

EQUALLY SAFE IN HIGHER EDUCATION SEMINAR**9 JUNE 2017*****SAFE AND TOGETHER* – A DOMESTIC ABUSE INTERVENTION MODEL: A NEW DIRECTION FOR SOCIAL
WORK EDUCATION?****SUMMARY REPORT**

The Scottish Association of Social Workers recently acknowledged that social work systems cannot achieve their core mission of safety and wellbeing of families without being competent and skilful in their response to domestic abuse. A recent 2017 report from [Legal Action for Women \(in England\)](#) showed out of 56 mothers who had sought legal advice about their children taken into care, 71% had been victims of domestic abuse and/or rape. Recent and proposed Scottish legal and policy changes focus on the need for specialised support of adult and child victims of domestic abuse and to create robust responses to perpetrators. Social workers in Scotland are becoming increasingly aware of how domestic abuse intersects with the complex needs of the people they work with. The [Safe and Together Institute](#) in the US have developed a promising best practice model designed to improve competencies and cross system collaboration related to the intersection of domestic abuse and child welfare. It aims to improve practice for working with domestic abuse impacted families by providing a framework for partnering with domestic abuse survivors and intervening with domestic abuse perpetrators in order to enhance the safety and well-being of children. It is currently the most widely utilised, collaborative model, having been adopted across the US, in Australia and England, and it is currently being implemented by a number of Scottish local authority Social Work Departments. A seminar for staff in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, organised by the [Equally Safe in Higher Education](#) (ESHE) Project, provided an opportunity to hear from senior social work professionals about the model and how it is being implemented in local authority social work practice in Scotland. Alongside presentations from Mhairi MacGowan, manager at ASSIST, and Anna Mitchell, social worker and Domestic Abuse Lead Officer at City of Edinburgh Council, the seminar included small group discussions which considered the implications of these developments for social work education and practice. This report provides a short summary of *Safe and Together*, the seminar and its associated discussions.

Safe and Together

Safe and Together is defined as a ‘perpetrator-pattern-based, child-centred, survivor-strengths approach to the intersection of domestic violence and child maltreatment’ (Dibella et al, year, 5). Developed by David Mandel and Associates, the model provides an example on how to use a co-located model to create a domestic abuse informed child welfare system and to address the co-occurrence of domestic abuse and child abuse. It aims to keep children both ‘safe and together’ with the non-offending parent by partnering with the victim/survivor as the default position and intervening with the perpetrator using skilled engagement, accountability strategies, and the court system to reduce risk and harm. These three *Key Principles* are used to guide assessment and case decisions to create better outcomes for children and families, and are implemented in practice by a focus on identifying the following *Critical Components*: perpetrator’s pattern of coercive control, actions taken by the perpetrator to harm the children, the full spectrum of the non-offending parent’s efforts to promote the safety and well-being of the children, the adverse impact of the perpetrator’s behaviour on the child, and the role of substance abuse, mental health, culture and other socio-economic factors.

A focus on the full scope of the perpetrator’s pattern of coercive control highlights the individual’s choice(s) to be violent, abusive and controlling, and recognises that risk and safety assessments around child safety and well-being must look beyond current relationships and living arrangements. Often perpetrators continue to have access to their children even when a relationship ends, after an arrest or as part of civil court proceedings, and regardless of whether the parents remain living together or in relationship. The model works by contextualising survivors’ decision making and validating their diverse range of daily protective efforts and planning to achieve safety, stability, nurturance and wellbeing for children, beyond the traditional routes of police involvement and separation. The model adopts a strengths-based perspective in relation to the non-abusing parent – usually the children’s mother. It allows practitioners to work in partnership with and support individual empowerment as well as providing an opportunity to gather comprehensive information and collaborate on more effective safety plans, based on survivors’ experiences. The model also includes a number of concrete practice tools to provide practical guides for case decision-making, documentation, and family engagement.

Through the *Key Principles* and *Critical Components*, *Safe and Together* encourages domestic abuse practitioners and child welfare workers to keep the perpetrator’s pattern of coercive control visible, as the context of the case, in order to enhance their ability to make appropriate decisions and service referrals to increase child safety. It moreover challenges an overall ‘failure to protect’ discourse

which implies that the non-offending parent is in control of the violence by the perpetrator, as well as challenges gender-based expectations about parenting by aiming to engage with men in their role as parents. The model also aims to understand how the specific abuse within a particular family impacts on individual child wellbeing and development rather than a more broad focus on how it tends to impact on children as a whole. *Safe and Together* addresses these existing assumptions and problematic practices. An [year] audit of Edinburgh Council's domestic abuse case files indicated, for example, that response and practice prior to the implementation to *Safe and Together* was characterised by 'an overemphasis on singular incidents of physical violence, rather than recognition of a wider pattern of abuse; it assumes separation or removal of the perpetrator will automatically reduce risk; it places responsibility for care of the children and for ending the abuse primarily with the victim, whilst superficially engaging with perpetrators; it explicitly encourages separation, without addressing risks around safe contact or ongoing disruption to family life' (Safe and Together Edinburgh, 2017). *Safe and Together* is currently being implemented by a number of Scottish local authority Social Work Departments. In March 2015, for example, 46 professionals from a range of agencies were trained in the model, including health visitors, social workers, perpetrator workers and advocacy workers. They are now champions of the model in their neighbourhood, use *Safe and Together* tools when working with families and also provide support and advice to other workers on domestic abuse. This reflects that the model provides a framework for, and has policy and practice implications for various professions and settings. The next section provides a short summary of the ESHE seminar on *Safe and Together* and its associated discussions.

First impressions of *Safe and Together*

First impressions of *Safe and Together* were positive. Participants felt the model was both useful and positive, primarily because it is strengths based, aiming to empower and provide control to victims/survivors. If implemented correctly, it was deemed that *Safe and Together* has the potential to 'change the culture' and the way we think about domestic abuse, through its emphasis on creating behavioural changes, working to the strengths of everyone in the family and recognising the diverse types of care, coping strategies and use of agency by victims/survivors. This includes shifting the focus on and engaging with perpetrators and addressing the wider issue of 'missing' fathers. Participants also felt that the model could be useful for all agencies and significantly complements the framework of [Getting It Right for Every Child \(GIRFEC\)](#).

***Safe and Together* curriculum development**

There was discussion surrounding integrating *Safe and Together* within curriculum and education. Social work students in attendance highlighted that an additional focus on perpetrators was illuminating and that the wider model was an important learning framework at their current stage of education, before practicing professionally. This includes using social work values and a multi-agency approach to explore the perpetrators' biography, particularly in relation to issues of attachment and trauma, in order to identify ways to engage and work with individuals to address problematic and abusive behaviour. Students also applied and reflected on the five critical components in relation to current case examples and illustrations were given showing how social work practice and intervention has changed as a result of the model. Moreover, there was some discussion regarding where *Safe and Together* could be embedded within the existing Social Work education. Potential areas included practice based learning groups, within assessment procedure, and in key capabilities. Practice teachers were also considered as a platform for implementing the model alongside new social workers. Moreover, there was a reflection on the importance placed on language in the model, particularly in relation to challenging 'failure to protect', 'victim blaming' and 'mother blaming' discourses, and it was noted that *Safe and Together* may link well with GIRFEC within the curriculum.

Anticipated challenges in implementing *Safe and Together*

There was some discussion around the challenges of implementing *Safe and Together*. Principally, training, time and resources were deemed the main challenges to implementing the model into services and practice. Short-term training was not considered sufficient, as participants felt that implementing *Safe and Together* represented a longer-term change in culture and practice. Relatedly, there were issues raised about changing such practice when current thinking about child protection in Scotland does not naturally facilitate working with perpetrators, a key element of the model. Moreover, without Scottish Government support, participants were not convinced that local authorities could fully implement the model. There were concerns regarding linking *Safe and Together* with existing services, systems and current models of intervention across different agencies, and that the model may simply create further assessment and fail to change interventions. Overcoming gendered assumptions in personal attitudes and individual social work practice was similarly noted as a concern. Another anticipated challenge was the issue of re-configuring courses to include *Safe and Together* within social work curricula, particularly in relation to lengthy university timetabling and curriculum change processes

and the various approaches to social work curricula in different universities. Finally, the importance of effective evaluations of the model was also raised.

Seminar Evaluation

Participants were highly positive about the seminar. They enjoyed the opportunity to gain a clear understanding of *Safe and Together*, the various ways that it can be implemented with individual organisations and the insight provided into how it has currently been implemented in Edinburgh. Participants welcomed the model's shifting focus from 'blame' to strengths as well as the emphasis on engaging with the perpetrator and looking at 'the bigger picture.' The presentations were noted to have been clear, informative, whilst the presenters were described as both approachable and enthusiastic. The informal seminar structure and the opportunity for discussion allowed professionals from a variety of agencies to share ideas and best practice, and attendees were encouraged that social work students were involved. The handouts were considered useful. Reflecting on what they learned from the seminar, participants highlighted an increased knowledge of *Safe and Together*, and how it relates not only within social work but its relevance for other agencies such as Police Scotland and agencies involved in residential care, and as well as to other key policy areas. As well as learning about the key principles of the model, participants welcomed that the model was introduced in way which highlighted direct links to practice through specific examples such as *Safe and Together* Edinburgh. Another key learning area was the model's emphasis on extending focus beyond the victim to explore the perpetrator's past and current behaviour, and the importance of 'non-blaming' language. Participant's further questions about the session centred on how to move the *Safe and Together* model forward. This included how to include it within the curriculum for all agencies to promote partnership working, as well as develop a national, Scotland-wide approach. All participants reported that they aim or hope to implement *Safe and Together* within their current practice, as researchers, practitioners, teachers and trainers.

References and further information

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