

Through the Eyes of a Child

Understanding the Experiences and Perspectives of Children Living in Shelter

(December 2020)



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Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Through the Eyes of a Child

Understanding the Experiences and Perspectives of Children Living in Shelter

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Written by Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence
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This report is dedicated to Nancy Tyler, Esq. and Kevin Hennessy, Esq., whose judicious stewardship of our organization have been integral to the important advances CCADV has made throughout their tenure on the Board of Directors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to **Jacqueline Miller** and **Sophie Plotkin** for their assistance in facilitating conversations with advocates. Thank you to the **advocates** who work every day to help create safe environments for survivors and their children. And thank you to the **children** who shared their experiences with us so that we may continue to work to improve the experiences of all children and their families who come to our shelters.



INTRODUCTION

Children exposed to family violence are affected in many different ways, have been through traumatizing events, and for those who are staying in shelter, are then coupled with the distressing experience of arriving at a new and unfamiliar place.

The Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV) and its 18 member organizations offer a systemic statewide approach to addressing domestic violence. In particular, these organizations provide comprehensive supports to adult and child victims in areas such as a 24/7 response, safe temporary and transitional housing, lethality and risk assessment, and individualized and group counseling. All services are delivered from a victim-defined perspective that incorporates evidence-based tools. Of the more than 35,000 survivors who reach out for assistance through Connecticut's domestic violence advocacy system, nearly 5,000 are children. Of the more than 700 children who were safely housed in a shelter, 57% were six years old or under. Child survivors need a unique set of approaches, which will support them around mitigating the impact of family violence.

35K
Individuals
Served

5K
Were Children

Knowing that children's stay in Connecticut's domestic violence shelters emulate from a violent or threatening incident not anticipated or caused by the child, each member organization employs a minimum of one Child & Family Advocate whose primary role is to assist families in shelter and community in their transition.



700 Children Safely
Housed in Shelter



57%
Children Under
Age Six

Child & Family Advocates are certified domestic violence counselors with a heightened level of training and capacity to better prepare them to assist children and parents in shelter and in their communities. Currently 18 Child & Family Advocates are each funded at less than \$12,000 annually, to utilize a number of trauma-informed, evidence-based and resiliency-driven approaches to their work.

Child & Family Advocates also support the non-abusing parent in identifying protective factors that will enhance their relationship with their children. Knowing that

protective factors seek to build attributes and conditions among individuals, families, and communities to support the health and well-being of children, enhanced training to identify and embrace these factors for children is a priority within the domestic violence advocacy system.



PROJECT OVERVIEW

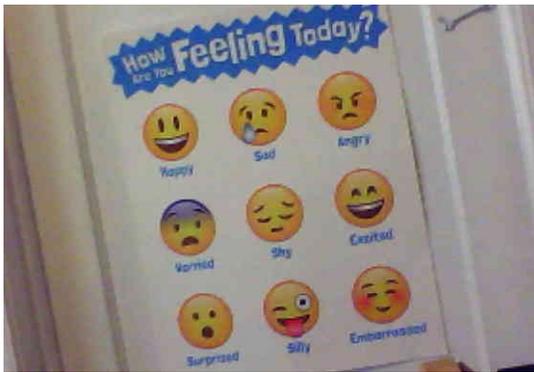
In 2015, the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV) initiated its *Through the Eyes of a Child* project to assess and understand the experiences of children who reside for a period of time in one of the state's 18 domestic violence emergency shelter settings. It is our ongoing practice to capture feedback from survivors, in this case child survivors, so that we may learn, adjust and improve our approach to serving this young population. Most importantly, we always seek to understand the efficacy of our work and aim to do better. For this reason, CCADV selected to conduct a second phase of the *Through the Eyes of a Child* assessment in 2020 to benchmark our progress and identify continued opportunities for improvement.



CCADV, at its core, is a social justice serving organization. As service providers embedded within a system of power, we acknowledge that we are accountable to the people who need our support. We must ensure that our response and

“This was in Jane’s office. It is fun in there and I like painting.”

services are equitable for all victims and survivors. Services must steadfastly address the myriad of additional barriers experienced by communities of color and must be accessible despite these barriers. Explicitly placing a focus on the experience of children of color was therefore especially necessary through this assessment.



Throughout the process, advocates taught us a great deal about the important work they do and their commitment to working with our youngest survivors. Children taught us about the importance of safe spaces, their need for autonomy and the significance of listening and learning from them. This report details the findings and recommendations of the *Through the Eyes of a Child* project.

“This is where we talk about how we’re feeling. Sometimes I just point.”

METHODOLOGY

With the assistance of Jacqueline Miller from Healthy Actions Intervening Responsibility and Casey Keene from the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, our most recent *Through the Eyes of a Child* project undertook a deeper exploration of advocate’s needs and challenges around their experiences serving children and families.

Jacqueline Miller held focus groups with Child and Family Advocates to learn more about children’s needs, to understand opportunities for enhanced support, and what they perceive children struggled with in their daily lives. Questions included the following:

- What is a typical day like for you?
- What type of cultural framework for play does your program support or have in place?
- If your program has a waiting area, what is it like?
- What types of children’s activities does your agency plan?
- Are there rules centered around play and play areas?
- Are children supervised/monitored in play areas?

In addition to focus groups with advocates, children in shelter were provided with cameras and encouraged to photograph anything in the shelter they wanted, but specifically to take pictures of what they “liked” and “disliked” about their stay.

From these images, individual scrapbooks were created to include the child’s explanation of their photographs. Children were also offered the option of drawing a picture or putting their thoughts to paper.

+ + + + + + + + +

+ FINDINGS +

+ + + + + + + + +

Through the focus group responses and project submissions, several themes emerged including the need for safe spaces, child's play, technology, and a needed sense of self and ownership. Other findings emphasizing race and equity were also found and are outlined in the following section.

A SAFE AND WELCOMING SPACE

| *Where they are free to be themselves.* |

The idea of safety and the ways in which domestic violence shelters offer a sense of security and stability resonated throughout the assessment. Well-being in the form of a comfortable, sizable couch which enabled a young boy to sit with his mom and sibling to read or watch television was captured along with pictures of a blue sky and trees blowing. In its caption, the trees were depicted as "fresh and nice," by the young photographer who stated, "Trees help me cool down when I'm mad. I like the calmness of them too." These images speak of the comfort, familial linkages and reliability that domestic violence shelters provide as supportive spaces to heal and connect. Of note is a need for sizable rooms to accommodate families and their desire to be together. One picture highlighted a family room with ample seating with the caption "This is my brother's special place because he has to be close to mom."



I want to paint **happy words** on rocks and leave them for people to find so they can **feel happy and not sad.**

The home-like setting of the shelters was also featured, nonetheless with reference to the challenges associated with living in a communal setting. As with five years ago, one child made note of the presence of garbage bags or large garbage cans in open areas as unwelcome and smelly. Toys left out, some which make unfamiliar noises in the middle of night, were also of concern to children adjusting to sleeping in a new place.

PLAY AND SELF-EXPRESSION

| *Where their imagination can run wild.* |

Time and again, children took joyful photographs of those things which make them feel happy and built their self-confidence. There were a number of submissions which depicted colorful paintings they produced, and a new play scape and toys were continuously held up as positive and hopeful. Books that they, "can keep forever and read over and over," were featured by a child as well as play dough, bubbles and rocks which they had painted.

It was hard at first to think of how I **shine**, but now it is easy.



The value of the connections between children and the Child & Family Advocates were also very evident as the advocate's office or meeting space was highlighted as a place where they can relax and share feelings. One child took a photo of a treasure box on the shelf in an advocate's office with the words, "This is How I Shine Today," on the front. This child shared that, "This is my favorite thing. It was hard at first to think of how I shine but now it is easy."

The idea that the presence of a bright play scape where a child can swing with their siblings as long as they want is simple. For many children living in domestic violence shelters, outdoor play areas serve to build a more relaxed and secure sense of self as they navigate through a difficult time.

SENSE OF SELF AND OWNERSHIP

| *Essential for navigating difficult times.* |



This project underscores the need for shelters to have new items on hand for children to keep. Often times, children and families do not understand that the toys they play with are for them to keep even after they depart. Advocates indicated that children returned the toys because they didn't want to be accused of stealing or that they never had the experience of being given something to keep just for themselves.

In response, one young girl took a picture of a pink ball that she was given. She captioned, "My ball. I love my ball. I had to take a picture of it." Kids also submitted other photos of train sets and miniature kitchen sets as important reminders that new toys with all of their parts are relevant to the healing process.

NEED FOR ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

| *The ability to do things children do is key.* |

It was also evident that kids will be kids and the idea that they may not be able to use their technology or watch their favorite show on cable while in shelter was of great concern to many of them. And while this may seem trivial, for children in transition, the ability to still be able to do the things that make them happy is important. Photos depicted movies on Netflix and Nickelodeon as well as a PlayStation brought from home.

One boy took a photo of his spot in the family room where he could sit quietly to plug in his electronics. He said, "I was really happy that we could watch Netflix here. I was also really worried that I could not bring my games."

These pictures and messages highlight the need for shelters to have working internet and cable. For some children, playing games and watching television has served as the escape they need to cope with the violence to which they have been exposed.



"This is my **pride and joy**.
 So happy I could bring it!"

IDENTIFYING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

| *Key to building resiliency.* |



From a young boy, we learned that the presence of a knife set on the kitchen counter in a domestic violence shelter reminded him of violence and the prospect of harm. Another male child, while marveling at the ability to look out the window and see the blue sky, wondered aloud if his incarcerated father could see the same sky.

A young girl offered excitement that her baby brother had a plastic bathtub of his own in shelter and she had the occasion to help her mom wash his hair. Another child felt safer with the presence of a high fence around the shelter grounds.

INTENTION TO HEAR THE VOICES OF CHILDREN OF COLOR

Of all the children residing in shelter during this project, 73% were identified as children of color. The relaunch of the *Through the Eyes of a Child* project set out to illuminate and better understand the unique experiences of children living in shelter as well as to bring a particular focus on the capacity of domestic violence advocates to assist families from within communities of color.



Of children residing in shelter identified as children of color

RELEVANT ADVOCACY RESPONSES FOR FAMILIES OF COLOR

During this project, CCADV made a concerted effort to learn more about how we can improve our response in meeting the needs of children of color. Understanding the unique needs of survivors from communities of color and their children is critical. Therefore, we must put forth efforts that assure inclusivity.

While well intentioned, we realized that providing cameras to children as a way to learn what they like and dislike about the shelter should be done with an intersectional lens and understanding as it relates to “play.” Very often children make discoveries about what they like and dislike through play.

As a way to **uphold their dignity and pride**, these women often **buffer** their children **from unintended harm** that may be caused by social service programs, such as domestic violence advocacy, by telling them **not to ask for anything nor accept anything**.

Focus groups with advocates revealed that dignity and pride for children of color means not asking for anything, accepting anything, not touching anything. In addition, women of color have been accused of taking advantage of the “system.” As a way to uphold their dignity and pride, these women often buffer their children from unintended harm that may be caused by social service programs such as domestic violence advocacy, by telling them not to ask for anything, nor accept anything. All of these issues combined may play out as children of color showing a lack of interest in handling items such as a camera. As the discussion ensued about the process for engaging children in the photos activity, advocates recalled instances where survivors of color withheld their children from participating in activities. Advocates recalled hearing survivors from communities of color to tell their children, “don’t touch” and apologized to staff for them doing so.

Survivors of color might also have concerns that if something is broken or stolen, that their children will be blamed for it. When it comes to play, children of color have experienced often being policed or monitored while doing so. Children are commonly told not to accept anything from strangers. Unless survivors of color and their children feel welcomed, trust may not be established and program staff will be seen as “strangers” by both the survivor and their children.



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BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND COMPETENCE TO SUPPORT FAMILIES OF COLOR

Advocacy and services are guided systemically across the 18 domestic violence organizations by curricula and organization standards. The perception of being culturally relevant is often viewed as having toys that are representative of a community. If a child can see themselves, then we have accomplished our goal. Through this assessment, we learned how any efforts to deliver culturally relevant programming are not solely about the activity but more so the introduction of said activity and drawing an association for that child. By understanding the family's culture and life experiences more deliberately, advocates can better develop an authentic connection.

We learned through this process of deep conversation that there is a great opportunity to enhance the existence of culturally relevant advocacy and programs, beyond that of inclusive play rooms and toys. The process taught us that our advocacy must improve to better understand the complexities of serving communities of color. Advocate feedback clearly represented a competent understanding but with an identified opportunity to increase capacity to apply this information in a more effective manner. Increased abilities to utilize the knowledge effectively will certainly enhance our response from solely cultural competency to providing culturally responsive services and programs. CCADV recognizes its role in leading and supporting this change.

The current service delivery model is well intentioned. Advocates utilize promising practices in their advocacy which offer a variety of participatory groups and activities. Yet, these do not always resonate with communities of color. There are two competing issues at play. First, culture and life experiences are the drivers for decision making. The second issue is the intersectionality of systems for communities of color. Because families of color navigate historical systems of bias and oppression concurrently with the existing crisis in their lives, it does not provide room to actively engage in healing as it should be. From the standpoint of advocacy, this might be perceived as lack of interest, resistance or aggression. For example, advocates shared several types of supports and activities available for children. Their recognition that everyone does not partake was of concern to them.

There is opportunity for CCADV to more affirmatively support advocacy approaches that can adeptly shift, adapt and understand as the strategy of being more culturally responsive. Simple shifts in language and approach can provide children of color and their parents with the opportunity to engage more fully and feel appreciated. By gaining a greater understanding of the diversity within communities of color, advocacy can shift from the viewing all children as the same. An authentic advocacy response will formulate trust, openness and a willingness to connect to the family as a whole. It will allow all children to experience the richness of the activities offered without the parents feeling shame, pity or the presumption of "taking" something. As such, everyone will be able to benefit from such services. Most importantly, it will allow all children to grow and thrive in the most challenging time of their lives.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. MAINTAIN THE CONTINUOUS THEME OF SAFETY

Prioritize safe spaces for children.

The continuous theme of safety, as it relates to safe spaces in and outside of shelters, areas for children to express themselves, and the existence of Family and Child Advocates is enormously important. The domestic violence system in Connecticut is challenged by the continuous need for shelter as a safety option and not enough availability of space. On an on-going basis, domestic violence shelters far exceed their 227 licensed bed statewide capacity. Domestic violence shelters in the state have been operating at 123% capacity and at 140% capacity at the height of the Coronavirus pandemic with 98% of survivors residing in shelter and 42% in hotels. The pandemic necessitated that domestic violence shelters operate at or below capacity to allow for needed social distancing.

Providers relied on hotels as a safety option for the overage, spending nearly \$400,000, in unanticipated costs, during a six-month time frame beginning in March 2020. Individuals and families were and continue to be supported by transforming family rooms and children’s play rooms into bed-space when needed. Coupled with the ongoing demand for safe shelter does highlight the need for CCADV and the 18 domestic violence organizations to work with public and private funders and policy makers to develop sustainable solutions. Answers may range from increased diversionary practices, increased funding for hotels, or the development of a new set of shelter prioritization standards.



2. ADDRESS OUR LACK OF DIVERSITY AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION AMONG DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ADVOCATES

Elevate the response to children of color.

This most recent assessment reaffirmed the importance of how we validate the communities we serve. We learned through advocacy focus groups that there is a continuous need for the domestic violence advocacy system to elevate and prioritize its responses to survivors of color, to continually promote advocacy, programming and play spaces which more affirmatively support their healing. We understand that cultural representation plays a significant role in building connection, trust and inclusivity.

Organizationally, we must make a concerted effort to address the lack of diversity and cultural representation among domestic violence advocates. We have the chance to improve our recruitment process to ensure we create opportunities to actively identify and successfully recruit candidates from within the communities we serve.



3. ATTAIN RESOURCES TO ADEQUATELY SUPPORT CHILDREN IMPACTED BY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

| *Revenue streams to support critical aspects of domestic violence are essential.* |

Time and again throughout this learning process, children living in Connecticut’s domestic violence shelters reinforced our understanding that the existence of strength and resiliency factors which build their emotional abilities are essential to their well-being. Kids who experience this form of violence are seeking to feel safe. Safety in the form of shelter which has suitable space for their family, an advocate available to connect with, toys to play with and call their own, and simple things like access to the internet are imperative. Yet, enduring revenue streams to support these critical aspects of domestic violence are waning.

Our Child & Family Advocates at the 18 domestic violence organizations are woefully underfunded. Necessary funds to continue needed advocacy along with the infrastructure to accommodate trauma-informed spaces is lacking, and predicted state and federal budget deficits make the prospect of bolstering this system concerning. It is upon the domestic violence advocacy system to develop a strategy to resource unique responses to children and to work with statewide stakeholders around a plan.

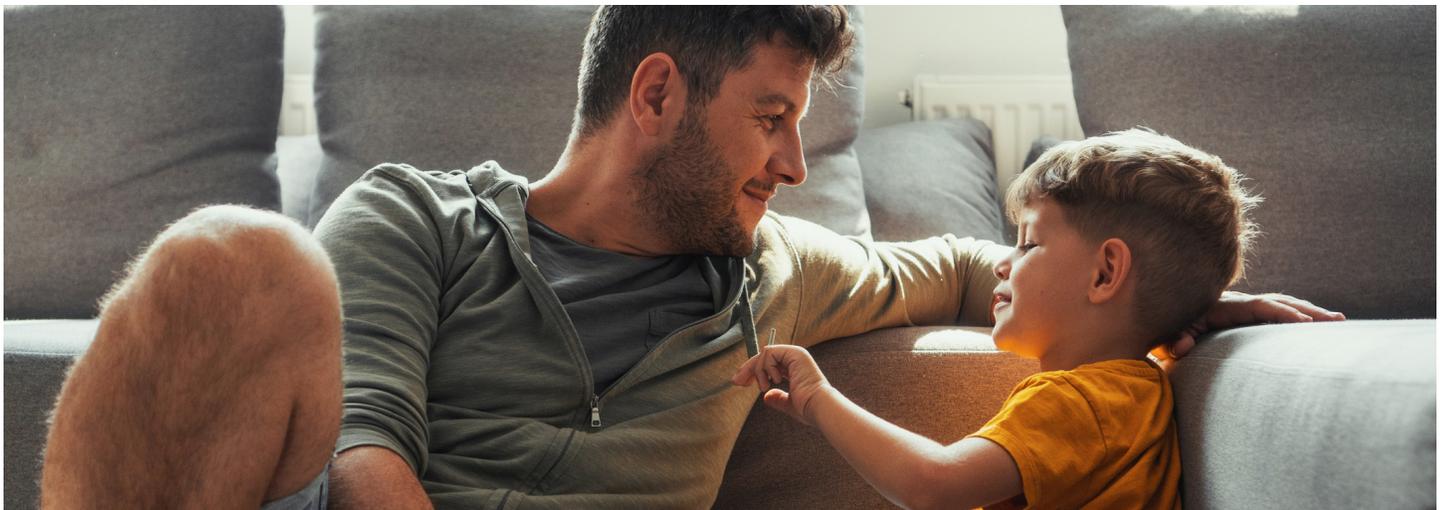


“I love the swing set. My brother and I have swing races and I always win and he cries. **Nobody tells us to get off.** I like that.”

4. BUILD ADDITIONAL TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE ON CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS, IMPLICIT BIAS, AND INCLUSIVITY

| *Professional development and capacity building.* |

Through courageous conversation, advocates expressed a desire for additional training and technical assistance on cultural responsiveness, implicit bias and inclusivity. As advocates eagerly identified with the need for additional capacity building, the success of its application is dependent on all of us to recognize our inherent bias and acceptance of our limited knowledge. CCADV strives to be a learning organization and supports the advocates’ desire to advance their knowledge and skills. Therefore CCADV should identify resources for this purpose and seek out influencers and trainers on both a state and national scale to enhance their skills across the spectrum.



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