



# Guided Conversations:

*A Toolkit for Advocacy with battered families.*



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## ***What makes 25 Conversations special?***

Across the country, Domestic Violence Advocates do crisis intervention work with battered families every day. Many work as Child Advocates, those specially focused on helping children who have witnessed or lived with the aftermath of DV. I was a child advocate. But as I began doing the work I quickly came to realize that someone else had done my job for me. Developing a relationship with the child, building trust, gaining their confidence and answering hard questions was a role already filled by the non-violent parent. It was obvious that the children had advocates, hard-working, loving parents who spent every waking and often most of their sleeping hours thinking of nothing but how to protect and nurture their children. While the children I served had a parent receiving advocacy services, most of the parents did not have an advocate that was able to mend the strained relationship between child and battered parent. We were serving battered women, not battered families.

So I asked my supervisor if I could change my title to “Family Advocate” and I began searching for a way to do my job. In my research to find methods and techniques, I continually ran into *the therapy wall*; the thousands of books and methods out available that taught how to work with children were all focused on therapeutic models, many of which again involved replacing the parent by becoming the child’s confidant. And the longer I worked with children and moms, the more apparent it became that no matter how many support people a family had, and no matter how frequently the battered parent saw an advocate one thing was still not happening between the children and the battered parent; conversations. Many women expressed frustration that their children were bottling up emotions. Many of these same women also expressed a fear of or inability to discuss the reality of their abuse with their children.

No one doubted that the children knew that violence had occurred. For most children, the realities were obvious due to factors such as police response, living in shelter or even visible injuries to one or both parents. As I watched this veil of secrecy and shame draw tighter around the families- even those living in shelter with other battered families- it became painfully obvious that this lack of communication was more than exhaustion or confusion on the part of the battered parent- it was both a direct result and a tool of domestic violence.

Realizing this gave me an even greater sense of urgency. If battered families entered and left our services without ever being able to communicate, then they were leaving our services without having a significant aspect of their abuse addressed. I knew that as with all problems, the solution was found in the puzzle itself. Why weren’t battered families talking? Some of the reasons were obvious:

- overwhelmed by meeting basic needs, battered parents simply didn’t have the energy left to talk
- some parents felt ashamed and embarrassed to discuss the abuse with their children
- many parents feared re-victimizing or traumatizing their children

But some of the other reasons hid beneath layers of defensiveness or apathy:

- some children behaved or looked like the abuser, which made interacting with the children difficult or even traumatic for the battered parent
- many battered families had survived for years by maintaining silence- being free of the abuse did not automatically undo this habitual behavior pattern
- some battered parents felt incapable of good parenting, due to the sabotaging tactics of their abuser, and the victim blaming of family, friends or society.
- Many of the women in our programs felt guilty or embarrassed by their desire for the batterer to remain a part of the children’s lives. Rather than sharing that with their advocate, women would often avoid conversation about their children altogether.

Finally I landed on the idea of *guided conversations*. Having a prewritten script that a parent and advocate follow together allows the parent to control the conversation with confidence, knowing that their words will go on a framework designed by a domestic violence expert. The guided conversation is not so rigidly scripted that the parent loses their voice; rather it provides a solid framework that gives the parent confidence and empowers them to find their own voice within the text. The script acts as a guide, allowing parents to share their personal stories and ideas with their children.

*Guided Conversations* also help to clearly define and maintain each person’s role in the conversation. Often Advocates feel lost in a family conversation, wondering when and how to step in. *Guided Conversations* clearly defines the role of the Advocate so that parent, child and Advocate are all on the same page.

Finally, *Guided Conversations* is more than a concept or a text; it is a toolkit- providing not only scripts, but companion activities, art projects and resources that expand the conversations into productive and enjoyable advocacy sessions. An Advocate armed with this toolkit will have everything needed to get battered families talking and healing together. I believe that an effective and equipped advocate has the ability to turn conversations into life-changing experiences. You can help battered families can heal through the power of *Guided Conversations*.