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## Shock Waves

### *The Batterer's Impact on the Home*



The typical behavior of batterers, both as partners and as parents, can have far-reaching effects on all aspects of family functioning (Graham-Bermann & Levendosky, 2011; Mullender et al., 2002; McGee, 2000; Hurley & Jaffe, 1990). In fact, a batterer's parenting cannot properly be spoken of apart from his other behaviors because his full pattern of conduct has important implications for family dynamics, as we will see. The effects on children of this damage to family bonds have not been the subject of extensive examination, yet they may be among the principal causes of the symptoms so widely demonstrated to accompany exposure to domestic violence. Few studies have addressed the impact of domestic violence on family functioning (Hanks, 1992) or the *emotional climate* of homes where battering occurs (Graham-Bermann, 1998), although excellent clinical descriptions exist (e.g., Graham-Bermann & Levendosky, 2011).

Family dynamics in the presence of domestic violence are shaped by a complex weave of factors involving the relationship between the parents, the relationship of each parent to each child, and the relationship of the family to the outside world. The following scenario, which combines aspects from a number of our cases, describes 2 days in a home with a battering father. The scenario illustrates the patterns of

interaction that battering engenders and will be used as a reference point throughout this chapter.

Roger, 36, and Marsha, 34, are married. Their son Kyle is 11, and daughter Felicia is 8. On Sunday morning, the children wake excited about a long-anticipated afternoon canoe trip. After breakfast, Marsha asks her son to help with the dishes, and he gets mad, saying, "My friends are waiting for me. Why do I have to do the stupid dishes? Why can't you or Felicia do them?"

Roger steps in and says to Marsha, "You tie that boy down with too many chores. He needs to be active. Go on out, Kyle." Kyle says pointedly to Marsha, "I told you this was stupid, Mom." His father winks at him, and Kyle runs outside. Marsha gives Roger a dirty look then asks Felicia for help with the dishes.

Roger leaves the kitchen, but later he finds a moment when he thinks that Felicia is out of earshot and says angrily to Marsha, "What was that look you gave me earlier? I don't need that shit from you!" An argument ensues about Kyle, and Roger finally yells, "You don't understand boys! You're messing him up completely. You want to handle things your way; go ahead. I'm not going on any stupid canoe trip." He stomps upstairs and slams the door.

An hour later, Roger has still not emerged, and Marsha has to tell the children that the canoe trip is off. Felicia bursts into tears and says, "This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't argued with him! You know how mad he gets. Why did you have to do that?"

Later, Felicia wants help organizing her butterfly collection and asks her father. He yells at her to leave him alone. After lunch, Roger finally comes downstairs and goes outside to join Kyle and his friends in a game of touch football. He jokes as if nothing has happened. After the game, one of Kyle's friends says, "I wish I had a dad that was as much fun as yours." Roger then leaves to play golf for the afternoon.

After dinner, when the children are in their rooms, Marsha asks Roger if he could either help pick up the house or take care of his mother's birthday card. He says, "Don't bother me with this stupid stuff," and an argument rapidly escalates to yelling and name-calling. Marsha is louder than Roger in the argument, as his style is to use logic and cold sarcasm. Roger finally becomes

enraged, however, and knocks over two kitchen chairs, smashes a glass against the wall, and shoves Marsha against the refrigerator so that she falls to the floor. He continues yelling as he goes out the front door.

When Roger returns a short while later, police are at the house, following a neighbor's call. The police ask if there has been any violence, and both Marsha and Roger say, "No, just some arguing." Roger tells the police that Marsha did most of the yelling. Because Marsha does not have visible injuries, the police do not arrest Roger. The children hear all of these events from upstairs. A few minutes after the police have left, Felicia begins to repeatedly ask Marsha, "What happened?" She refuses to go back to bed until her mother answers her. Marsha finally yells at her to get back in her room "or you'll be sorry."

In the morning, Marsha tells Roger that she can't take the fighting anymore and that she wants him to look for a separate place to stay. He refuses to leave, saying that he paid for the house and that, if she doesn't like it, she should be the one to move. He says that he should report her to the Department of Social Services for being a lousy mother and that, if they break up, he will get custody of the children. Marsha and Roger are unaware that the children can hear pieces of this argument from upstairs. The children leave for school, and both parents go to work.

Kyle acts up in class that day and is sent to the principal's office. The principal says to Kyle, "I'm very disappointed to see you going back to your old ways, young man, since you've been doing better for a while now. This better be the last time, or you'll be suspended."

Felicia is sent to her school nurse complaining of a stomach-ache. She is crying, and the pain is getting worse, so the school calls Marsha, who leaves work to take Felicia to the doctor. The pediatrician finds nothing wrong, saying that Felicia perhaps ate something that didn't agree with her.

At home, Felicia falls asleep. Marsha calls her therapist, describing the incidents of the night before. They talk about the stresses that Roger is under and how Marsha could help him feel better. The therapist says, "I'd like you to think about why you feel the need to provoke Roger when you know what it can lead to. It seems to be a way to punish yourself."

When Roger gets home that night, he brings presents for both children and announces that he is taking the family out for dinner and ice cream. He tells Marsha that he is sorry that he lost his temper but “let’s not dwell on it,” and gives her a hug and a kiss in front of the children. She stiffens and looks away, which the children notice, but gradually, she interacts more cordially with Roger, who is fun and charming all evening. Before bed that night, Kyle says to his mother, “I don’t understand why you have to be the way you are with Dad. He tries so hard to make things go well.”

Roger helps Felicia get ready for bed that night, and while they are alone together, he says to her, “I’m sorry that Mommy yelled at you last night. She shouldn’t do that. She needs to work on her temper, and I’m going to get her to see a therapist. Don’t you worry about it; she just has some problems.”

Felicia has a bad dream that night and comes to her parents’ bed, but Roger tells her angrily that she is too old for that. She returns to her room and stays awake alone, frightened. When Roger is asleep, Marsha slips out of bed quietly and goes to be with Felicia. Two days later, Kyle gets in a fight with another boy at school and is suspended.

We explore multiple dynamics illustrated by this scenario.

#### ❖ UNDERMINING OF THE MOTHER’S AUTHORITY

As we introduced in Chapter 2, battering undermines a mother’s authority, commonly involving both effects that are inherently undermining and additional behaviors by the batterer that are more explicitly and intentionally undermining. We examine both of these aspects here.

##### Inherent Undermining Effects of Abuse

Battering in itself undermines a mother’s parenting in several ways. The batterer’s conduct provides a behavioral and attitudinal model for children that can outweigh the more constructive messages that they may receive from their social surroundings. This model’s most specific effect is to teach children a negative and disrespectful

outlook on their mother. The batterer's violence and threats, for example, communicate to the children that their mother's physical integrity need not be respected. During an assault, children may observe that their mother feels afraid and powerless; they may observe her efforts to defend herself but also see that these attempts are largely ineffectual, and they may even take in the fact that, the more she attempts to fight back, the more seriously she gets hurt. In the aftermath of violence, their mother's shock, depression, or withdrawal is likely to be evident to the children, and they may perceive her as downtrodden. In all of these ways, children's views of their mother are shaped by the battering (see also McGee, 2000; Pickering et al., 1993).

The verbal abuse that accompanies most assaults can contribute further to forming children's images of their mother. Foul and degrading language, name-calling, and blaming of the victim accompany most incidents of battering, and children are exposed to the belittling and contradicting of their mother (Hughes & Marshall, 1995). The batterer also may threaten his partner with further harm if she does not do as she is told. This combination of verbal abuse and violence often contains important implicit messages to children that their mother caused the batterer to assault her through her stupidity, selfishness, or failure to obey his instructions. Thus, children may learn that verbal or physical abuse of their mother is justified when she is behaving in a way that is not desired; that she is stupid, inferior, or worthy of ridicule; and that she is far less powerful than is the batterer.

The aftermath of an assault can introduce additional elements to the children's learning process. They are likely to be upset and emotionally vulnerable following a violent incident and therefore may be particularly subject to influences on their interpretations of what took place. In the overwhelming majority of assaults, there will be no consequences for the batterer, which may tend to confirm for the children that he is both the more powerful party and the more justified one. Even in the minority of cases where police are called, meaningful consequences for the batterer do not necessarily ensue. Well-intentioned school personnel or human service providers are sometimes overly concerned with protecting the children from loyalty conflicts and so will use neutral phrases such as *the violence that happened between your parents*; such language can serve to obscure the batterer's responsibility for his actions, perhaps making it easier for children to blame their mothers or themselves.

The great majority of incidents of domestic violence, however, never come to the attention of police or school personnel, and thus, children's private experiences within the family most often shape what lessons they take from the violence. They may find that, over the days subsequent to an assault, their parents make no mention of the incident (Peled, 1998), strengthening the children's impression that a shameful and secret event has occurred. They may feel ashamed of their father's violence, but they are likely to be just as ashamed of their mother's degradation or humiliation or of what they believe to be her role in causing the violence. They also may perceive her as passive, because children of a battered mother are often unaware of ways in which she may be attempting to stop the abuse.

Children's interactions with their parents in the days following an act of violence further inform their views. During this period, their mother is likely to be struggling with a mixture of shock, rage, and fear and may be experiencing post-trauma symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks, or depression. (For research on the high rate of PTSD symptoms in battered women, see Bargai, Ben-Shakhar, & Shalev, 2007.) Thus, the children may find her cold and withdrawn, short-tempered, and emotionally volatile. Under these circumstances, any difficulties that they may have in interacting with her can reinforce their earlier impressions that her character was a central cause of the violence, and they may accept the batterer's view of their mother as crazy or unfit (McMahon & Pence, 1995). By contrast, the batterer may make a concerted effort to win the children's loyalty and may be markedly attentive and positive with them. He may joke and play, spend money on them, or take them out to do things, as Roger exhibited in our opening scenario. Many batterers are able to engage in childlike, lighthearted play, which the mother often has difficulty doing because of the effects of battering and verbal abuse. Thus, it is not uncommon for children to see the batterer as the fun parent (J. Erickson & Henderson, 1998) and to blame their mother for the parental conflicts and even for the battering (Jaffe, Wolfe, et al., 1990).

The undermining of a battered mother's authority thus has multiple aspects, including (a) the violence itself, (b) the verbally abusive and victim-blaming messages that the batterer gives before and during the violence, and (c) the dynamics of the aftermath. All three of these aspects can lead the children of a battered woman to gradually acquire the batterer's view of her and to begin to describe her in terms similar

to ones that he would use. This batterer-like language can be especially marked among teenagers. We observe this tendency even in those children whose roles in the family are to be on the battered woman's "side," who may state, for example, that the reason why they need to protect their mother is because of her incompetence or immaturity.

### Deliberate Undermining

The preponderance of our clients augments the inherently undermining effects of battering with deliberate tactics designed to control the children's loyalties and to govern their perceptions. Chronic undermining is significantly more common with battering than with nonbattering men (Adams, 1991) and has been described by battered women as a behavior the abuser uses to attack her position as a mother (Lapierre, 2010). Some batterers control their partners' parental authority as part of their overall dominance and may punish their partners for questioning their authority over the children (Ptacek, 1997). In addition, we observe that children of a battered woman have some natural tendencies to sympathize with her, and our clients sometimes appear to be aware that a battered woman's close relationship to her children can be a great source of strength, validation, and social connection for her, and in the long run may help her to escape the abuse; thus, the batterer may feel the need to take active steps to shift the children's leanings. Some of our clients have negative opinions about women in general and for this reason wish to minimize maternal influence over the children's development. Interestingly, a recent study found that those batterers who are the most undermining of their partners as parents showed evidence of also being the least likely to change from their overall abusiveness (Hellman, Johnson, & Dobson, 2010).

Our opening scenario illustrates typical undermining behaviors used by batterers, beginning with direct interference with the mother's ability to create structure and to teach responsibility. Roger explicitly intercedes with Marsha to relieve Kyle of his household responsibilities, thereby encouraging Kyle to see him as the kind parent and Marsha as overly strict. Roger's interference also lays the groundwork for Kyle to respond to his mother with resentment or defiance the next time that she attempts to hold him to his responsibilities. In practice, we find that batterers create tension between mothers and their children in just this way. The batterer may then stand aside from the

resulting conflicts or may even step in as the mediator, "to help the children and their mother work it out," as a number of our clients have reported.

In our scenario, Roger definitively overrules Marsha's decision using an authoritative tone of voice. From witnessing such superseding by the batterer, children may grasp that their mother is second in command, with the batterer free to delegate responsibilities to her or to rescind them from her. We have observed that children thereby learn to prolong conflicts with their mother until they can involve the father, thus lessening her ability to manage their behavior.

It is important to note that the batterer's overruling of the mother does not necessarily take the direction of his being the more permissive parent. He may forbid them freedoms or privileges that she feels they are ready to take on. Some batterers are invested in restricting the extent of the children's social contacts and so may supersede maternal decisions in order to keep them home (see also Jaffe, Wolfe, et al., 1990). The batterers most inclined to isolate their children appear to be those who have the greatest concern that the children may disclose abuse to outsiders and those who rely heavily on the children for companionship or support.

Continuing with the scenario, we next see Roger wink at Kyle approvingly for insulting his mother. Kyle is thus rewarded for behaving disrespectfully and is emboldened. Future efforts that Marsha may make to require Kyle to address her appropriately may be unsuccessful, as he assumes that his father will not permit her to impose consistent consequences. One effect of this dynamic is that the child can be drawn into participating in the psychological abuse of the mother, armed with the father's power by proxy. It is generally true that aggressive behavior that meets with praise or approval is more likely to be repeated (Bandura, 1978).

We find that preteen and teenage boys, who are often experimenting with social roles regarding their relationship to females, are especially subject to the batterer's influence. By being rewarded for their inappropriate behavior toward their mothers, they are in effect being trained to abuse women, though this is not necessarily the batterer's intent. In effect, preteen and teen boys sometimes begin to practice abusive behaviors on their mothers, imitating behaviors that they have witnessed in their fathers (Johnston & Campbell, 1993b). Indeed, boys who are exposed to batterers are more than twice as likely as are other



boys to physically assault their mothers (B. Carlson, 1990). We have observed that our teen clients gain a certain thrill from discovering their power over their mothers in this way while simultaneously tending to experience guilt. They then sometimes attempt to relieve their cognitive dissonance by further lowering their image of their mothers and by developing other justifications for their treatment of her. These boys can begin to exhibit ways of talking and thinking about their mothers that are closely parallel to adult battering styles.

Moving now to Roger's bedtime conversation with Felicia on the second night, we see him communicating to her that her mother is not a competent parent, is out of control, and is not treating her well. Similar statements that clients of ours have made to the children include describing the mother as a drunk or a drug addict, saying that she is having sex with other men, telling them that their mother does not love them or that they were conceived by accident and weren't wanted by their mother, and stating that their mother is lazy and lives off of the batterer's hard work. One client of ours told the children that, because of the mother's promiscuity, he could not be certain that he was their biological father. Although the batterer's statements to the children about their mother tend to be fabrications, their potential emotional destructiveness is probably equally serious in cases where they contain elements of truth.

A number of additional tactics that our clients or their partners report with some frequency but that are not reflected in our scenario include ridiculing or humiliating the mother in front of the children; swearing at her, calling her names, or insulting her; laughing at her; and being unusually nice to the children when they are in conflict with her. These actions serve as attitudinal and behavioral models for the children so that a battered mother often finds herself left to manage multiple forms of rude and uncooperative behavior on the part of her children (Spilsbury et al., 2007; Bancroft, 2005; McGee, 2000; Pickering et al., 1993). Compounding her difficulties, the batterer may explicitly tell her that she is a bad or incompetent mother (Hughes & Marshall, 1995), and the children may hear these statements.

We have observed that the inherently undermining effects of battering, often combined with more deliberate undermining tactics, can lead to dynamics in the family that cause the mother to appear incompetent and ineffective as a parent (Schechter & Edleson, 1998), while the batterer presents to outsiders as able to take charge of the children's

behavior appropriately (see also Pickering et al., 1993). Furthermore, the mother's fear of replicating the father's abusive or authoritarian parenting style may lead her to be afraid to act with appropriate parental authority (Bilinkoff, 1995).

Partner violence sometimes follows conflicts regarding the children (Hughes & Marshall, 1995), further undermining the mother's authority and her ability to have a voice in parenting decisions. Mothers who attempt to protect their children from emotional or physical mistreatment by the batterer put themselves at risk of violence (Mbilinyi et al., 2007), and many restraining order affidavits describe violence or threats by the batterer when the mother attempts to intercede on behalf of her children (Ptacek, 1997).

### Undermining After Separation

Separation or divorce can begin an important new phase in the father's undermining of the mother's authority. In our observations, batterers are commonly retaliatory in the aftermath of a breakup, and interfering with the mother's parenting can be an important tactic. Furthermore, many batterers respond to separation by intensifying their own desire to justify past actions and to deny their abusiveness. In some cases, a client of ours wishes to prove to the woman and to outsiders that he is the more psychologically healthy person and points to her difficulties with her children (which may be largely of his causing) as evidence of her incompetence, instability, or need for his assistance. Some batterers are interested in pursuing custody litigation and so wish to strengthen their parenting position and to weaken the mother's.

Postseparation undermining tactics that we encounter are numerous, so we will review only selected ones here. The most common behavior of this kind among our clients is to create an atmosphere in their homes that is largely or entirely lacking in discipline. During periods when the children are in his care, the batterer may allow them to eat unhealthful foods steadily, permit them to stay up late at night watching movies or playing video games, and ignore any homework responsibilities. He may go out of his way to involve the children in activities that he knows upset or worry their mother, such as driving with the children not wearing seat restraints, taking them to a shooting range to learn weapons use (we have had several cases of this), or

showing them movies that are frightening, violent, or sexual. When children who have enjoyed this kind of catering and freedom return to their mother's home, they feel increased resistance to accepting her efforts to impose structure. They may feel that, now that they are home with their mother, life is once again consumed with homework, bed-times, chores, and healthful eating.

A batterer who intends to pursue custody litigation may discuss with the children the possibility of coming to live with him. For example, Bancroft served as guardian ad litem (GAL) in a case where the batterer admitted freely, with no sense of wrongdoing, that he had begun speaking about the possibility of a change in custody with his two children when they were only 6 and 8 years old, respectively. The mother's authority was steadily eroded over the subsequent years, and the children would periodically make statements to her such as "I don't have to listen to you, because Dad's going to ask for custody, and I'm going to go live with him."

Due to both general gender factors and to the specific dynamics of domestic violence, batterers tend to be in stronger economic position postseparation than battered women are (Emery, Otto, & O'Donohue, 2005). Men who batter sometimes work hard to buy their children's favor through expensive purchases and through making resources available at their homes that the mother cannot afford (McGee, 2000).

Although competitiveness and undermining can be dynamics in difficult separations even where battering has not occurred, the implications of such behavior become even more problematic in the context of domestic violence, given children's increased need for safety and security in their relationships with their mothers (see Chapter 5).

When a batterer is no longer present in the home because of parental separation, the past undermining of the mother's authority can become even more apparent as the father is no longer available to enforce discipline. For example, we find that partners of our clients are more likely to be physically assaulted by their children after parental separation than while the batterer is still in the home. Children may feel suddenly freed from having to constrict themselves around the batterer; although this freedom has healthy aspects, it also can lead to serious problems for the battered mother in managing the children's erupting behavior. In many cases, the batterer is then able to use the effects of his undermining of her authority, combined with the effects

of his absence, to make a case in court for why the children need to be in his custody because the mother cannot control them. This dynamic is visible when children return home from visits with the batterer, at which time they “may quite typically ‘erupt’ while in the mother’s care after having to contain their impulses and feelings while with the father” (Walker & Edwall, 1987, p. 146).

Perhaps (at least in part) as a result of the dynamics produced by the batterer’s undermining, battered mothers have roughly twice the rate of physically abusing children that nonbattered mothers do (Holden et al., 1998; M. Straus, 1990). Although the increased risk is much lower than for batterers, who are seven times more likely than are nonbatterers to physically abuse children (M. Straus, 1990), it nonetheless indicates that battered mothers often need assistance in reestablishing parental authority and in using nonviolent methods of discipline.

Research indicates that, in domestic violence cases, parenting by the mother that includes consistent discipline combined with punishments that are not harsh has an important positive impact on the children’s ability to cope well with exposure to the batterer’s behavior (Martinez-Torteya, Bogat, von Eye, & Levendosky, 2009). Therefore, a batterer’s undermining of the maternal authority should be considered a highly significant addition to the damage his abusive and violent behaviors are causing in the lives of children.

#### ❖ EFFECTS ON MOTHER–CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

The undermining of the mother’s parental authority is just one aspect of a batterer’s potential interference with his partner’s ability to maintain close relationships with her children. Distance and tension between battered women and their children come from myriad sources (J. Erickson & Henderson, 1998), and children who have been exposed to domestic violence present unusually high levels of behavioral difficulties when interacting with their mothers (Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Shapiro, & Semel, 2003). We have observed that these tensions appear to spring from the batterer’s style both as partner and as parent; here as elsewhere, the batterer’s entire pattern of conduct needs to be seen as interwoven with his parenting, because his behavior can cause profound disruptions in relationships between the mother and the children, between him and the children, and between siblings.

### Direct Interference With Her Parenting

Returning to our scenario, we encounter a scene on the second night when Felicia has a nightmare and attempts to climb into her parents' bed for security but is sent away by Roger. Roger's behavior illustrates what we have observed to be the single most common form of direct interference by our clients in their partners' parenting: preventing the mother from holding or comforting a crying or frightened child or in other ways forbidding her to provide parental care. We have had widespread reports from the partners of our clients of being blocked even from picking up a crying infant; in a custody evaluation performed by Bancroft, the batterer (a college professor) stated that his former partner had been "spoiling" their 11-month-old baby boy by going to him when he cried in the night and "fawning over him." A batterer can become particularly irate when his partner attempts to comfort a child who has been frightened or hurt by him, as he sees such assistance as implicitly criticizing his conduct. Such interference can contribute over time to the children forming the impression that their mother is not a dependable parent or does not care about protecting them.

Battered mothers can begin to lose control of the parenting process before they are even pregnant, as they tend to have less power than do nonbattered women over decisions regarding birth control and are more likely to have unwanted pregnancies (Goodwin et al., 2000) and to have more children (McKibben, De Vos, & Newberger, 1989). Men who batter are about twice as likely as other men to be party to an abortion and almost three times as likely as other men to have been involved in three or more abortions, suggesting that they are more likely to cause an unwanted pregnancy; they are also far more likely than nonbattering men to be involved in conflicts over abortion with their partners, either to prevent the woman from having an abortion or to compel her to have one (Silverman et al., 2010). They are significantly more likely to fail to use condoms or use them inconsistently, force sexual intercourse without a condom, have sexual intercourse outside the relationship (increasing the risk of sexually transmitted disease), and have fathered three or more children (Raj et al., 2006). One of the top predictors of whether a woman will be battered during pregnancy is whether her partner is opposed to her having the child (Chu et al., 2010). Findings from a Nicaraguan study suggest that the increased number of children in homes where battering occurs

may be a result rather than a cause of the domestic violence because almost all of the battering began early in the marriage (Ellsberg, Pena, Herrera, & Liljestrand, cited in Heise et al., 1999). Studies from many countries have shown that women are less likely to use contraception if they fear that their husbands will react violently to their doing so (review in Heise et al., 1999). Adolescent girls who have had abusive boyfriends have increased rates of pregnancy (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001).

A tremendous number of studies have found that women who are battered during or shortly before pregnancy have less access to prenatal care, higher rates of smoking, less healthful pregnancy weight (too low or too high), poor maternal health, and poorer pregnancy outcomes (Chu et al., 2010; Shah & Shah, 2010; Bailey & Daugherty, 2007; Silverman et al., 2006; and many more—see the citations within these articles). The level of psychological abuse that a mother is subjected to by her partner is an important predictor of pregnancy outcomes, not just physical violence (Bailey & Daugherty, 2007). Given all of the findings listed above, violence during pregnancy should be considered an important measure of a batterer's level of disregard for child safety and his willingness to harm the child as part of harming the mother. As we discuss in Chapter 7, a batterer's violence and psychological abusiveness during pregnancy should thus be an important factor in the determination of a batterer's visitation with children postseparation.

We have often remarked over the years on the frequency with which battered women report difficulties with their early mother-infant bonding. Although this may result partly from depression or other post-trauma effects of the battering, much of the cause may be concrete and direct. We have had cases, for example, of batterers who forbid mothers from breast-feeding, declaring it distasteful.

Our clients' reactions to pregnancy and childbirth can be understood in the light of their underlying outlook, particularly their typical expectation of being the center of attention. During pregnancy, the focus of attention in a couple necessarily shifts to the expecting mother. This marked shift in the dynamics of a relationship are received poorly by a large proportion of batterers, who demand continued labor and caretaking from the mother, refuse to increase their own contribution, and feel jealous of her attention to the coming child (see similar observations in Campbell, Oliver, & Bullock, 1998). Pregnant, battered women receive noticeably lower levels of emotional support from

their partners than do nonbattered women (Curry & Harvey, 1998). Furthermore, because of their sexual entitlement, some of our clients resent the physical changes that pregnancy brings, wanting their partners to remain thin and sexually available (see similar discussion in M. Straus et al., 1980).

The effects of these dynamics have been recognized increasingly by medical personnel. Obstetricians comment on the frequency with which abused women miss prenatal appointments, and they may observe additional warning signs of domestic violence, such as inadequate weight gain (as discussed earlier), which can be due to stress or to the batterer pressuring her not to get "fat"; depression; or high anxiety (Eisenstat & Bancroft, 1999). Abused women often enter prenatal care late (review in Heise et al., 1999; B. Parker, McFarlane, Soeken, Torres, & Campbell, 1993). In a case of ours, the battering father heavily pressured the mother to have a natural childbirth and called her "bitch" in the midst of the delivery when she finally accepted an epidural.

Not all batterers increase their violence during pregnancy: About half of batterers actually decrease their violence during this period, and for another quarter, the pregnancy does not affect their abusiveness in either direction (Campbell et al., 1998). These findings support our contention (discussed in Chapter 7) that a batterer's level of violence or of psychological abusiveness during pregnancy may be one useful indicator in distinguishing batterers who are a high risk to children, as it may demonstrate a tendency to ignore the children's well-being when wishing to abuse the mother.

Following childbirth, the demands on a mother's attention become even greater, which can engender further collision with the batterer's entitlement. A recurring statement from our clients who have infant children is, "She cares more about the baby than she does about me," revealing their belief that a woman's parenting responsibilities should not reduce her availability to look after her partner.

Direct interference with the mother's parenting can continue through the years, taking various forms that include harsh and frequent criticism of her parenting, retaliation against her for failing to follow his parenting instructions, controlling the family finances and refusing to give her adequate resources to pay for the children's basic necessities (which is sometimes followed by calling her an irresponsible parent for not feeding or clothing the children properly), not permitting the children to speak to their mother when he is angry at

her, and many others. Batterers have also been found to cause sleep deprivation for mothers and children, both through deliberate tactics and through the stress created by their abuse (Humphreys, Lowe, & Williams, 2009). Furthermore, many batterers isolate their partners socially (M. Dutton, 1992; Jaffe, Wolfe, et al., 1990), and such restrictions on a mother's freedom can interfere with her ability to obtain medical care for her children, involve them in a social life, or take them to participate in stimulating activities. Taken together, the array of common behaviors by batterers described above represents a serious potential threat to children's healthy attachment to their mothers (see also Jaffe, Wolfe, et al., 1990).

#### Indirect Interference With Her Parenting

Battering leaves many emotional and physical scars on a mother, any of which can make it harder for her to care for her children (review in Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2000; Osofsky, 1998). For example, battered mothers have high rates of PTSD and depression (C. Taylor, Guterman, Lee, & Rathouz, 2009; Bargai et al., 2007; Edelson et al., 2007; Casanueva et al., 2005), which in turn make it more difficult for them to be fully attentive and nurturing with young children (Letourneau, Fidick, & Willms, 2007; Levendosky et al., 2006; Levendosky et al., 2003). Widely recognized effects of beatings and of attendant psychological abuse include depression, anxiety, nightmares and sleeplessness, flashbacks, crying easily, rage, loss of self-confidence, and others (Vitanza, Vogel, & Marshall, 1995; M. Dutton, 1992). Battered women exhibit an extensive array of health problems compared to other women, as a large collection of studies has established (review in Dolezal, McCollum, & Callahan, 2009), which can in turn interfere with their parenting. Battered mothers have been found to have slightly higher rates than nonbattered mothers of physical or psychological aggression toward their children and substantially higher rates of spanking their children or neglecting them (C. Taylor et al., 2009).

A mother who is struggling with the experience of being battered may find it difficult to be an engaged, energetic parent (Margolin, 1998; Osofsky, 1998), to focus attention on her children (Holden et al., 1998), and to keep track of the myriad details that child care and schooling require. Her patience may be short, and thus, she may be



prone to grouching and yelling, which can be compounded by the erosion of her authority as described earlier; a number of studies have found that battered mothers experience unusually high parenting stress (e.g., Zerk et al., 2009), including studies that looked specifically at the experience of Latinas (Edelson et al., 2007) and Latina immigrants (Baker, Perilla, & Norris, 2001). (This study also found that the abusers do not feel increased parenting stress compared to nonbattering men.) If the batterer subjects her to heavy criticism of her parenting, as is common (Hughes & Marshall, 1995), she may develop a timid or indecisive parenting style (Letourneau et al., 2007). Battered mothers appear to have lowered awareness of their children's needs (Osofsky, 1998) and to have more frequent conflicts with their children (Holden et al., 1998), perhaps largely due to the additional behavioral challenges that their children present (Zerk et al., 2009). At the same time, they receive a lower level of social support than other mothers (Letourneau et al., 2007) from which to draw in facing this range of challenges.

In an important finding, Mbilinyi and colleagues (2007) reported that battered mothers themselves observe the negative effects that the batterer has on her parenting; nearly 90% of mothers in this study reported that at some point they had been unable to care for their children in the way they wanted to because of the abuser's behavior. About half of the mothers reported that they had at least once used overly harsh punishment of their children while under stress from the abuse. As discussed in Chapter 2, this same study found that a high percentage of batterers had harmed the woman at some point to punish her for standing up for her children. These results, taken together, indicate to us that criticism of battered mothers under the assumption that they are not aware of their children's distress is largely misguided and that supportive interventions would be more likely to be relevant and effective.

Battering can contribute to the development of a substance abuse problem by the mother, which can in turn lead her to lose custody of her children to the state or to the batterer. One study found battered women to have 16 times the rate of alcohol abuse of nonbattered women (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988), and another found that more severe battering correlated with higher alcohol use on the woman's part (Clark & Foy, 2000). However, we observe that our clients typically claim that their partners' alcohol problems predate the abuse.

Children of battered women can target their mother for their angry resentments toward the batterer, as they often do not feel comfortable expressing their anger directly to him (Bancroft, 2005; Roy, 1988). This dynamic is illustrated in our scenario, with Felicia blaming her mother for the cancellation of the family canoe trip. Similar dynamics can shape postseparation interactions. A recurring theme in our work with divorced couples, for example, is that the batterer may refuse to see the children unless he is catered to regarding all the visitation arrangements, with the children then targeting their mother for their disappointment over not seeing their father. If the mother attempts to protect her children by placing restrictions on the batterer's visitation, children may resent her for that as well (Peled, 1998).

The violent and aggressive behavior that commonly appears in children exposed to batterers puts further stress on their relationships with their mothers, as it typically falls to her to attempt to find ways to manage those behaviors. One study found that this aggressiveness in children can create a loop of reactions and counterreactions between mothers and children that causes deterioration of relationships (Jaffe, Wolfe, et al., 1990), but more recent research found battered mothers to generally be responding well to the difficult challenges posed by their children's behavior (Levendosky et al., 2003).

A battered mother's fear of the batterer can cause her to change her parenting behavior when he is present; in one study, 34% of battered mothers reported making such changes as compared to only 5% of nonbattered mothers (Holden & Ritchie, 1991). These battered mothers were divided almost evenly between those who become more lenient when in the presence of the batterer and those who become harsher.

Violence and other frightening behaviors by a batterer can make it necessary for a mother to adjust her parenting to avoid recurrences. Some of our clients have used violence against the mother when blaming her for not adequately controlling the children's misbehavior or noise levels (also in Jouriles & Norwood, 1995). Such violence can cause the mother to develop overly strict rules for her children's behavior in order to protect the children and herself from the batterer's reactions (Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Walker & Edwall, 1987) or to become generally overprotective (Osofsky, 1998).

Therapists and child protective workers often comment to us on children's tendencies to feel bitter toward their mothers for failing to leave a batterer or for not challenging him. Children are largely

unaware of the complex obstacles involved in leaving an abusive relationship (described comprehensively in Davies, Lyon, & Monti-Catania, 1998), nor do they always realize the ways in which the batterer may retaliate against their mother on the occasions when she does assert herself. A crucial bind thus arises for the mother: Her children are likely to be resentful toward her both for what happens when she does resist the batterer's will, in that she is perceived as causing him to erupt, and for what happens when she does not do so, in that she is perceived as tolerating the abuse or as failing to stand up for the children's interests (see also Johnston & Campbell, 1993b). We observe that the great majority of children exposed to domestic violence respond to separation with potent, mixed feelings; they commonly undergo an initial period of relief, but this is typically followed by their increasingly missing their father and desiring to reunite the family. They may turn resentful and critical of their mother over time for "not being willing to work on it" or for "not forgiving Dad and giving him another chance," sometimes echoing phrases that they are hearing from him. The children thus tend to resent their mother if she leaves the father and breaks up the family (Peled, 1998) but also if she fails to leave him and "puts up with" the abuse (Roy, 1988).

Because of the traumatic effects to children of seeing or hearing violence, they are in acute need of support, reassurance, and closeness from their mother in the aftermath of an assault. However, this is precisely the period during which she may be the most unavailable to them emotionally because of her own shock, physical injuries, and other effects of domestic violence (Jaffe, Hurley, et al., 1990; Wolak & Finkelhor, 1998). For the mother to be unable to nurture the children at their time of greatest need represents a significant rupture in their perceptions of her as caring and as reliable. We observe in some children of battered women a lingering sense that their mother has abandoned them and cannot be counted on to protect them. In periods between assaults, the mother may feel forced to focus on meeting her partner's needs in order to prevent the next assault, which can leave her children feeling neglected.

Particular attention should be drawn to a critical theme underlying most of our discussion of family dynamics so far: the typical ability of men who batter to shape the children's views of both parents and to condition children to misinterpret the abuse that they observe in a way that leads them to blame their mother and to minimize the abuse.

One study, for example, found that exposure to domestic violence affected children's views of their mother more negatively than it did their views of their father (Sternberg et al., cited in Wolak & Finkelhor, 1998). It should also be noted that the batterer's manipulation of how he is perceived as a father is likely to have an impact on his partner's perceptions as well. We find, for example, that partners of our clients generally describe the men as good fathers when responding to general questions, but when more specific questions are asked, they reveal more problems in the man's parenting (see similar observations in Holden & Ritchie, 1991).

In reviewing the wide range of ways in which batterers' violence and other behaviors can damage mother-child relationships, it is important to note the finding of Holden and Ritchie (1991) that the single best predictor of behavior problems in children exposed to domestic violence was the mother's level of parenting stress, not her overall life stress. In addition, battered mothers report much higher levels of parenting stress than do nonbattered mothers, and their likelihood to use physical aggression with their children is correlated with their levels of parenting stress (Holden et al., 1998). Battered mothers do not show marked differences by ethnic group in the levels or natures of their parenting problems (Holden et al., 1998). Thus, the damage that domestic violence can cause to mother-child relationships may be the most serious cause of distress for children of battered women.

However, a growing body of research indicates that battered mothers are doing a stronger job of parenting than many professionals assume to be the case, despite all the obstacles. There is evidence, for example, that as children get older, the parenting of battered women rises to the level of other mothers, indicating that victims of domestic violence seek ways to compensate for the negative effects the abuser is having on the family (Letourneau et al., 2007). A recent study of women who have been involved with the child welfare system found that the parenting of abused women improves as more time passes since the mother was last abused by her partner, and that, even while the abuse is active, battered mothers were parenting at roughly the same level as other women, including showing no increased risk to be spanking (Casanueva, Martin, Runyan, Barth, & Bradley, 2008). One possible interpretation of these findings, raised by the authors, is that these statistics may be coming out more or less even because, while some battered mothers are experiencing deterioration of the quality of care they give their children, others are actually improving

their parenting to above-average levels out of their awareness of the need to compensate for the impacts on their children of exposure to abuse. Many battered mothers manage to parent effectively despite the tremendous challenges that battering causes for mother-child relationships, continuing to respond well to their children's needs (Letourneau et al., 2007; Levendosky et al., 2003; Holden et al., 1998). A large portion of battered mothers reportedly are aware that they need help in dealing with their children (J. Erickson & Henderson, 1998) and may therefore be open to parenting assistance. Thus, the parenting of battered mothers shows a range of responses to circumstances depending on factors including the severity of the batterer's interference, her strengths as a parent, and the resources available to her.

#### Harming Her for Her Efforts to Protect

While it is widely believed in the public and among child protection system personnel that battered women do not make efforts to protect their children, both research and clinical experience make it clear to us that a large proportion of mothers attempt to intercede on their children's behalf and pay a high price for doing so. Mbilinyi and colleagues (2007) found, for example, that over 48% of battered women reported having been physically hurt by the batterer at least once to punish her for intervening, and 35% said that he had carried such retaliation out against her multiple times. We have observed clinically that the batterer's punishment of the mother for protecting her children many times takes the form of mental cruelty; thus these statistics, already high, about physical retaliation do not capture the full weight of retaliation that battered mothers are enduring. In addition, we have dealt clinically with two dozen or more cases where the batterer's reaction to the mother's protests has been to deliberately harm the children even more heavily. In this context, where not only the mother but also the children may pay a painful price for her efforts to stand up for them, we cannot be surprised if her level of intervention may decrease over time.

#### Requiring Her to Follow His Parenting Dictates

The batterer can very directly damage mother-child relationships by telling the mother what she must do with respect to the children under the implied (or sometimes even stated) threat that she could be

harmful if she does not obey or if the children do not obey. Mbilinyi and colleagues (2007) found that nearly 80% of battered women reported at least one incident when they were physically harmed by the abuser to punish the mother for the children's behavior, and 40% of the women said this had occurred often. This kind of violence should be seen as requiring the mother to damage her relationship with her children; the threat of future violence forces her to take steps to make sure that whatever behavior upset the batterer does not recur, which in turn will tend to require either being harsh with the children or pleading with them, both of which disrupt healthy parent-child functioning. Furthermore, this behavior is likely to increase guilt and shame for the children as they are witnesses to their mother being victimized in a way that makes the children appear to be at fault.

#### Children's Tendencies to Distance Themselves

In the context of the range of dynamics that we have discussed, children of battered women can feel an impetus to draw away from their mothers emotionally (McGee, 2000; McMahon & Pence, 1995), and this may be especially true for boys (McGee, 2000; Johnston & Campbell, 1993b). We have observed both boys and girls who have exhibited a desire to disassociate themselves from their battered mother, beginning as young as age 5. This tendency appears to be more pronounced in boys who are roughly age 8 and older and in teenagers of both sexes; we find it is most prevalent of all in the teen boys with whom we have worked, who often stand out for their audible tones of contempt, derision, and shame in discussing their mothers. Children tend over time to absorb the batterer's disrespect for their mother, which can lead them to feel superior to her and ashamed to be connected to her. Furthermore, they may have well-founded fears that the batterer will retaliate against them with verbal abuse or violence if he sees them as allied with their mother. These dynamics can be exacerbated if the batterer has a history of rewarding the children for speaking inappropriately to their mother or for distancing themselves from her, as Roger did with Kyle in our scenario. The batterer may openly ridicule or shame children for being close to their mother (McGee, 2000). We have encountered this most frequently in verbal taunts that many of our clients make toward their sons, calling them "Mama's boy." In addition, children may feel that their mother has failed to

protect them from their father's abusiveness for reasons that we have already explored.

These dynamics, when taken together, can create powerful incentives for children to keep their mothers at arm's length. The resultant psychological damage to children can be grave, as they are losing the strength of their connection to the person who in most cases is their best potential source of love, nurturing, and appropriate parental guidance.

### Violence by Children Against Their Mothers

As we have alluded to briefly, children of battered women have elevated rates of assaultive behavior toward their mothers (M. Dutton, 1992; Hanks, 1992; Holden & Ritchie, 1991), particularly preteens and teenagers and particularly boys (Johnston & Campbell, 1993b; B. Carlson, 1990; M. Straus et al., 1980). This behavior sometimes involves conscious reproduction of the father's behavior; for example, M. Straus and colleagues (1980) reported instances where children threatened to have the father hit the mother if she did not do what they wanted her to do. Roy (1988) states that about 20% of the preteen and teenage boys in her study "joined their fathers in victimizing their mothers. They identified with the aggressor and ultimately became the aggressors—a role they both loathed and admired" (p. 64). We also receive occasional reports of assaultiveness toward mothers beginning at younger ages.

In our experience, children's violence against their battered mothers appears to arise most frequently in cases where the parents have separated and one child begins to assume the batterer's role. Teenage boys can be taller and stronger than their mothers and thus may develop the capacity to be physically intimidating. In the great majority of our interviews with battered mothers who have become targets of assaults by their teen boys, we find that the boy is not only using violence but is reproducing an array of abusive behaviors that he learned from the batterer. In one of our cases involving a 13-year-old, for example, the boy interrogated the mother about her social contacts and attempted to govern what times she could leave or not leave the house, just as his father used to do; he also punched his mother in the leg, leaving a visible bruise. In another case of ours, an older teen boy threatened his mother that he would rip her arms off and throw them in the trash, which he reported to his therapist with audible pride. He stated, "My mother only wants me so that she can collect child

support," and he referred to her as a "lunatic" and a "liar," reproducing statements frequently made by his father.

Teenagers' reactions are summarized by Jaffe and Geffner (1998):

Adolescents may turn against the mother in an attempt to win the approval, love, and affection of the father as they begin to identify with the power of the abuser. They may have seen that there were no negative consequences for the abusive use of power and control, and they may begin to model the aggressive behaviors in their own relationships with peers and [with] their mother. (p. 387)

A transition from being the mother's protector to participating in abusing her is sometimes observed in children at this stage of life.

#### ❖ USE OF CHILDREN AS WEAPONS AGAINST THE MOTHER

Among the most potentially damaging parenting choices that batterers can make, leading to an array of unhealthy family dynamics, is the involvement of children as arms in efforts to control or to abuse their partners. Not all batterers draw their children into the abuse, but we have been struck over the years by how many do (see also Lapierre, 2010; Mullender et al., 2002; McCloskey, 2001; J. Erickson & Henderson, 1998; Peled, 1998; McMahan & Pence, 1995). Our discussions with the partners of our clients make clear to us that the involvement of the children can be one of the most upsetting and intimidating aspects of the battered woman's experience. It is perhaps precisely the effectiveness of these tactics that makes them recur so commonly in our clients' behaviors.

#### Children as Weapons During the Relationship

A very large percentage of battered women report that the abuser has used the children to harm or control her (Mbilinyi et al., 2007). Behaviors reported by a majority of victims include the batterer using the children to monitor the mother's behavior, intimidating her by his aggression toward the children, using the children as a way to maintain contact with the woman when she was attempting to break away, and others. Just slightly fewer than half of the mothers also reported that the abuser attempted to turn the children against her and used the



children to pressure her for a reunion (Beeble, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2007). In findings that have important policy implications, this study found that fathers were significantly more likely than batterers who were not the children's father to use the children as weapons against the mother; that batterers were more likely to do so when the woman was attempting to end the relationship; and that those batterers who had court-ordered visitation made a higher rate of attempts to harm the woman through the children than other batterers did. In an equally important finding, this study reported that those batterers who use the highest rates of psychological abuse toward the mother are the most likely to attempt to harm her through the children.

An important related finding from another study was that a majority (55%) of battered women reported that the batterer punished the children severely and blamed it on the mother, and more than 20% of the mothers said that this happened often (Mbilinyi et al., 2007). It is reasonable to consider such behavior deliberately divisive, and we have observed the success that some abusers have over time in persuading the children that their mother is in fact responsible for his behavior toward them. This same study found that 80% of battered mothers reported that the abuser had used the children as pawns against her, and nearly 50% reported that he had done so often.

Depending on the context, most of the undermining and interfering behaviors that we have already described can also be used as deliberate weapons of abuse. A few behavioral examples from our clients include refusing to allow his partner to enter the room where their 3-year-old lay in bed calling for her because he was angry that she had arrived home late that evening from visiting her older son in the hospital; punishing his partner for refusing to quit her job by telling their young daughter, "Mommy likes to go to her work because there is a man there that she has sex with"; intimidating his partner into dropping her restraining order by threatening to reveal humiliating information about her personal history to the children; and training their 2-year-old, who was just learning to talk, to call the mother "Mommy bitch."

Several categories of behavior by batterers involving the children appear to figure prominently in the abuse of battered mothers. One is *direct mistreatment of the children* in retaliation against her. As noted in Chapter 2, for example, one mild-mannered client of ours admitted in session that he had gone into his teenage daughter's closet and destroyed her prom dress with a pair of scissors in a rage at his wife;

he was open with us about the fact that his goal was to hurt the mother. In another striking case, one of our early clients admitted that he had deliberately given the couple's infant spoiled milk to retaliate against the mother. It should be noted that both of these men had used low levels of physical violence relative to other batterers in their groups but were capable of severe psychological cruelty. A number of our clients over the years have knocked over Christmas trees, broken children's new birthday presents, caused the children to miss important events in their lives such as weddings or funerals, or have physically assaulted children, all in contexts where the batterer's focus was explicitly on abusing the mother.

*Deliberate endangerment of the children* can be similarly intimidating to the mother. In one of our cases, the father spun the car repeatedly in circles in a snow-covered parking lot with their infant girl in the back-seat. On other occasions, this same batterer would balance the infant on the edge of a high stair, watching for the mother's fear, and then would laugh at her reaction. A large number of our clients have driven recklessly with children in the car in response to arguments. In addition to the intrinsic effects of such acts, they communicate an implied threat of more serious harm to the children in the future.

A batterer may *require the children to monitor and to report on their mother's behavior* during periods when he is away from her as part of maintaining her isolation. The effect on the children is to create a grave loyalty conflict and burden, as they do not wish to betray their mother but are afraid of withholding information from their father. At the same time, they can gradually become attached to the power that this position gives them over their mother, reversing the proper parent-child roles in the family and tending to infantilize her. He also may *hurt the mother with information the children reveal inadvertently*; for example, he may hear the children say things that indicate that the mother has taken the children to a place where he has forbidden her to go or to see people he has forbidden her to see. Mothers have been observed to be afraid to disclose domestic violence to doctors with children present for fear that the batterer will find out through them that she was telling and will retaliate by harming her (Zink & Jacobson, 2003).

*Neglect of the children* can also be used as a form of retaliation against the mother. For example, a client of ours who was angry that his wife asked him to contribute more to cleaning up after dinner

(which he viewed as their daughters' job) responded by disappearing from the home for three days, leaving his partner to contend with the daughters' upset and worry over his long absence and with unrelieved responsibility for their five children.

A substantial number of our clients have used *threats to harm the children* in response to their partners' efforts to resist being controlled. Studies have found batterers to be more than three times (McCloskey, 2001) and more than four times (McCloskey et al., 1995) more likely than nonbatterers to make such threats, with more than two thirds of batterers making such a threat at least once. Threats to harm children become even more sharply intimidating in cases where a batterer's past behaviors demonstrate to the mother that he is capable of carrying them out. The most common threat of this kind reported to us by partners of our clients is that he will leave the family and not provide financial support, which could leave the mother and children destitute. (On domestic violence as a cause of homelessness, see Zorza, 1991.) One partner of a client, who had left the batterer for a period of time and was now living with him again, informed us that she had allowed him to move back in after he had threatened to molest their daughter during his visitation with her. In another case, the batterer threatened on several occasions to wake up their sleeping infant if the mother did not do as she was told. These intimidating tactics sometimes escalate to threats to kill the children; we have had many dozens of reports over the years of clients of ours using this tactic, including sometimes threatening that they will kill their partners, the children, and then themselves. These threats have not always come from those batterers who have histories of the most frequent or brutal violence, yet they sometimes cause similar levels of terror.

Partners of our clients report that an equally terrifying use of the children as weapons is the batterer's *threatening to take her children away from her*, which can take a number of forms. One is to threaten that, if she ever leaves him, he will *take custody* of the children away from her through family court litigation (Jaffe, Lemon, & Poisson, 2003). Another is to threaten to *report her to the state's child protective service*, alleging that she abuses the children or is alcoholic or making other claims that may or may not be true (Mullender et al., 2002). If the child protective service does become involved, the state may place the children in foster care; child protective services often have failed to take domestic violence into account and therefore have held

mothers responsible for the effects on children of the batterer's behavior (S. Johnson & Sullivan, 2008; Strega et al., 2008; Echlin & Marshall, 1995). In some cases, the batterer leaves the home, and child protective services then place the children in his care; Bancroft was GAL in a case where child protective personnel placed a 9-year-old boy with the battering father despite their awareness that his violence had already caused the mother to lose custody of her two teenage children by a different father. (This case is described in detail in Chapter 5.) We find that our clients sometimes present themselves to child protective personnel as concerned, somewhat detached men who simply are trying to "help her with her problems with her children." In a few cases, the batterer has appeared actually to desire that the woman lose custody of her children to the state as part of his pattern of cruelty toward her. We find that lack of awareness of the above dynamics on the part of many child protective workers sometimes can allow batterers to succeed in using the child protection system against the mother.

*Kidnapping* is another threat that must be taken seriously. A large-scale study of kidnapping found that the great majority of parental abductions are carried out by fathers or by their agents (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1990), and most parental abductions take place in the context of a history of domestic violence (Greif & Hegar, 1993). We have been involved in a number of cases where batterers have kidnapped children and then succeeded in winning custody of them.

The threat to take the mother's children from her by legally *winning custody* is used by many batterers (Ptacek, 1997; Pence & Paymar, 1993). In a surprising number of our cases, the batterer has succeeded in carrying out this threat. As noted in Chapter 1, batterers are more likely than are nonbattering men to seek custody (American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family, 1996; McMahon & Pence, 1995; Liss & Stahly, 1993), and when they do so, they often win (Logan, Walker, Jordan, Horvath, & Leukefeld, 2003; Logan, Walker, & Jordan, 2002; McMahon & Pence, 1995). Batterers have numerous advantages over battered mothers in custody disputes, as we explore in detail in Chapter 5.

Finally, a batterer's threats to *kill the children* cannot be taken lightly. Batterers sometimes do murder children, usually in conjunction with a homicide or attempted homicide against the mother. Killings of children by men tend to take place in the context of partner violence (Websdale, 1999), and batterers kill one or more children in 10% to 15% of domestic violence homicides (Langford et al., 1999).

In a well-publicized case in New England, a batterer shot four children to death in front of their mother and then killed himself—but did not attempt to kill her. This case illustrates the role that the batterer's desire to emotionally injure the mother can play in an assault or murder of her children.

A batterer's actions to harm children, threaten to harm them, or take them away from their mother can be sources of severe fear and emotional trauma for battered women and their children. This critical aspect of domestic violence appears to be widely underestimated for its prevalence and destructiveness.

### Children as Weapons After Separation

Our clients sometimes increase their use of the children as weapons after separating from their partners as other avenues of control or of intimidation become less available. A batterer's first goal can be to pressure his partner into a reunification or to retaliate against her, and children can be an effective vehicle toward either goal (Mullender et al, 2002; R. Straus, 1995). Some batterers begin to do so postseparation who had not chronically done so before (Mullender et al., 2002), though more commonly it is part of a continued pattern. Clients of ours have told their children such things as, "Mommy went to court and got an order that says, if I go to the house, I will get put in jail," "I'm not living with you because your mother is angry at me," and, "Your mother is having sex with another man right now, and that is why she doesn't want me in the house." We have rarely had a client admit to his children that the separation resulted from his violence or abusiveness. Through distorting events in this way, some batterers can lead children to blame their mother for the separation and to pressure her to allow their father to return (Hart, 1990a). Children typically miss abusive fathers during separation and wish for their return to the home (Peled, 1998), except in the case of the most terrorizing batterers. This disruption and tension in a mother's relationship with her child can exacerbate the fear and ambivalence that most battered women feel when attempting to leave a batterer. Dozens of partners of our clients have reported to us that they have returned to the batterer after a period of separation because of pressure from their children.

Batterers can use children as vehicles for communicating with their former partners, a tactic that becomes particularly important if the woman has obtained a restraining order or has taken other steps

to indicate that she wishes that the batterer not contact her. One client of ours had said to his wife prior to separation, "I love you, and that's for life. If I can't have you, no one else will, and we're going to die together." After separation, he said to the children, "Tell your mother I will always love her." The children had no awareness of the implications of this message.

Preexisting problems in the parenting behavior of a particular batterer tend to intensify after separation for reasons that we have discussed above, including the retaliatory tendencies common in batterers and the absence of supervision by his former partner. Thus, issues such as the undermining of her authority, efforts to turn the children against her, or threatening to take the children away from her can become more pronounced in this period. To these, he also may add inconsistency in visiting with the children, retaliatory or intimidating custody and visitation proceedings, and exorbitant expenditures or promises in order to curry the children's favor. If the mother attempts to begin a new relationship, he may use the children to interfere by turning them against the new partner, making a groundless child abuse report, or filing for custody. It is common for batterers to threaten to take the children away from the battered woman by proving her to be an unfit mother (Doyme et al., 1999). Threatened or actual litigation regarding custody or visitation can become a critical avenue for the batterer to maintain control after separation (Shepard, cited in R. Straus, 1995).

#### ❖ THE BATTERER'S IMPACT ON OTHER ASPECTS OF FAMILY FUNCTIONING

A few important additional ways in which batterers can affect patterns of interaction within their families call for our attention. We find little discussion of these dynamics in the existing literature regarding the effects on children of exposure to domestic violence.

##### Sowing of Divisions

Batterers can cause divisions among family members in a range of ways, adding to the divisive impact of the typical sources of family tension that we have already reviewed (see also Bancroft, 2005; Mullender et al., 2002; McGee, 2000). The reason why some batterers

appear to be invested in creating divisions in their families can perhaps best be illustrated by observing what tends to happen if they do not do so. In cases where mothers and children succeed in remaining unified against a batterer, supporting each other and refusing to act as agents of the abuse, he can lose much of his ability to control and to manipulate family members. In such a family, the mother may increase her self-esteem and self-confidence through her healthy relationships with her children and through her successes as a mother; we have spoken to a number of battered women who state that their relationships with their children were an important factor in their being able ultimately to leave the abuser. Some batterers appear to be aware that their access to power and control is threatened if this kind of solidarity exists within the family, and they take steps to prevent alliances from forming.

Unfortunately, our experience indicates that whether or not this is a deliberate goal, the behavior of the majority of batterers with children does prevent family unity. Although we occasionally hear clients of ours complain that their families have “turned against” them, we find much more commonly that families of batterers experience factionalism and mutual resentment (see also Walker & Edwall, 1987), except in cases where the batterer is not the children’s legal or emotional father. Our observations are echoed by Johnston and Campbell (1993b), who state that families affected by domestic violence commonly have “a great many splits and alignments among the family members, and children’s alliances keep shifting from one parent to the other” (p. 293).

Among the most overtly divisive behaviors is the strong tendency in batterers to use *favoritism* toward one of the children (McGee, 2000; review in Peled, 2000). This dynamic was illustrated in our opening scenario, where Roger rejected Felicia’s requests for help with a project but then joined Kyle in a game with his friends. In a case of ours, the mother described how the father would arrive home from work to two children who were very excited to see him, “and he would give all his attention to our son and brush off our daughter like she was a mosquito.” She reported further that the daughter was only permitted to spend time with her father when he wanted to nap, at which time he would allow her to sleep by his side.

Our clients may favor either boys or girls, although we observe that the former is more common (as does McGee, 2000). When the favored child is a boy and there are also girls in the family, the favoritism often takes an overtly sexist form, with father and son bonding

in superiority to females (Johnston & Campbell, 1993b). When the favored child is a girl, the father–daughter relationship can sometimes take on a romantic aspect in which the mother is in part replaced as the father’s partner; in these cases, we have heightened concern about the possibility of boundary violations by the father. We also have observed that batterers may use favoritism in a constantly shifting way, so that which child is in the father’s good graces keeps changing.

Favoritism can have deep, long-lasting, divisive effects even in the absence of domestic violence. We are familiar with cases where adult siblings in their 30s or even older are still struggling in their relationships with each other from the effects of parental favoritism in childhood. When combined with the effects of exposure to domestic violence, the implications become even more worrisome.

We have observed a number of other tactics used by our clients to turn family members against each other. One involves lying to family members about statements that others have supposedly made about them, as with our client who told his children, “Your mother said she is sick and tired of looking after you and wants to put you up for adoption.” Another client said to his daughter, “Your brother told me he thinks your haircut looks stupid, but I think it’s nice.” Several of our clients have deliberately betrayed confidences from private discussions between the parents, such as the man who said to his son, “Mommy said she thinks you just don’t have a head for math.” We have also noticed that batterers sometimes feed family members’ resentments toward each other rather than assisting children to work out their conflicts. Finally, batterers in some of our cases have punished children collectively for the misbehavior of one child, fostering mutual blaming. Many of these behaviors are strikingly similar to divisive tactics used by incest perpetrators, who appear to have similar motives for wishing to turn family members against one another (Leberg, 1997). Divisions among siblings have been noted as a dynamic in families where incest occurs (Giaretto, 1980).

Battering also can contribute to divisions among siblings in ways that are not necessarily conscious or intended on the part of the batterer. Violence among siblings is more common in homes where there is domestic violence (Hurley & Jaffe, 1990; Suh & Abel, 1990), is particularly common in boys, and is likely to occur even where the children are not themselves targets of abuse and regardless of class differences (Hotaling et al., 1990). Those children who most identify with the batterer are especially likely to abuse younger siblings (Hanks, 1992). Some



children may take the role of protector of their mother, while others identify more with the aggressor, contributing to factionalism. In sum, relationships between siblings exposed to domestic violence "are marked by high levels of sibling rivalry and jealousy, with punishment, intimidation, exploitation, and scapegoating passed down the sibling hierarchy from eldest to youngest" (Hurley & Jaffe, 1990, p. 473).

### Scapegoating One of the Children

Providers specializing in child abuse or substance abuse have recognized for many years the prevalence of scapegoating in the families with which they work (e.g., Satir, 1972). They attribute this phenomenon largely to the fear that family members may have of acknowledging the abuse, perhaps even to themselves. In families where the abusive parent is perceived as having disproportionate power, family members have additional reason to channel their resentment, fear, and blame onto one of the children. In family systems terminology, the scapegoated child is known as the *identified patient*, who appears to be selected unconsciously by other family members for his or her vulnerability.

We find that such scapegoating is common among families where there is battering (see also Wagar & Rodway, 1995). In our experience, the battered mother herself is sometimes drawn into this pattern of blaming one child and can lack awareness of the family dynamics that have led to the child's inferior status and acting-out behaviors. Both human service and juvenile court personnel comment on the frequency with which domestic violence turns out to be an underlying dynamic in families that present at first as being involved with services because of a "problem child." We find that our clients can contribute strongly to such scapegoating, which places the family and community focus on the "bad" child and diverts attention from the batterer's conduct.

### The Impact of Chronic Fear and Emotional Deprivation

Underlying the patterns of interaction that we have been discussing is the impact on the children of chronic fear (Jaffe, Hurley, et al., 1990), which can deepen and solidify unhealthy dynamics. Fear may lead family members to react with anger and panic toward anyone who is perceived as upsetting the batterer, whether by misbehaving, standing up to him, or simply attracting too much attention to themselves.

Children living with chronic fear may experience blurring of their identities with that of the batterer as they strive to convince both him and themselves that they share his interests, style, and preferences in order to avoid being endangered by him. This kind of identification with the aggressor is widely recognized as a symptom of abuse-related trauma (D. Dutton & Painter, 1993). In some circumstances, however, fear can be a unifying force, especially in cases where the batterer uses terror tactics, and periods when a family is highly divided may alternate with times when the mother and children support each other.

The presence of emotional deprivation can play a similar role in heightening the effects of other dynamics. Battering in a family shifts the locus of attention from the children to the batterer, which can result in children chronically failing to get their needs met. This deprivation in turn can increase the batterer's ability to manipulate the children as their eagerness for his attention and approval are sharpened. A sense of emotional scarcity in a family can contribute to children perceiving each other as competitors rather than as allies.

### Role Reversal

We want to underline the many ways in which a batterer may cause role reversal between mothers and children, with a number of examples already provided earlier. Over time, the progressive pretification of children and infantilizing of the mother can lead to a situation in which the mother competes with her own children for the batterer's occasional kindness and attention and family members jockey for position to avoid being the target of his rage, insults, or violence. Children may act both as protectors and as controllers of their mothers (Roy, 1988), often feeling responsible for managing their fathers' rage (Doyne et al., 1999; Johnston & Campbell, 1993b) and for taking care of their younger siblings (Jaffe, Wolfe, et al., 1990). There are extreme cases in which the mother becomes psychologically paralyzed over time (e.g., A. Jones, 1994, on the Hedda Nussbaum case) and the batterer's position becomes that of absolute ruler, often with the children acting as his agents.

### Violence Toward Pets

The propensity of men who batter to cause fear in the home by harming a pet has been observed in a number of studies (Ascione et al.,

2007; McCloskey, 2001). Mothers report being highly intimidated by these actions because of their attachment to the pets, and children report being distressed, often deeply, when pets are harmed or killed by the abuser. Many women report that concern for the pets has affected their decisions about whether to leave the abuser or stay with him, particularly their fear about leaving pets behind that he might harm. Pet abuse is correlated with a higher level of violence by the batterer (Ascione et al., 2007), so those women who are feeling the most urgent need to flee, in order to protect their safety and that of their children, will often be the same ones who have the greatest reason to fear for their pets.

At the same time, two separate studies found that children who are exposed to a batterer in the home were three times as likely as other children to have participated in the harming or killing of a pet themselves, and these findings were roughly equal for boys and girls (Ascione et al., 2007; Currie, 2006). This finding illustrates the tendency for children's distress to take aggressive form, the impact of the batterer as a role model, and the capacity of exposure to abuse to cause desensitization in children.

#### ❖ RESILIENCE IN MOTHER-CHILD AND IN SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

We have observed that resilience occurs not just in individuals exposed to domestic violence but in their relationships as well. The destructive patterns that batterers and battering can create between mothers and children alternate "with patterns of caring, rescuing, nurturing, playfulness, and cooperation" (Hurley & Jaffe, 1990, p. 473), and many mothers succeed in finding ways to increase their parenting effectiveness in response to their awareness of the effects of domestic violence (Letourneau et al., 2007; Levendosky, Lynch, & Graham-Bermann, 2000). Some mothers and children remain close and unified despite the batterer's abuse, and some siblings maintain reliably supportive relationships. To our knowledge, however, the resilience of these relationships has not been the focus of any study.

Similarly, children's resistance to the batterer has not been the subject of any study of which we know, although it was examined to a limited extent by Roy (1988). We have encountered many cases in which children and mothers have made escape plans together, have lied to the batterer to protect each other's freedom and safety, or have

called the police during violent incidents. We also have encountered numerous examples of mothers and children supporting each other well in resisting the batterer, in avoiding self-blame, and in recovering from frightening or injurious incidents. We have had a small number of cases in which families have unified to successfully drive the batterer from the home. Even the act of maintaining their own thoughts and opinions can be profound acts of resistance by family members, given the investment of many batterers in controlling the actual views and beliefs of family members (R. Straus, 1995).

Based on our experience, we have identified the following factors that can contribute to the resilience of familial relationships and the maintenance of healthier family dynamics: (a) a mother who is an unusually competent and caring parent, is able to combine kindness with strong discipline, and does particularly well at shielding her children from the effects of the batterer's abuse; (b) mothers and children who receive particularly good support from friends, relatives, their religious organization, or other community resources; (c) a batterer who is not a skilled manipulator or whose violence is obvious and extreme and who therefore is less successful at causing mutual blame, self-blame, and other divisive and unhealthy dynamics; (d) a batterer who is highly neglectful and uninvolved in any aspect of parenting or who abuses his children directly, physically or sexually (although this behavior can also lead to the *most* divided families, depending on the batterer's ability to manipulate some family members while terrorizing, violating, or ignoring others); and (e) a family that receives an especially constructive response from law enforcement, courts, or child protective services in a way that holds the batterer fully accountable for his actions and that offers support to mothers and children to help them remain close.

Our battering clients whose families remain unified present themselves as victims of a family effort to "gang up" on them and rarely recognize their roles in driving family members away from them. After separation, those families who remain the most unified and who have the greatest degree of psychological health among mothers and children appear to be among those most vulnerable to being labeled as having parental alienation, which can result in forced visitation for the children with the batterer or even a change to being in his custody (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Unless actively undermined by the batterer's postseparation behavior, mother-child relationships tend to improve over time once

the batterer is no longer residing with the family (Peled, 1998). Service providers can contribute in many ways to the resilience of these relationships (see Chapters 5 and 9).

#### ❖ SUMMARY

Battering can have a far-reaching impact on patterns of interaction within a family. Many of the symptoms demonstrated to occur in children exposed to domestic violence may result largely from these disruptions in family functioning rather than being entirely the product of traumatic witnessing of assaults. Professionals wishing to intervene in families affected by domestic violence and to offer assistance to children can strengthen their effectiveness by paying attention to critical issues such as the undermining effects on the mother's parental authority, the children's absorption from the batterer of negative views of their mother, and the divisions among family members that abuse tends to engender. Thus, fostering children's long-term recovery and well-being involves both assisting them to heal from the emotionally traumatic effects of the incidents that they have witnessed and intervening to help them to repair and strengthen their bonds with their mothers and with each other. Both child protective personnel and custody evaluators can avoid serious errors by ensuring that dynamics resulting from domestic violence (including important postseparation ones) have been taken into account.

We wish to finish with a word of caution. Professionals who become aware of the implications of domestic violence for children and families sometimes respond with increased impatience or criticism of battered mothers who do not leave the batterer. Such responses can be the product of an inadequate understanding of the complexities of leaving a batterer, including the potential *increased risk to children* from the batterer if she does so. Chapter 5 examines in detail the post-separation role that batterers tend to play as parents and the continued challenges faced by battered mothers in attempting to protect their children.

