



Inspire
Action for Social Change

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A Guide to Convening Your Local Learning Community: Supplemental Tool Kit

**For use with *Facilitating Healing and Change: Building Victim
Centered Approaches for Survivors who are Visiting Parents***

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A Guide to Convening Your Local Learning Community: Supplemental Tool Kit was developed to complement Inspire Action for Social Change's *Facilitating Healing and Change: Building Victim Centered Approaches for Survivors Who are Visiting Parents* publication. This publication was the outcome of a two-year-long learning community process that explored the specific issue of survivors as both victims and visiting parents using a supervised visitation program to see their children. In this exploration Inspire Action for Social Change (Inspire Action), in partnership with the Office on Violence Against Women, convened a learning community of seven Justice for Families grantees (JFF) from around the country to examine the complexity of these scenarios in an effort to enhance our work with victims who are visiting parents. The learning community process illuminated the building blocks needed for a visitation center and their surrounding community to better serve victims who are visiting parents.

A supervised visitation specific learning community is organized and charged with taking up and working to address a current or emerging issue related to supervised visitation and post-separation issues for women, children, and men experiencing domestic violence. The process includes reading and researching,

critically thinking and dialog, practice work, and ultimately, the creation of a paper or tool that can be used by the broader field to address the issue, policy, or practice that was identified. A learning community should begin its work together by establishing a set of working agreements and create an understanding of each person's role and responsibilities.

Inspire Action's process of developing a learning community was intentional and strategic. We prioritized a learning community approach to foster a shared understanding, uncover barriers and challenges, and create new solutions that supervised visitation programs, and their partners can employ to improve the safety and well-being of all victims of domestic violence.

We have found that convening learning communities is an invaluable way to enhance supervised visitation services in many ways. We encourage you to incorporate the learning community process into your practice. This document contains resources and tools to support you in convening a learning community to enhance your programming. While this Tool Kit was specifically created to explore when survivors of domestic violence are visiting their children at a supervised visitation center; we encourage you to use these materials freely and adapt as needed to meet the unique needs of your community.



THE TOOL KIT WORKSHEETS & ACTIVITIES

- ▶ **The Victim as Visiting Parent Exploration Data Snapshot**
- ▶ **Learning Session - Working with Victims as Visiting Parents: Successes and Challenges**
- ▶ **Facilitating Listening Sessions with Survivors of Domestic Violence Who Are Visiting their Children at a Supervised Visitation Center**
- ▶ **Learning from Children and Youth**
- ▶ **Policy Review Tool: Examination of Supervised Visitation Policies that Support Victims who are the Visiting Parent**
- ▶ **Learning From Your Community Partners**

Within the Tool Kit, you will find facilitator tips and notes, worksheets, questions, and sample forms that can be adapted to meet your unique program and community needs. The important aspect of these activities is the process itself, which provides you an opportunity to slow down, explore, and listen deeply to bring about change for everyone involved.

We encourage you to be intentional in

your planning and convening process and think creatively about how you would like to structure your learning community.

Making the following determinations at the beginning of your learning community exploration will enhance your outcome:

- ▶ **Who should be included?**
- ▶ **What are the time commitments?**
- ▶ **When and where will meetings take place?**
- ▶ **How will group decisions be made?**
- ▶ **How will facilitators be identified?**
- ▶ **Will there be a notetaker?**
- ▶ **Which topics will you explore over time? And How will you identify these topics?**
- ▶ **How will you apply your learning to center policy and practice and systems change in the community?**
- ▶ **How will you bring forward adult and child survivor voices?**

Convening a learning community is an opportunity to foster curiosity, learning, and shared leadership. We hope you find the convening of your learning process helpful and supportive of your work and in the lives of the families you serve.

We also suggest you contact Inspire Action for Social Change for additional support and resources as needed. Contact information is available at www.inspireactionforsocialchange.org

The Victim as Visiting Parent Exploration Data Snapshot

FACILITATOR NOTE: *Before you begin forming your learning community, we suggest you start by getting a snapshot of your program, the number of visiting victim parents you are serving, and the reason why they are being referred to your program. We have provided sample worksheet content to aid in this process. Feel free to adapt the document as you see fit, gathering the information that will be the most helpful.*

Knowing what is happening in your program is a good place to start as you think about convening a learning community. The data gathered here will help you quantify the nature of your work with victims as visiting parents. It can also illustrate to community partners the importance of developing specific and informed approaches for families where victim parents have lost custody of their children to the person who harmed them.

The Victim as Visiting Parent Exploration Data Snapshot

The number of families your program provided services to in the last 12 months.	
The number of supervised visits you provided in the last 12 months.	
The number of supervised exchanges you provided in the last 12 months.	
The number of visiting parents who are survivors of domestic violence that received supervised visitation services in the last 12 months.	
The number of visiting/non-custodial parents who are survivors of domestic violence that received supervised exchange services in the last 12 months.	
Reasons why victim parents were referred for supervised visitation or exchange.	

LEARNING SESSION

Working with Victims as Visiting Parents: Successes and Challenges

Taking opportunities to examine our successes and challenges is a good way to get a baseline for what is working well, and where there are areas for growth and change. Starting with successes is a meaningful way to remember that while we all have room to grow, we have many strengths on which to build.

FACILITATOR DIRECTIONS: *This activity can happen in one meeting or over the course of multiple meetings, and could be held internally with center staff or with your community partners. If you are facilitating this meeting with community partners, you may want to explore more generally what the community thinks is going well and where there are challenges in working with victims' who lose custody.*

ACTIVITY #1:

In this activity, you will be leading participants through an exercise to concretely explore what is working well in supporting victim parents when they lose custody of their children and need to utilize supervised visitation services. As the facilitator of this activity, you will want to gather as many concrete details as possible. If participants share vague statements, encourage them to provide details, and give examples if necessary. Remind participants of the confidential nature of the work, and ask that they don't use names or identifying information if they are referring to a specific person. This is a critical point that you should reiterate often, especially if system and community partners are participating. Partners should not be able to identify specific families through learning community activities. During each of these activities, you will want to take detailed notes.

ACTIVITY #1 STEPS:

THINK Ask everyone to think about a victim visiting parent they are working with now or have worked with in the past. Ask them to think about what worked well and why it worked well. Some themes to explore: How did you successfully help them navigate their safety needs? How did you help them maintain attachment and connection with their children? How did you build trust with them?

WRITE After spending time thinking about what worked well and why, ask each person to write about what stands out as successes, and what factors contributed to the success.

SHARE In the large group, invite each person to share their moments of success in working with victim parents who are visiting their children.

ACTIVITY #2:

For the next activity, the participants will be focusing on what has challenged them in working with victims as visiting parents and where there might be room to grow and make adaptations.

ACTIVITY #2 STEPS:

THINK Ask everyone to think about a victim visiting parent they are working with now or have worked with in the past. Ask them to think about what worked well and why it worked well. Some themes to explore: How did you successfully help them navigate their safety needs? How did you help them maintain attachment and connection with their children? How did you build trust with them?

WRITE After spending time thinking about the challenges, write down what stands out and any insights you have about the situation.

SHARE In the large group, invite each person to share highlights from their writing exercise.

After completing these two activities, compile your notes and the information gathered from participants to support ongoing learning, exploration, and needed change within your programs and community.

Facilitating Listening Sessions with Survivors of Domestic Violence Who Are Visiting their Children at a Supervised Visitation Center

FACILITATOR NOTE: *A powerful component of your learning community exploration is hearing directly from survivors about their experiences as visiting parents. Once your learning community has feedback from survivors in listening sessions, or one-on-one interviews, or a combination of these two forms, you will have rich and dynamic material to learn, explore, and integrate into learning and practice change.*

The primary goal of a listening session or one-on-one interview with victim visiting parents is to increase your understanding of their lived experience. You want to take the time to hear their hopes, fears, needs, and concerns. Below are some sample questions that could be used to guide your session. Please note that your learning community or center should pick and choose the questions most relevant to your exploration. It is not advised that you ask all of these questions in one session, which could be overwhelming and dysregulating to trauma survivors.

- ▶ **How did you and your children come to use the visitation center?**
- ▶ **What has your experience been like after losing custody of your child?**
- ▶ **Do you feel the judge or court system had all the necessary information to consider when making their custody determination? If not, what information or perspective was missing?**
- ▶ **What are your expectations for what will happen at the supervised visitation center?**
- ▶ **How do you think center staff or another system or person could intervene or work to reduce the abusive behavior of your partner?**

- ▶ **Do you have a trusting relationship with the center staff? If so, what specifically did the visitation center staff do to support the development of such a relationship?**
- ▶ **What has the visitation center done to support you and your children?**
- ▶ **What has been helpful to you, and what has been not so helpful?**
- ▶ **Has the visitation center done anything that increased risk or trauma for you and your children?**
- ▶ **What can you tell us about your children's experience visiting you at the center?**
- ▶ **What are your greatest hopes and fears for your children?**
- ▶ **What do you believe your children need to feel supported? How can we support them?**
- ▶ **What do we need to know about your relationship with your children?**
- ▶ **What are your ultimate goals as a parent, and how can the center help you achieve these goals?**

AREAS TO BE LISTENING FOR:

- ▶ **What is working well, and what is problematic?**
- ▶ **The impact services have had on their lives.**
- ▶ **How the center supports their healing or gets in the way of their healing.**
- ▶ **Gaps between their lived experience and system intervener responses.**
- ▶ **Gaps between their lived experience and the visitation center responses.**
- ▶ **How have any aspects of their identity been met with injustice or unfairness when navigating the system (for example, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, ability, etc.)?**
- ▶ **System interventions that could have or should have prevented them from losing custody.**

TIPS TO CONDUCT INTERVIEWS AND LISTENING SESSIONS³:

- ▶ **Set the stage for the discussion - create a safe, comfortable, and private space to hold the sessions. It is often helpful to offer snacks and beverages if you are able, ensure the temperature of the space is comfortable, and be sure to ask if participants need anything to feel comfortable.**
- ▶ **Deliver a welcome that includes an overview and introductions. You will want to establish ground rules with the group and talk about confidentiality and what you will do with the information and notes taken during the session.**
 - Introduce yourself, the notetaker, and any observers and co-facilitators (please be mindful of the number of “others” you include).
 - Frame the reason for the listening session (why we are here): “We want to know more about the experience of survivors whose partners or husbands have been threatening, abusive, or violent toward them, and they have lost custody or access to their children and now visit their children in a visitation center. We’ll be asking about your experience, as well as your recommendations for change. There are no right or wrong answers, and we encourage you to be candid. We want to hear negative and positive comments. It’s okay if you have varied experiences from each other or disagree with each other.”
 - Explain that for us to capture their wisdom, the notetaker will be capturing what is said in the group. No identifying information will be captured in the notes.
 - Possible Ground Rules:
 - *All comments are confidential - don’t share personally identifying information with anyone outside of the group.*
 - *Use first names only during our discussion.*
 - *One person speaks at a time.*
 - *We will not attach names to comments in our notes.*

³ Created, developed, and adapted from the work and teaching of Jane Sadusky.

- Explain how long the group will last (90 minutes is a good suggestion). Establish that you may need to move the conversation along at times, and indicate that you want to be sure to end on time. Let people know that you may need to interrupt them at times to move the conversation forward. Let them know that when talking about challenging and emotional topics, it's common to lose track of time, and there is no shame or judgment.
 - Explain the informed consent form. Remember to emphasize that participation is voluntary and confidential. Gather a signed form from each participant. *The following page contains a sample consent form.*
 - Share what you will do at the end of the session, before it is over, to make sure that all participants are grounded enough to safely and comfortably leave and have any support they need that you can offer. In closing, you may want to ask them each to share one thing they love about their children or one thing that makes them smile when they think of their children and then do a short stretching and breathing activity.
- ▶ **Engage in active listening and avoid responding to comments.**
 - ▶ **Avoid expressing your points of view.**
 - ▶ **Avoid body language or comments that signal approval or disapproval.**
 - ▶ **Manage group dynamics to ensure that everyone gets a chance to talk and share their insights.**
 - ▶ **Listen for comments needing more clarification and probe for deeper understanding.**
 - ▶ **Pay attention to time.**
 - ▶ **Move discussion along and keep it on track.**
 - ▶ **Close the session with a summary, positive and grounding closing activity, and provide sincere thanks.**
 - ▶ **Prepare/review notes and include an overview of key points as soon as possible.**

LISTENING SESSION CONSENT FORM

The listening session organizer has explained the purpose of the listening session, and I agree to participate in the listening session. My agreement to participate in the listening session is voluntary and I understand that I can change my mind and refuse participation at any point and excuse myself from the group.

I understand and give my consent to allow note-taking of the listening session. I understand that the note-taking will only be used to help remember what was discussed in the group. The notes will be maintained in a safe, confidential manner and will not be released to anyone outside of [Insert the name of your organization/program].

I understand that my name will not be used in anything that is written or stated about this project.

I further agree to hold in confidence any other person or situation I see or hear while participating in the group.

If I have any questions about the group, the program, or the project I can contact:

[Insert name and contact information].

Printed Name of Listening Session Participant

Signature of Listening Session Participant

Date

Learning from Children and Youth

Just as it's crucial to learn from adult survivors, it's helpful to hear from children and youth about their experiences. It's not easy and may not be feasible to conduct listening sessions with children, so we suggest engaging in conversations and activities that provide space for them to share during your check-in time. Then, you can bring the information you obtain back to your learning community and decide how to integrate the information you gather into a process of working to improve your practice.

We have found that using an activity that facilitates directed conversation is often the most effective approach to getting feedback and input from children and youth. Here are a few examples you could use:

(1) Ask them to create a drawing that describes something related to supervised visitation. Some examples include: "Can you draw a picture of what you like about visiting your parent as the visitation center?" or "Can you draw a picture of what bugs you about coming to the visitation center to see your parent?" Or, you can ask something more open-ended like, "Can you draw a picture of how it feels to visit your parent at the visitation center?"

(2) Ask them to finish a sentence verbally or in writing for you. Some examples include: "When I come to see my parent at the visitation center I am...", or "When I'm at the visitation center I wish I could...", or "I think the visitation center should...". Or, "I would like to come to the visitation center more if..." If you sense a young person needs a less involved conversation, you can ask: "What is one word you would use to describe visiting your parent here at the center?"

(3) Ask them if they would be willing to give some advice to other people who work in visitation centers or give some advice to help other kids coming to see their parent at a visitation center. Some examples include: "What would you want other kids to know about coming to a visitation center?", "What is the best thing about coming to the visitation center to see your parent?" or "What is hard about coming to a visitation center?"

Special Note: It is important to be clear with both the kids and their parents about why you are asking the questions you are asking, what you will do with the information you gather, how you will protect their identity, the extent and limitations of confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of talking with you. Ensure that every kid knows that they can stop talking to you at any time, and they don't have to share anything they don't wish to share or answer.

Only engage in these activities and questions with children and youth during times when they are emotionally regulated and relatively calm, and only once you have established some rapport and relationship with them. For example, following a difficult visit is probably not a good time to engage them in these questions.

You should also be aware that privacy is important and check-in with children and youth (as is developmentally appropriate) about who is in the room with them when they answer these questions, as well as checking-in with parents. Additionally, make sure you have a plan to communicate to their caregiver if they display any distress or emotional dysregulation after the activity, so their caregiver is aware of supporting them.

POLICY REVIEW TOOL
**Examination of Supervised
Visitation Policies that Support
Victims Who are the Visiting Parent**

This worksheet is a tool to help you review your center’s policies and procedures through the lens of supporting the safety of victims who are visiting parents. We encourage you to pull policies related to arrival and departures, gifts, guests and food, documentation, and information sharing. This worksheet can be used with all policies; however, the policies listed above may be a good place to start.

You can complete this worksheet as a team, in small groups, or individually. If you are going to assign policies for review to small groups or individuals, we recommend that as a team, you work through one policy first, to ensure everyone understands the exercise. You should use one worksheet per policy.

Policy Review Tool Worksheet

POLICY:		
Does this policy?	Yes/No	Notes
Enhance safety for adult victims who are visiting parents?		
Increase the potential risk of harm to adult victim visiting parents or their children?		
Recognize the multiple layers of the survivor's lived experience?		
Create a supportive experience without replicating the dynamics of abuse, violence, and oppression?		
Account for the role, culture, family, and tradition play in the lives of survivors and their children?		
Allow for flexibility as needed?		
Reflect an understanding that different levels of dangerousness and risk require different levels of response?		
Acknowledge how those who use violence often undermine a child's relationship with the other parent?		
Recognize that victim parents need protection regardless of custodial status or co-occurring barriers (e.g., mental health, substance abuse, use of force, etc...)?		
Provide opportunities for healing and change?		
Consider the context in which harm and risk may be present?		

Learning from Your Community Partners

Convening listening sessions or one-on-one interviews with judges, attorneys, social workers, domestic violence advocates, and intervention programs in your community is important for creating a more seamless and coordinated response for visiting victim parents. Taking an opportunity to listen deeply to the perspectives, expectations, and challenges of key partners can help deepen and expand both your relationships with these key partners as well as bolster the enhancement of support for families.

Here are some sample questions to use in your listening sessions with key community partners. Based on any other learning community explorations, you may want to develop additional tailored questions to probe and better understand what is happening in your community.

- 1. What are your perceptions/ideas of the role and purpose of supervised visitation for families experiencing domestic violence?**
- 2. As it pertains to visitation and custody, what do you think is working well for victim parents? What are the areas you feel could use improvement?**
- 3. Do you work closely with your local visitation program? If yes, please describe your partnership? What works well? What are the challenges or barriers?**
- 4. Generally speaking, why do you think victim parents are losing custody and ordered to supervised visitation?**
- 5. What are the court's priorities around custody and visitation for victims of domestic violence?**
- 6. What would be your suggestions to a visitation program that gets a disclosure from a victim visiting parent about the abuse they have experienced at the hands of the custodial parent?**

- 7. What legal remedies are in place to support victim visiting parents and what other remedies are in place to support victim visiting parents when their abusive partner withholds their children or continues to use coercive power and control? What suggestions would you offer a victim parent in these circumstances?**
- 8. What do you find most helpful about visitation programs?**
- 9. What tools or support would be helpful to civil legal attorneys when working with victim visiting parents?**



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