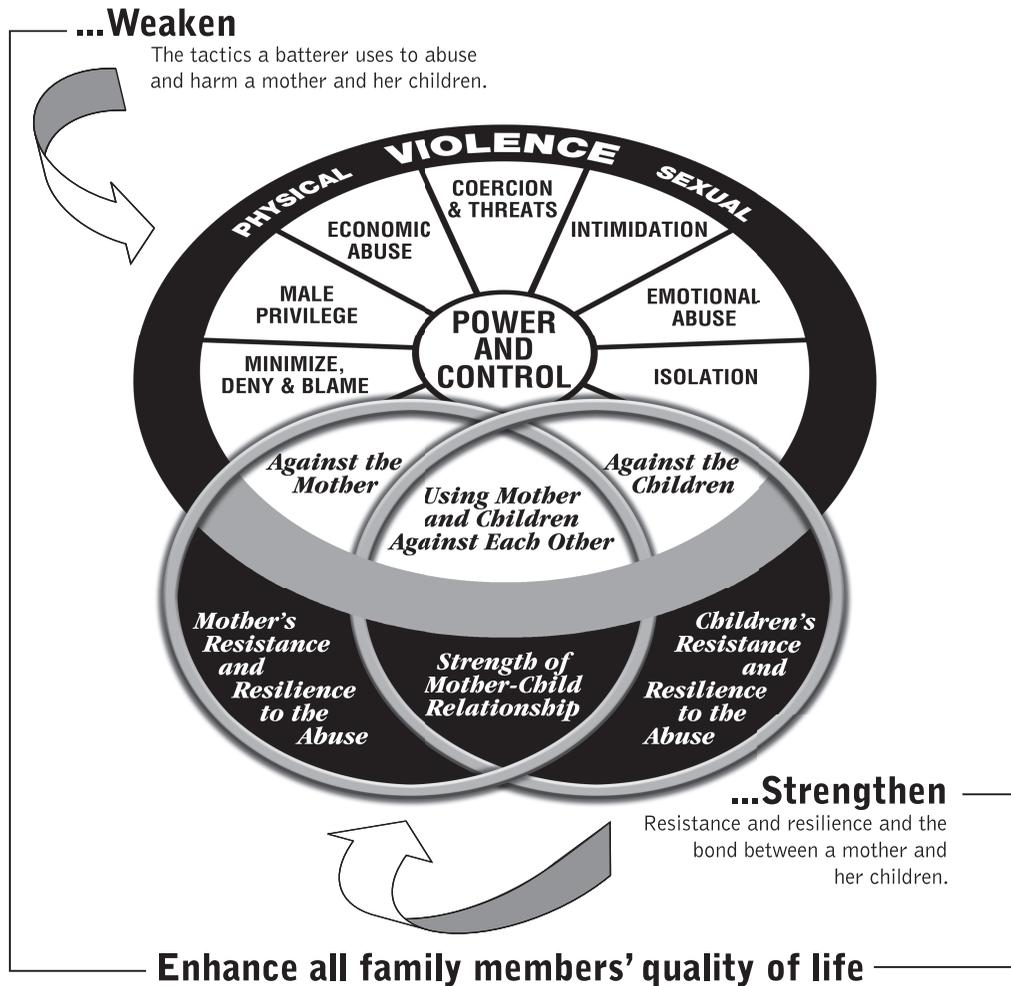
Strengthening this mother-child relationship gives children their best chance of surviving abuse and remaining resilient to its effects.

This resilience, in turn, increases a battered woman and her children's chances of escaping abuse safely.

you can help...

Can Help Battered Mothers and their Children

Family and Friends Can Help Battered Mothers and their Children



The Power and Control Wheel was adapted with permission from the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, Duluth, MN. All rights reserved. It was developed in 1984 by women attending educational classes offered by the battered women's shelter in Duluth. It depicts the primary abusive behaviors experienced by women living with men who batter, and illustrates that violence is part of a pattern of behaviors rather than isolated incidents of abuse or cyclical explosions of pent-up anger, frustration, or painful feelings. A batterer's use of physical assaults or sexual abuse is often infrequent, but it reinforces the power of the other tactics on the wheel that are used at random and eventually undermine his partner's ability to act autonomously. (Excerpted from Education Groups for Men Who Batter, Pence and Paymar, Springer Publishing, 1993.)

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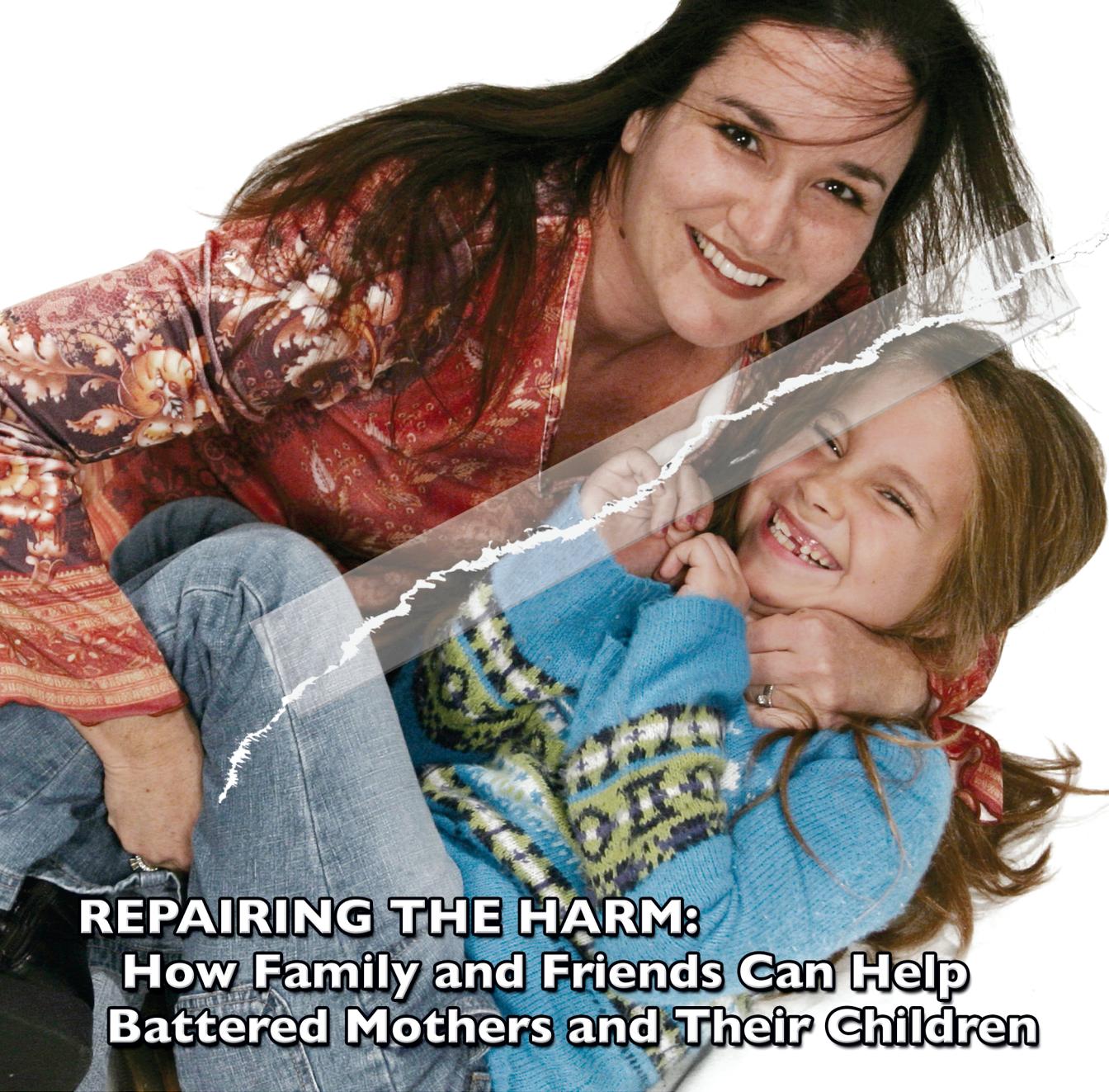
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For more information to help battered mothers and their children, contact:

CARING UNLIMITED
York County's Domestic Violence Program
24-Hour Helpline: 1-800-239-7298
www.caring-unlimited.org