



## Domestic Violence Prevention & Investigation

with David Cropp

# 3 integrated concepts for domestic violence investigations

**Embracing these three concepts will do a lot to move law enforcement into the future of effective response and investigation of DV / CEDV calls for service**

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In the latter half of last year, the Ray Rice case piqued social interest in Domestic Violence (DV). In fact, much of that interest came to a head during October, which happens to be National Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Remember those football players demanding that society not accept excuses for domestic violence? Remember how the media discussed domestic violence using a confusing array of terms and comparing DV to everyday assault and battery? Did you notice all those DV-related events and training symposiums last October?

Good for you.

But what have we learned? Do we really hold ourselves accountable for understanding DV any better than the NFL or media personalities? In some cases the answer is yes. But we can do better. I've been in law enforcement for 35 years, so I remember when 'success' was getting the male half of the disturbance to pack a few things and leave for the night. I remember telling kids, "Everything will be okay — go back to bed." I remember making no arrests and writing few — if any — reports.

We've all seen improvements in DV legislation and training — we've definitely come a long way — but there is more we can do to improve our understanding of DV. Law enforcement should be respected for our depth of knowledge — something more than superficial social banter. A better understanding

in this domain is not just an academic venture. There are practical benefits as well; benefits that include a safer response strategy, better investigations, better reports, a higher filing rate.

There are many implications and intricacies of DV, but there are three integrated concepts that will help us move toward a better understanding of this crime. Let's examine each in turn.

## **1. Children Exposed to DV**

For law enforcement officers, Domestic Violence is an assault. We respond to assaults or attempted assaults. sometimes we respond to criminal threats or violations of restraining orders, but many times these are based on precipitating assaults. We see Domestic Violence as an incident.

However, to the children exposed to DV, it's not about an incident or a series of incidents — it is about an environment. It is about an environment of chaos, profanity, and threats. When it comes to children exposed to DV (CEDV), we respond to an incident but we walk into an environment.

This environment leads to maladaptive brain development and problematic behavior. It creates a troubled social climate defined by poor interaction with peers and poor performance at school. Children exposed to DV have been diagnosed with various types of conduct disorder. They may dissociate from society and present with seizure disorders (Perry, 2003). These effects are related to mental suffering and trauma. The nexus between mental suffering, trauma, and domestic violence allows us to add criminal charges of child endangerment. However, many of these charges are dropped because we haven't done a good enough job of narrating the environment that the children live in.

In a recent 911 call, a 14 year-old girl told dispatch that she knows just when to call the police to keep the violence from getting worse. The mother denied any history of violence.

How do we address this conflict? It's simple. Use these three words: "Tell me more."

We must clarify the nature of this parasitic environment: What do they see? What do they hear? How often does the violence occur and to what severity? How do they sleep at night? Were they scared, and if so, scared of what and whom?

## **2. Risk Factors**

Jacquelyn Campbell's Danger Assessment (2002) is an example of validated risk factors. They indicate a higher risk for injury or death. Here's a common phrase that I've seen many times over the years in police reports: "The victim claimed that past incidents have only been verbal and that this is the first time it's gotten physical."

Now let's look at the first risk factor on Campbell's list: "Has the physical violence increased in severity or frequency over the past year?" When a victim tells us that the violence only recently became physical, do we see the connection between her statement and this risk factor? Any increase in violence suggests a direction that can only lead to a worsening risk of danger.

We must ask victims to describe the nature of the violence and we must look for correlations to existing risk factors. Campbell's risk factors include controlling behavior, stalking or threats—threats

to harm or take the children — or commit suicide. This type of clarification helps the prosecutor establish cause for filing charges. It helps to support allegations of child endangerment as well.

There are many types of risk assessments and some police departments have integrated them into their report template.

### **3. Trauma-Informed**

The subtle nuances of a trauma-informed approach, if not properly understood, can mean mediocrity to law enforcement personnel who ignore it. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) recently came out with a report on these concepts. It includes the ability to understand how trauma is experienced by victims and children. Many times we project our sense of logic and rationale onto victims. We say things like, “Why doesn’t she just leave?” or “How could she put up with that?”

Understanding the traumatic effects of DV / CEDV allows us to see how victims’ and children’s brains become altered by exposure to violence. They don’t think the way we do, and expecting them to do so only re-victimizes them. Understanding the effects of trauma on victims and children helps us to ask better questions and produce better reports. It helps our prosecutors in their decisions to file charges and gain convictions.

In summary, embracing these three concepts will do a lot to move law enforcement into the future of effective response and investigation of DV / CEDV calls for service. It’s a win-win for everyone. We are not the NFL. We are not media personalities who know nothing about DV / CEDV. Maintaining a high level of professionalism is a constant battle. Being proud of our work product and the way our communities see us is important — it perpetuates law enforcement as leaders in our communities.

## **About the author**

David Cropp is a retired sergeant with the Sacramento Police Department and has a combined 35 years of law enforcement experience. He is a regional domestic violence expert witness and consultant, and holds a POST Master Instructor Credential and a Master’s Degree in Behavioral Science.

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