



Coping Strategies in Women and Children Living with Domestic Violence: Staying Alive

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Abstract

Purpose Children exposed to domestic violence are at risk of adverse short- and long-term psychosocial effects and of being abused themselves. However, mothers and children face systemic gaps when seeking safety from domestic violence services and police. Safety planning typically focuses on women, overlooking their multiple social identities and excluding their children. We explored safety strategies used by mothers and children coping together with severe domestic violence.

Method Interviews with 30 mothers who experienced severe or potentially life-threatening domestic violence and 5 adults who experienced domestic violence in childhood were qualitatively analyzed using thematic analysis, revealing five major themes: ongoing communication, appeasing the abuser, soothing activities, exposure reduction, and fostering independence.

Results Interpreting participants' experiences in terms of the mother-child dyad, we found that mothers and their children worked together to reassure each other, keep each other safe, and make plans to leave their abuser.

Conclusions Safety planning for the mother-child dyad could build on children's existing coping strategies and recognize and support children's desire to protect their mother and themselves effectively and safely according to their developmental stage.

Keywords Children · Coping · Domestic violence · Mothers · Safety planning

Introduction

Domestic violence can be broadly defined as any use of violence, actual or threatened, in an intimate relationship, whether physical or sexual violence. Domestic violence often occurs along with other forms of abuse, including emotional and psychological abuse, criminal harassment, and threats to harm children, other family members, pets or property. Domestic violence is a deeply gendered crime, with 79% of police-reported cases perpetrated

against women (Conroy, 2021). Domestic violence is consistently recognized as a public health issue that disproportionately affects women and their children (e.g., Jaffe et al., 2017; David, 2017). Children are often present during domestic violence incidents (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). An extensive research literature documents the adverse effects of exposure to domestic violence on children's emotional, social, cognitive, and psychological functioning, as well as their physical safety (Howell et al., 2016). Furthermore, children may become victims of homicide, most often perpetrated by a parent in the context of domestic violence (e.g., Scott et al., 2020). Thus, understanding coping strategies used by women and children who experience domestic violence is vital.

Several authors have pointed out that not all children suffer adverse consequences and in fact may be engaging in active coping strategies rather than being passive victims (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Øverlien & Holt, 2019). For example, interviews with more than a hundred children across four European countries highlighted the ability of children who experience domestic violence to be resilient, resist violence, and maintain positive self-esteem (Callaghan & Alexandre, 2015). A critical piece of this research

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is building knowledge from the lived experience of children and survivors of domestic violence (Øverlien & Holt, 2019). Maternal mental health and warmth are two key factors that limit adverse outcomes among children exposed to domestic violence (e.g., Fong et al., 2019), highlighting the importance of the mother-child relationship in this context (Holt et al., 2008).

Research has been conducted into how mothers, children, and professionals experience the process of identifying children's exposure to domestic violence in healthcare and social services (Lewis et al., 2018). Some of this research would suggest that abuse victims are often blamed by service providers for failing to protect their children from exposure to violence and revictimized by the very systems that need to protect them (Mandel, 2010). Mandatory services such as police (Millar et al., 2021) and child protection (Lapierre & Côté, 2011) may lack the training to recognize that there are two victims in most cases: the mother and the child(ren).

The literature on the role of mothers' concerns, children's perspectives, and the mother-child relationship in seeking and obtaining support for safety planning remains sparse. The aim of the present study is to explore the safety strategies used by mothers and children living with severe domestic violence. Specifically, we examine how both mothers and adult survivors of childhood domestic violence seek to protect themselves from violence in the home and how those strategies promote safety for the mother-child dyad.

Barriers in Services for Children and Women Experiencing Domestic Violence

Women with children face systemic gaps in service provision when seeking safety from domestic violence. For example, child welfare workers have reported a lack of training and understanding of the impact of domestic violence on children, and expressed discomfort – even fear for their own safety – when dealing with cases that involve domestic violence (Fusco, 2013). Child protection in domestic violence cases often requires engaging multiple agencies; however, inter-agency conflict and communication pose a substantial challenge for child welfare workers (e.g., Langenderfer-Magruder et al., 2019) and for domestic violence service providers (e.g., Mennicke et al., 2019). In shelters or non-residential services for abused women, staff have identified barriers to children's services at several levels: systemic barriers, including poor inter-agency collaboration and lack of children's services; agency-related barriers, comprising a lack of training, funding, tools, and protocols; and client-related barriers, such as parents' and children's own lack of trust of child protection services (Reif et al., 2020). Thus, research is needed to better understand how mothers and children stay safe in the face of such barriers.

During police investigations of domestic violence, children look to the police for protection, yet often feel excluded from the investigation and decision-making (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Speaking with children in the home has the potential to increase victim satisfaction and aid in the collection of information for risk assessment and prosecution (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). However, police officers may be reluctant to interact with children because of lack of time and training, fear of intimidating the children, or the belief that it is not an appropriate role for police. Saxton and colleagues (2020) found that procedural influences such as inconsistent policy and limited collaboration with child protection services also impeded police officers' response to children exposed to domestic violence. Officers may therefore be more inclined to interact with adult victims rather than children.

However, some women avoid seeking help for fear of the abuser's retaliatory harm to the children or separation from the children (Lelaurain et al., 2017). Systematic reviews of barriers to formal help-seeking by domestic violence survivors have identified several access challenges involving children, including: lack of childcare; fear of being reported to child protection services; concern for the children's safety; and wanting to protect the children from family separation, living in a shelter, or exposure to the criminal justice system (Lelaurain et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2020). Interventions to enhance outcomes for children exposed to domestic violence are available; however, the decision to engage with such services is a challenging one for both parent and child (e.g., Howarth et al., 2019). Research into both mothers' and children's coping strategies may inform services in how to engage with them.

Coping Strategies Used by Children Living with Domestic Violence

Previous research has focused on coping strategies used by children, rather than the mother-child dyad. Children stay safe by attempting to intervene physically or verbally, moving to another area of the home away from the violence, or calling the police (Chanmugam & Hall, 2012; Jarvis et al., 2005). Coping strategies differ depending on the age of the child. For example, infants and younger children are very dependent on their primary caregiver and are more likely to be referred to child protection for support (Jenney et al., 2022). In contrast, adolescents may leave the home during the violence, collaborate with family members including gathering siblings or extended family for safety, speak to a school counsellor or a professional, and avoid time at home by joining extracurricular social activities (Chanmugam & Hall, 2012; Aymer, 2008).

Understanding that children of all ages can and do engage in various coping strategies points to a need for

collaborative safety planning that incorporates an active and developmentally appropriate role for children (Chamugam & Hall, 2012; Kress et al., 2012). However, safety planning is typically conducted solely with the mother. A theoretical framework that recognizes women's multiple social identities as woman, partner, victim of domestic violence, and mother may help optimize use of the existing evidence base regarding children's coping strategies and improve safety planning for both mother and child.

Theoretical Framework

Examining the mother-child relationship in domestic violence safety seeking is inherently intersectional. Intersectionality provides a lens for considering individuals in their multiple domains of social experience, including gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and physical ability, among other identities. Intersectionality recognizes that social categories are flexible and negotiated in everyday life, making each individual's experience fluid and unique (e.g., Etherington & Baker 2018). Using this theoretical framework, researchers explore the meaning and consequences of membership in multiple social groups in order to understand an individual's whole experience (e.g., Cole 2009). As a research method, intersectionality does not merely involve adding categorical variables but, moreover, seeing how different identities overlap and converge, to reveal areas of inequity at the "crossroads" (MacKinnon, 2013, p. 1020).

Intersectionality has been applied to women's experience of domestic violence, but there is a gap in relevant literature on children's identities (Etherington & Baker, 2018). Children may have varying roles in the family: In addition to being a witness to or direct victim of violence in the home, they may be the child of an abused parent and of an abusive parent. The child's relationship to their parent is often an unbreakable bond. Children are often inclined to protect their homes and families, and therefore reluctant to reach out for help. Children also have unique experiences of their identities such as gender, ethnicity, and immigration status that cannot necessarily be inferred from their parents (Etherington & Baker, 2018). Identities may be more complex as child survivors later enter their own relationships and may become parents. Research with child survivors of domestic violence must be sensitive to their intersecting identities.

The Present Study

Existing literature reveals gaps in understanding mothers' and children's perspectives on the role of the mother-child relationship in safety planning and barriers to support, especially research that recognizes mothers' and children's multiple social identities. We addressed these gaps by exploring mother-child relationships among women who had

lived with domestic violence as adults or children, identifying their safety strategies and barriers to accessing safety and support. We interviewed women who experienced or survived severe domestic violence or attempted domestic femicide and who identified with at least one of the following populations: immigrant or refugee; Indigenous; and/or rural, remote, and northern communities. We used qualitative methods to permit a preliminary analysis of multiple social identities.

Method

The current study is part of a larger research study conducted by the *Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative with Vulnerable Populations* (CDHPVP). We used qualitative data gathered from interviews with survivors of severe domestic violence. We took an interpretive approach to understanding their experiences based on their responses to questions about what strategies worked to manage their risk, what did not work, and what could have been done differently.

Sample

The larger study generated 77 interviews with participants who self-identified as survivors of severe domestic violence (e.g., had ever feared for their lives because of the abuse) and with one of the four populations listed above. The sample for the present study consisted of 30 mothers who experienced severe or potentially life-threatening domestic violence and 5 adults who had experienced domestic violence during their childhood. The average age for mothers was 43 with a range of 27 to 62 years, and the average duration of the domestically violent relationships was 11 years ($SD = 9.75$). The average age for child survivors at the time of the interview was 31 with a range of 24 to 54 ($SD = 12.58$).

Measures and Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by the CDHPVP's lead universities research ethics review boards at Western University (REB#: 112,430) and the University of Guelph (REB#: 19-02-013), as well as at nine other universities across Canada. The research was coordinated in six regions: Northern Canada, British Columbia, Prairie provinces, Quebec, Ontario and the Maritime provinces. A Research Coordinator in each region was responsible for promoting the research with and among partners. Participants were recruited through national and regional CDHPVP partner and collaborator networks including shelters, settlement service agencies, Indigenous organizations, websites and

newsletters, email lists, websites, and other social media outreach methods. The team in Manitoba worked collaboratively with Indigenous partners to conduct interviews based on the principles of relationship, relationality, and collaboration.

From 2019 to 2020, research coordinators conducted screening interviews by phone or video calls to determine eligibility, establish participants' safety and readiness, and identify needs such as a translator or support person. An ethical challenge that the research team encountered included telling participants that they were not eligible to participate in the study if they did not meet eligibility requirements, as many individuals who reached out for an interview wanted their voices to be heard. The screening interviews were amended, along with the ethics protocol, to allow participants to tell their story of abuse so that their experiences were noted and counted. This allowed sufficient time during the final interviews for participants to focus on discussing risk factors, barriers to help-seeking, gaps in services, missed opportunities, effective practices and policies, and recommendations for practices around prevention. Original eligibility criteria included that participants should not be involved in the court system at the time of the study. It became apparent that many women with children are often engaged with the family court system for years after separation and would therefore not be eligible to participate. Eligibility criteria were amended to exclude women with ongoing related cases in the criminal justice system only, as there were concerns for their ongoing safety. Trained research assistants conducted final interviews in person, by phone, or virtually, using a semi-structured interview guide developed by academics and front-line professionals.

Participants were asked if they had any preferences regarding the interviewer's cultural identity and gender. We were successful in matching all participants with interviewers based on their preferences. The interviewers asked survivors to reflect on their experiences and provide insights and recommendations for service providers and their advice for others experiencing domestic violence. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews after March 16, 2020, were conducted by phone or virtually. Final interviews lasted 1 to 2 h and were audio-recorded. Participants received a \$50 honorarium and had the opportunity to review the transcript.

The interview incorporated a storytelling narrative approach, a conversational method that is relational, informal, flexible, collaborative, and reflexive (Kovach, 2010). The narrative approach allowed the participant to take charge of telling her story her way. The interviewer had some prompt questions to help guide the conversation as needed. Using traditional storytelling as a research method can lead to culturally appropriate research, building a

bridge between Western and Indigenous approaches (Datta, 2018). Research assistants invited survivors to share a few stories about times where they did something to feel or be safer – whatever experiences came to mind, which allowed the information to flow more naturally.

Researcher Reflexivity

It is essential that investigators recognize how their backgrounds, beliefs, and values may influence how they approach, interpret, and communicate the research to produce qualitative research that is transparent. Similarly, it is important that readers are made aware of the lens in which the research is being presented to them. The authors are all in the field of domestic violence research, with varying levels of experience spanning from one year to over forty years. In addition, they are diverse in age, lived experience with domestic violence, and racial background, which has allowed for a more nuanced analysis and interpretation of the data.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was used to examine barriers identified by participants at both implicit and explicit levels (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The dual deductive/inductive method allowed us to draw from an established theoretical foundation and provided flexibility to develop novel themes (Joffe, 2011). The thematic analysis took an iterative process starting with an initial analysis, followed by a thorough review of interview transcripts and existing literature. A provisional codebook was developed and presented to a six-member research team consisting of professors, post-doctoral fellows, and graduate students. Two trained graduate students then read through the transcripts to establish preliminary themes, which were then discussed with the larger group. This collaborative process allowed researchers to apply a specific coding system while offering the ability to explore evolving themes (Saldaña, 2011). The team then determined the final codebook by examining the consistency of codes across various coders.

Deidentified verbatim transcripts were imported into Dedoose (V.8.1.8). A series of coding steps were completed with a blend of descriptive and sub-coding to aid in grouping the data (Saldaña, 2011). The sub-codes found by each coder were then either combined or removed due to extraneousness. Larger themes were developed through the process of presenting and discussing the coded transcripts among the research team. The quotes reported below were selected as the best portrayal of the generated themes and associated with participant pseudonyms using

a random name generator with consideration given to cultural diversity.

Results

Throughout analysis, the overlap of mothers’ and their children’s actions to stay safe and cope with domestic violence was evident. Five major themes related to coping emerged during analysis (see Fig. 1) including ongoing communication, appeasing the abuser, partaking in soothing activities, exposure reduction and fostering independence.

Ongoing Communication

Mothers and children ($n = 8, 23\%$) strongly emphasized the importance of ongoing communication in a variety of forms. Communication was used in several survival tactics.

Code Language to Signal ‘Help’ and Use of Technology

Mothers and their children often decided on special code words to secretly communicate without the abuser understanding and used that code language helped to direct children to call police or take other actions. Mariah shared, “I always had to have a code word. And then I always had to get my son prepared to go get help or whatever, and what to say” Another survivor used code language to let her children know when she was being physically assaulted. Tam and her son developed a code signal after they were separated due to a custody arrangement. They agreed that her son would send her a specific emoticon through text to signal a call for help:

He [survivor’s eldest son] texts me a message with a pizza slice emoticon and a sad face, it means that

he’s in a bad situation. He can Uber immediately, no questions asked and I’ll send him. I’ll get the Uber to pick him up and only drop him off at home and so there’s that, little things like that. Yeah, definitely communication through emoticons has been really, really helpful.

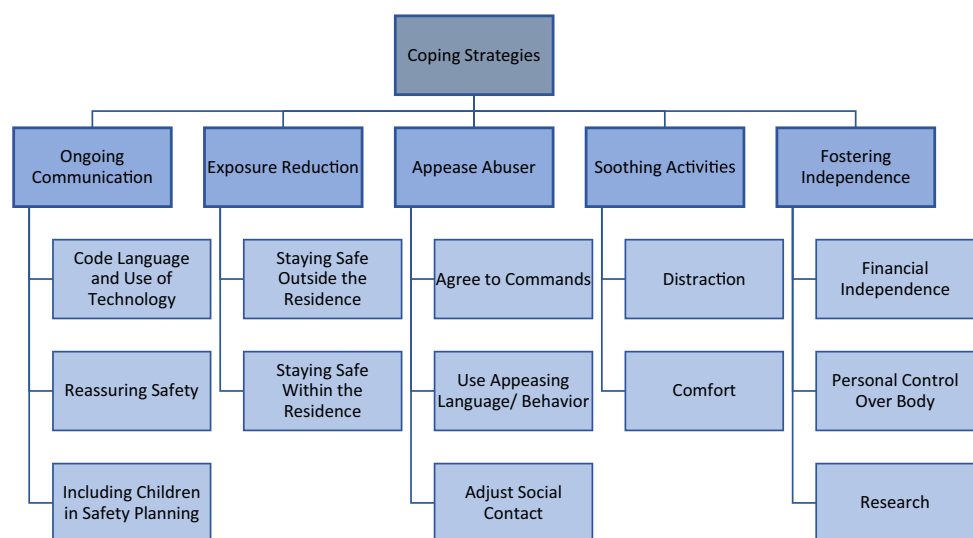
Some mothers also used non-verbal communication with their children. For example, one survivor would use her eyes to signal to her children that they should go to their bedrooms to reduce their risk of violence. Tam explained, “If I would turn my back to my ex and looked at them without blinking, they knew it was time to go [to] their bedroom.” The ongoing communication between the survivor and her children was paramount to their survival.

Reassuring Safety

Mothers and children felt a deep sense of fear even when the abuser was not inside the home. Mothers had ongoing conversations with their children to reassure their safety and strengthen their ability to endure suffering. Selena mentioned, “I had to reassure them... I had to tell them no, I’ll keep you safe.” Mothers and children also communicated about how the children’s presence influenced the abuser’s actions, including keeping the mother safe. Mothers and children sometimes arranged for older children (when comfortable) to protect them by mediating interactions with abusers. Children’s presence reduced violence against mothers:

When he [the abuser] was sober, if he knew the girls were around, my daughters, he wouldn’t get violent with me. If he started to raise his voice, my daughters would walk in and he’d stop. And then he would just kind of go walk away, to walk. (Selena)

Fig. 1 Coping strategies used by mother-child dyads



This quote illustrates the active role that older children can play in safety planning.

Including Children in Safety Planning

Mothers frequently communicated with their children about their plans to leave the abusive relationship. Communication often included direct and honest discussions about risk and the imminent danger that the abuser posed to them both. Mothers felt empowered when they taught their children how to think quickly and actively participate in their exit plans by gathering documentation and essential items. Mothers and their children (if developmentally appropriate) would often work together on executing an exit strategy, and a few survivors described how their children played a significant role in leaving the relationship through communication and planning precautions. For example, Rachel and her children had ongoing communication about leaving their abuser. They collectively planned to gather documents and important household items prior to leaving:

So, I told her [victim's child] what my plan was and she was onboard with that and so she would call me when I was at work and she would say, 'Mom, the sheets are on sale', oh, 'they've got this really good deal on towels' or what have you, and I would say, 'okay, put them aside for me, I will come to buy them'. (Rachel)

Exposure Reduction

Many survivors ($n = 27$, 77%) identified several strategies for exposure reduction which is conceptualized as minimizing the risk posed to partners and children by their abusers. Exposure reduction was further broken down into strategies that mothers and children used to either leave the residence or stay safe within the residence.

Staying Safe Outside of the Home

Intentionally Engaging with the Community It was commonly found that mothers and children would leave the house for errands, work, school, or extra-curricular activities. One mother, Riley, shared her strategy for limiting their exposure to the abuser, "We would be leaving and going to any sort of early childhood centre or library or anything that was free and accessible to us so that we weren't around when he woke up." Tara, a child survivor, described her deliberate participation in extracurricular activities to stay out of the home and reduce their exposure, "I joined theatre at school so I could stay at school

until seven at night." Another child survivor, Amal, discussed how short-term exposure reduction strategies led to long-term exposure reduction. Her commitment to her academics provided her with a strong application for university and the possibility of leaving her family home fueled her scholastic commitment:

The only way I could leave was to study hard and get accepted into university in Canada. So, I would study all the time. I was studying like day in, day out, I would find any reason to leave the house and stay at the library. I used to stay at the library until it closed. That's what I think one thing that was helpful was trying to stay away from home. (Amal)

Emergency Exit Planning Mothers discussed how important it was to reduce their children's exposure *during* a violent encounter. During a crisis, mothers commonly instructed their children to escape from the residence and seek help from neighbors, friends, or other family during a crisis. For instance, Anwaatin discussed one exchange with her children:

I yelled at my kids, the kids were screaming, they were crying at the bottom of the steps, trying to come help, to protect me. They were small. So, I said, 'Go next door, go next door right now. Go!' (Anwaatin).

As children age and gain independence, they may start to decide for themselves when to leave the residence prior to a violent encounter, in some instances even permanently. Diana described how her adolescent children used exposure reduction to stay safe, "They were aware that things were escalating, so they chose to leave, get out of the house. [Be] cause they were already teenagers. So, they went to their uncles." (Diana).

Short-Term Exit Planning Another common exposure reduction strategy was for mothers to send their children for short visits at other trusted homes so that they would limit their exposure to the violence. For example, a short-term exit strategy for mothers included arranging for the children to spend time at a family member's or friend's house. Sharon explained:

There was a PD Day coming up on the Friday and things were getting worse and worse and I arranged for the kids to go somewhere else. I didn't want them home, I had to work and so I didn't feel safe leaving the kids at home... I remember I had called the friends

where the kids were and I said, ‘Could the kids stay over with you tonight?’ (Sharon).

Long-Term Exit Planning Many mothers felt as though they would burden others with their children if they moved in. For example, Rachel detailed how her children made her long-term exit planning difficult, as she did not want to impose on her family or friends in such a large way. She explained: “I don’t want to go to somebody’s house with four kids and be a burden on them... I couldn’t foresee myself doing this.” In addition, mothers tend to fear legal ramifications of taking children away from the abuser. Keeya, a mother, explained how she was reluctant to leave her abusive domestic relationship because of her kids. She felt that she could not take them due to custody considerations and she also refused to leave them in an unsafe environment with their abuser. Keeya explained:

I wouldn’t leave my kids behind. So, you know leaving wasn’t an option for me because my kids were there. It was hard to find somebody to take us all in and to be able to afford it and mobilize. (Keeya)

Once children are old enough to conceptualize the violence, they also begin to brainstorm their own ways of leaving the residence. For example, one child survivor, Amal, shared how she advocated for herself to both her mother and her sister. She tried to strategize ways to leave both their residence and the new country they found themselves in:

I used to tell my mom maybe we should go back to Canada. And that we should do something. I was talking to my sister, I was like ‘maybe we should go back to Canada and just you know go into foster care or like stay away from my dad because he didn’t emotionally—he didn’t seem stable at all’... I was just getting very desperate to leave because it was getting very dangerous. (Amal)

Staying Safe within the Home

Mothers commonly discussed how they would separate themselves and their children from the abuser by physically moving to another room when the abuser started to exhibit signs of abuse. For example, Riley recounted, “there were countless nights I spent laying in my children’s beds with them to ensure that like they stayed quiet so that they weren’t disruptive.” Many survivors specifically stated how maintaining proximity to their children was beneficial in increasing their physical safety and their sense of safety. Keeya described her experiences, “I was scared enough to not sleep with him and just go into the kids’ room and sleep in there”

Child survivors echoed these sentiments, stating that being close to their mothers provided a sense of comfort. Amal shared, “me and my brothers slept next to my mom.” Child survivors also discussed how they used physical proximity to their siblings to stay safe. One child survivor, Kaitlyn, locked herself in a room with her siblings to increase their collective safety:

In order for the three of us to all feel more safe we ended up actually just locking ourselves in our shared bedroom and just staying in there and not allowing our dad or anything to come in for the remainder of the night. (Kaitlyn)

In addition, mothers discussed how they communicated with their children to ensure that they would stay out of the way so as to not upset the abuser. For example, Rachel described her communication with her children:

Well, I just spoke to them [...], when he comes home, like just go to their rooms and just stay out of his way, pretty much. Because, he tended to come home every day and come in a bad mood and then he would pass on his anger to the kids because I had already said that if he ever touched me that I would call the police on him. (Rachel)

Acting as Mediators Mothers frequently discussed how they would mediate the interactions between their abuser and their children. Children are often used by abusers to influence their partner in specific ways. The strategic use of children is often linked to the mother’s desire to protect and care for her children, which frequently came up during the survivor interviews. One mother, Keeya, explained how her abuser’s violence toward her children evoked a violent reaction in herself in order to protect her son:

I was headed upstairs and when I heard him punching my son I flew downstairs backwards. [...] I didn’t want my kids to have a bad view of me, but yet they were subjected to the abuse. [...] I am very protective over my son. It was scary. (Keeya)

Many child survivors also discussed how they also acted as mediators, trying to keep the peace or intervene in the violence between their parents. For instance, Kaitlyn discussed the role she held in her family throughout her childhood:

My relationship with both of my parents at the time, I was very much like, the mediator between the two of them so, whenever they were fighting, I would always try and kind of like Dr. Phil it and put myself in the middle, sometimes physically to try and stop them from arguing or try to get them to see each other’s side

or something. So, I was pretty, I guess, confident in my skills in doing so, but you know, maybe I just need to say the right thing and he'll calm down and everything will be okay, but I put a lot of responsibility on myself to fix everyone else including him. (Kaitlyn)

Caroline recounted similar actions that her children would voluntarily do to protect her, illustrating how both mothers and children tried to protect each other during violence:

The abuse started escalating again, the kids were crying, they were distraught, they were seeing him, us fighting, they were seeing, they were getting yelled at, I would go to the rescue and then he would turn on me. I remember my older kids saying 'mum, do not protect us, because it only gets worse, then dad [...] starts going after you'. So, the kids were saying, 'mum I take the abuse, just to protect you'. That's when I'm like 'this has gone too far'. (Caroline)

Appease Abuser

The majority of mothers ($n = 25$, 66%) reported appeasing their abuser to protect both themselves and their children. Mothers would appease to avoid triggering their abuser's violence and to protect their children from exposure to physical or emotional violence. One mother said, "I would say 'please keep it down so the kids can't hear or they don't get scared,' but rather than turning it down he'd escalate louder" (Stacey). Mothers and their children often reported that they felt like they were "walking on eggshells" in that they had to be very careful about what said or did around their abuser, as the abuser would become easily upset or offended. Mothers detailed how they would agree to their abuser's commands, acting according to their abuser's expectations, and adjusting their contact with the abuser as they saw fit.

Agree to Commands

One of the many ways children and mothers appeased their abuser was by listening to commands. This survival tactic was reported by almost two-thirds of the survivors interviewed. There were many ways in which survivors showed this behavior. Women and children commonly discussed how their safety was a direct result of them remaining silent, saying 'yes' to requests, and avoiding conversations that would spark an argument. Gurmeet reported the benefits of listening to commands in depth and how she felt like her actions protected herself and her daughter:

I never felt so scared in my life and my daughter was there so I was like thinking... wondering is he [the

abuser] going to do this to her too? Like at that point it was just about protecting my child. So, I said anything to agree with him and just so he wouldn't hurt us. (Gurmeet)

Mothers and their children were also aware that modifying their body language could appease the abuser. For example, Tam would often refrain from looking at her abuser in the eye to show that she was not trying to be confrontational and that she was willing to listen to the abuser's commands. Also, some children said they were trained to "behave" when in public spaces with their abuser, being expected to act happy and unafraid of their abuser to put on a show for others. Tara, a child survivor, described her experiences of being controlled in public:

He used to like secretly pinch me when we were talking to somebody, he would put his hand behind me, and he just pinch me like I was saying too much or saying something wrong. So, like I'd just have to be—like I'd have to be quiet. (Tara)

Use Appeasing Language and Behavior

Women and their children often reported using appeasing language and behavior as a survival tactic. Women and children feared that if they did not say or do the things the abuser wanted, they would be shamed, insulted, or beaten. A child survivor, Jemila, described this as "I feel like if I said something that he likes or if I just try to avoid those conversations or just avoid those landmines, I will be safe." Elle reported that she did not feel comfortable sharing her excitement to go back to school with her abusive partner because he would become upset that she was excited to live on her own away from him, so instead she lied and apologized for even considering improving her education. Often, mothers reported that they would immediately have to pretend as if nothing happened after a fight. One child survivor reported having to demonstrate a sincere apology to her abusive father:

I kneeled down in front of him [the abuser], put my head on the floor and begged him not to go and that's when he stopped and that was extremely humiliating, extremely insulting. It's like, I don't think any child needs to do that, to beg their parents like, you know. Both my knees were on the floor [and] my forehead was on the floor too. (Jemila)

Adjust Social Contact

Mothers and their children commonly adjusted the amount of social contact that they had with their abusers to both survive and cope in their violent homes. They would appease their abuser's expectations by trying to become invisible

and reducing the time they spent in common spaces in the residence, by limiting friends from coming over and by spending most of their time in isolated rooms. Tara, a child survivor, remembered “Being as quiet and nonexistent as possible, being uncontroversial.” Women and children reported reducing social contact with close friends and family, which included reducing their access to social media accounts.

Another finding on this theme was that children would maintain contact with their abusive parent. This social contact showed their loyalty and prioritized each family member’s safety including the abuser – which speaks for the complex relationship most individuals have for their abusers. Kaitlyn, a child survivor described her feelings further, “I continued going on the weekends with him just to keep him safe because I knew what he was capable of.”

Soothing Activities

The last theme that was identified by approximately 22% ($n=8$) of interviewees was engaging in soothing activities. Many discussed how overwhelming it can be living in these circumstances. Children learned to deal with the stress they experienced in a variety of ways: some activities were a distraction, some provided comfort, and others did both simultaneously.

Distraction

Many children purposely participated in specific activities in order to distract themselves, from studying to playing the piano. As children grew, they found new ways to escape the chaos in their home. For example, Tara discussed how she spent her time when her parents were fighting, “I would spend a lot of time reading in my bedroom alone.” One mother discussed how her children engaged in activities to deal with the trauma they experienced within the home:

I [knew] my kids were hurting, and I could see my son in particular he would go and attack the piano. And he would play like, like really intensely, he’d play the piano and I could tell he was working through stuff.
(Rachel)

Comfort

Mothers described how their presence became a source of comfort for their children. During and after abusive encounters children relied on their mothers to protect them. Selena described “Yeah, they [children] slept with me in my room because they were so afraid. And even still to this day.” Another aspect that child survivors touched on was the comfort they felt when participating in certain activities. For

instance, Amal shared the importance of journaling when things were difficult, “I was 12 and started writing in my journal.” (Amal).

One child survivor discussed how, during her childhood, when violent encounters erupted in her family home, she relied on her favorite stuffed toys to bring her comfort. The solace she got from those stuffed animals was so powerful that it continued into her young adulthood:

One thing I still find, to this day, very comforting was stuffed animals, being able to hold them and cuddle them, touching them, getting that sensory comfort was really comforting. Spent a lot of time listening to music and really thinking about it, reflecting on it. (Tam)

The words of these survivors speak to the importance of having activities or spaces that are separate from the violence that can both distract and comfort them when necessary.

Fostering Independence

Some mothers ($n=9$, 26%) noted the importance of fostering independence for future safety planning. Financial independence, the personal control over their own bodies, goal setting, and thoroughly preparing both themselves and their children to leave allowed survivors to gain a sense of independence and freedom in the long-term.

Financial Independence

Mothers commonly shared that their lack of finances was the largest contributing factor to staying in their abusive relationships. Mothers feared that they would not be able to financially support themselves or their children and so they began to strategize different ways that they could save up money. Rachel shared that establishing her financial and employment stability was vitally important when preparing her leave her relationship,

My plan was save up the money, save up and this guy will never find [me], because now [I] can buy a house or whatever [I] can find a place to live [...] [I’m] not in a shelter and [I’m] not dependent on somebody else.
(Rachel)

Varisha discussed the exorbitant fees that she encountered paying for legal representation to regain custody of her children, as they had been previously placed in foster care. She started her own GoFundMe page to raise money from compassionate donors. It was commonly reported that, even after separation, finances continued to be barrier as custody battles ensued. One mother, Tiana, explained how she had to either lose everything or take on a second job to support herself and her children: “It’s a confusing system in which

you end up feeling like there is no way to get through it without going bankrupt or taking a second job.”

Personal Control Over Body

Many mothers discussed how important it was to feel like they had some control over their bodies, specifically as it related to their reproductive health. Sexual activity was often demanded by their abusers, thereby making it difficult to have autonomy over their bodies and increasing the likelihood of pregnancy. Mothers described how they feared bringing additional children into the violence that they were experiencing and took active steps to prevent unwanted pregnancy.

Many mothers reported an increase of domestic violence after giving birth, along with the difficulties of coping with domestic violence while simultaneously independently raising children. Mothers found it difficult to protect their children and wanted to avoid subjecting additional children to this environment, often prioritizing their child's needs over theirs. Mothers described the use of birth control as way to control their fertility, in addition to gaining sexual independence. Rachel, who had three abortions, described how multiple abortions should have prompted service providers to inquire about violence in her home, as she detailed her cry for help: “If a woman is presenting with multiple abortions, like if somebody comes to you three times saying I want you to get rid of this baby, screen that person for abuse for heaven's sakes.”

Research

The final strategy commonly identified by mothers and their children to foster their independence was the extensive research they did prior to leaving their abusive homes. Mothers discussed searching for resources pertaining to cycles of abuse and risk factors for domestic violence or domestic homicide, which they indicated helped inform their ultimate decision to leave. It was common for mothers to strongly identify with what they were reading, which further reinforced their will to survive and escape:

I've been doing a lot of research too and I'm like OK, like you know, domestic abuse violence perpetrators end up harming their kids or like killing them. So, I'm afraid, oh, I don't want that happening with my kids too, you know? (Aleena)

Mothers also described the considerable research they conducted into divorce, custody battles, and the division of assets. They feared what leaving would mean for her children, often prioritizing their children over themselves. Varisha shared how her research forced her to stay with her partner for fear that leaving would give him custody of the children and put them at higher risk:

So, I started researching you know about leaving and then that's when I realized that I can't leave because here in [Name of City] they have rights, they have access, they have rights to shared custody and that would mean that I would have to save myself at the risk of my children and what mother does that? So, then I realized I'm stuck until the kids are 14 because at 14 it says that the law says that they can decide where they want to live. (Varisha)

Mothers also discussed the amount of preparation they took in order to feel ready to leave their abuser. Many packed “go bags” for themselves with several critical items including identification (e.g., driver's licences, health cards, birth certificates, passports), credit cards, and bank account information. One mother commented on how having children made packing a go bag even more complex, as she had to consider all the items her children would need. Mei explained, “When we have children, there's all those things that add it up. You're not just making a go bag for yourself at that point, you're making a go bag for children, too.”

Discussion

The present study found five broad areas of safety and coping strategies including ongoing communication, appeasing the abuser, exposure reduction, partaking in soothing activities, and fostering independence. Similar to previous research, our findings suggest that children exposed to domestic violence are not powerless; instead, they can and do oppose the abuser's violence in ways that are useful for safety planning with mothers and children (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015). We expanded on previous research by examining the mother-child dyad, and found that mothers and their children worked together to reassure each other, keep each other safe, and make plans to leave their abuser. Participating mothers and children actively engaged in ongoing communication with each other through the use of code language and technology, even when their abuser was present. Moreover, mother-child dyads adopted these communication tactics at an early developmental stage, and actively worked together to build up each other's resiliency and reassure their safety with one another, especially by mothers including children in planned safety strategies.

Both ongoing communication and exposure reduction involved mothers and their children working together. While incorporating children into safety planning was mainly about communicating arrangements made to stay safe, exposure reduction mainly centred on exiting the home or separating victims (either mothers or their children) from their abuser. Exposure reduction strategies included strategic exits and deliberate movements within

the residence, especially when the abuser was noticeably agitated. Children adapted to think quickly, learned to mediate violence against mothers with their presence, and actively gathered their siblings in order to stay as safe as possible in their homes. Permanently leaving the residence with children was found to be a complex and long-term process, as mothers had to consider parental rights, retaliation, and ways to minimize disruption to their children's lives. The importance of the mother-child dyad was also reflected in distraction and self-soothing behaviors used to cope with the violence. Mothers encouraged their children to actively engage in activities that brought them joy, to comfort themselves and distract themselves from the violence in their homes.

Our findings not only reinforce the profound role that mothers have on their children living with domestic violence, but also illustrate how central the mother-child dyad is to coping and survival. Parenting is physically and emotionally more challenging for women who experience domestic violence; however, the bond and reassurance provided by mothers can be a protective factor for children (Radford & Hester, 2006). Maternal warmth and responsiveness have a positive mediating effect on children exposed to domestic violence (Fong et al., 2019). Children in the present study appreciated the consistent reassurance they received from their mothers and how they prioritized their bond over everything else. Mothers and children commonly noted how having each other got them through the most difficult times in their lives.

Our findings highlight the powerful notion of children taking care of others. The desire we observed for children to step into protect their mothers and their younger siblings is consistent with previous research (e.g., Callaghan et al., 2016). While Callaghan and colleagues noted that children who take on caretaking roles are often pathologized, our study indicates that individuals experiencing violence often rely on one another, regardless of their age. Similar to Hague and colleagues (2002), who reported that children actively monitored their homes for violence and intervened when they saw fit, our study reiterates that children are not passive witnesses. Children are very aware of the violence in their homes and want to be told about what is happening and involved in decisions where this is safe and possible.

Impact of Conducting Research with Domestic Violence Survivors

The research team was mindful of the impact that hearing and reading survivors' stories may have on the researchers. Team members received extensive training in advance of conducting the research to ensure they were aware of the impact of this research on their health and well-being. Some research team members may have come to the project with their own lived experiences of abuse and violence in

childhood or adulthood. Therefore, team members were supported through individual and team debriefing sessions to mitigate potential vicarious trauma.

Implications for Domestic Violence Services

These findings can inform service providers conducting safety planning with women and their children. According to Chanmugam and Hall (2012), almost a quarter of shelter staff do not assess a child's unique situation to develop a safety plan, and instead they typically make generic recommendations. Previous studies have identified that including children in domestic violence safety planning has been undervalued, and that children are able to participate in safety planning strategies (Lewis et al., 2018). The present findings illustrate the degree of inter-dependence and cooperation that women and children have when coping and staying safe in domestically violent situations. Understanding how mothers and their children cope together may be paramount to creating safety plans that address their collective needs.

Safety planning for the mother-child dyad could build on children's existing coping strategies, which include distraction, self-soothing, intervening in the violence, turning to a trusted person, or physically removing themselves from the abuse (Hague et al., 2002). Safety planning should also recognize and validate the child's desire to protect their mother. Children's ability to do so effectively and safely may be different according to their developmental stage. Thus, safety plans involving children may need to be responsive to how children's unique and developing social identities may influence their perceptions of, and responses to domestic violence, help-seeking, and strategies for coping (Etherington & Baker, 2018). The study also highlights the importance of enhanced training for first responders such as police who need to increase their focus on the needs of children (Millar et al., 2021). As well, child protection professionals play a critical role in ensuring that they are not blaming the mother for failing to protect the children, and turning their attention instead to the role of the perpetrator and his abusive behaviour (Lapierre & Côté, 2011; Mandel, 2010).

Limitations

Although we wished to study the experiences of mothers and their children exposed to domestic violence, due to pragmatic and ethical issues we could only include adult survivors. Further, due to recruitment challenges, this study included only five adult survivors of childhood exposure to domestic violence, who experienced domestic violence at varying ages and sometimes over prolonged time periods. Thus, we were unable to take a developmental approach to

understanding children's coping strategies, and children's perspectives may have been subject to recall biases. Also, although our focus was on how mothers and children coped together as a dyad, we did not interview mothers and their children together. Future research should recruit mother-child dyads and examine safety planning with children at various developmental stages. The present study could not address the coping strategies of children who were not old enough at the time of exposure to recall their violent experiences. Mothers of infants at the time of the violence could only infer how the children were feeling and did their best to protect them. Future research could develop methodologies for understanding the ways that infants adjust their behavior in abusive situations.

Participants were self-selected, which may bias the types of experiences shared. The participating mothers and child survivors were successful in that they managed to escape the violence. The ways in which they look back on the safety and coping strategies used may be biased by the fact that they did survive the violence and were safe at the time of their participation. Mothers may have been more willing to participate if they felt they had stronger relationships with their children and could speak to the strategies that they used together.

Conclusion

The present study adds to literature indicating that children are at risk in domestic violence situations and that mothers are often torn between leaving the abusive relationship and staying with their abuser due to various constraints and concerns regarding their children. Our focus on the mother-child dyad, inspired by an intersectionality framework, revealed that mothers and their children often found that the best way to increase their safety and reduce risk was to rely on each other as allies through their violent experiences. Through qualitative analysis, we illustrated the strategies used by mothers and their children that can inform domestic violence safety planning that includes and protects both mothers and their children.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest We have no known conflict of interest to declare.

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