



# Hatred, Hope, and Healing

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS FROM AN ADULT WHO WITNESSED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AS A CHILD

On October 18, 2017, CANTASD (the National Child Abuse and Neglect Technical Assistance and Strategic Dissemination Center) hosted a Digital Dialogue with Dr. Johnny Rice II, Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, Coppin State University and founder of Social Justice Ventures LLC. Sharon McKinley from the Children's Bureau and Mao Yang from the Family and Youth Services Bureau opened the conversation by reflecting on the Administration for Children and Families' commitment to supporting families at the intersection of domestic violence and child abuse and neglect.

This digital dialogue focused on the road to resilience for children who have been affected by domestic violence in their families. The conversation connected Dr. Rice's childhood experience with domestic violence to practical guidance on working with children and youth impacted by domestic violence in their homes. Throughout the dialogue, the moderators engaged participants in questions about their own experiences and strategies. This document summarizes what we heard from nearly 125 individuals from around the country who joined the call. The conversation covered the following topics:

- Why domestic violence is a child well-being issue
- How domestic violence affects children and youth
- A resilience-based approach to helping children impacted by domestic violence
- Pathways for healing and strategies for working with male perpetrators

Many participants stayed on the call after the end of the formal digital dialogue for a question and answer session with Dr. Rice. Information from that conversation has also been included.

### Poll Question 1: HOW HAVE YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCES INFORMED YOUR PRACTICE/WORK?

Dr. Rice began by grounding the conversation in his own experience as a young child in a home where domestic violence was prevalent. He noted that throughout the conversation, both his professional and personal experience would form the basis of his comments. To start the conversation, he invited participants to share how their own experiences shape their work with children and families. More than 20

#### Find related resources:

- Access the [Digital Dialogue recording and handouts](#)
- Visit CANTASD's [topic page on recovery and healing to learn more](#)
- [Stay connected to our ongoing work in this area](#)



participants shared personal experiences with violence and trauma—as children and as adults. They noted that these experiences helped them to do the following in their practice:

- Stay motivated and committed to the work they do.
- Understand the realities of the issues the families they work with experience.
- Understand the importance of positive parenting examples.
- Empathize with families experiencing domestic violence.
- Be aware and cautious about the environments in which the families they work with live.

Despite concerns raised about the sensitivity of the question, several participants replied that sharing their personal experiences was important because they were such an important touchstone for their work.

*“I didn't even realize that my experiences had led me to become a social worker and to work with sexually abused children and adults until after I was in the field. I now use it to help me empathize and relate to people.”*

*-Participant*

## **Poll Question 2: HOW DO WE WORK COLLECTIVELY TO ELIMINATE AND REDUCE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?**

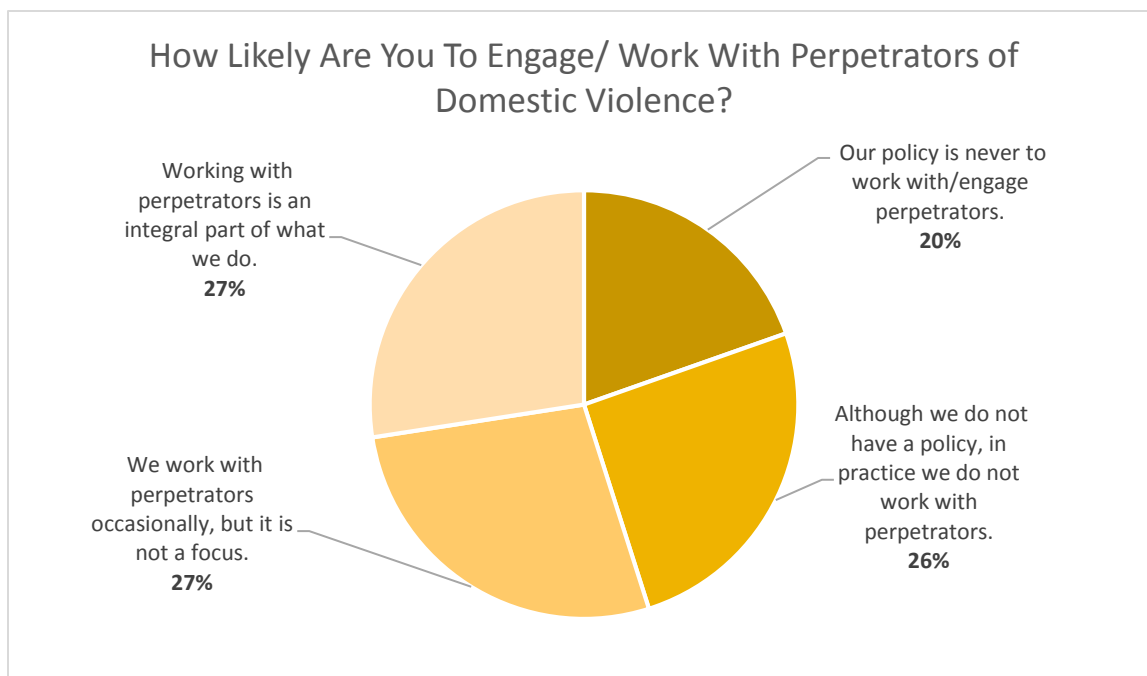
Responses to this question clustered in four areas:

- Collaborating across agencies.
- Teaching and recognizing what domestic violence really is.
- Addressing the social norms that often lead to domestic violence.
- Creating environments that can both understand the trauma that children have experienced and foster their resilience.

## **Poll Question 3: HOW LIKELY ARE YOU TO ENGAGE/WORK WITH PERPETRATORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?**

Dr. Rice talked about his father’s journey from a perpetrator of violence to someone who acknowledged his past actions and was trying to make amends for them. He also discussed his own work engaging male perpetrators to break the pattern of violence. We then asked participants about their own agencies’ practice in engaging perpetrators of violence. As shown in the pie chart, responses were nearly evenly split among four levels of engagement with perpetrators, demonstrating a diversity of approaches and focus.





## Q&A with Johnny Rice

**Do you have any words of wisdom for practitioners beginning to work with fathers who have used violence? Our system has largely ignored these men in the past, and now we are trying to engage and help them create change.**

**Johnny Rice:** "I think one of the things that can be helpful is really taking the temperature of where an individual or where the team is at and... assess their readiness to engage men around violence. I say that because some of us might come with our own preconceived notions, stereotypes, or even fears that are based in reality. It could be that our own personal experience or other jobs that we have had in the criminal justice system have shown us the worse side of domestic violence, and it could be very hard to consider change once you've seen that."

"But I would say is that having an open mind and understanding that you don't have to make this immediate paradigm shift, but ... just testing one small strategy to see if it improves your work with a dad.... So, the first step is to really do your own self-assessment to see, 'do I have any barriers or any type of lens... that may already give me a preconceived notion of what the outcome may be when working with this dad?'"

**What resources would you recommend for mothers who are dealing with guilt when their children ask about their father after a separation due to domestic violence?**

**Johnny Rice:** "I mentioned the coalitions (the Maryland coalition, the D.C. coalition, or even organizations such as Futures without Violence), and a colleague of mine, Jennifer Rose, at [Inspire Action for Social Change](#), conducts trainings and works with organizations. Jennifer's organization inspires action to support moms ... who may be experiencing guilt or who have major concerns about even exposing their children or reconnecting their children back with the father, based on the history of violence. I think there is support



there. I would start looking at the local community to see what directions the coalitions can push you, because many of them do the work daily and have a network of ... victim service organizations that may have therapeutic services or counseling services that can be of value.”

### How would you go about engaging with a father who won't admit his actions and denies the violence?

**Johnny Rice:** “Individuals... may be referred directly to abuse intervention programs in which they have a curriculum that’s used and trained facilitators who are good at being able to work with men. [Another method is] group accountability with those other men in the group—get that individual to come to a place where they acknowledge their behavior.

“What I find has been more challenging sometimes—on a community level—for an individual who has not been formally charged with an act of domestic violence... is that the individual has to want to change. [I]f they don’t acknowledge that they engaged in domestic violence, the first step is trying to educate them because it could be that they don’t perceive their behavior as domestic violence based on how they were raised—it could be normal to them. When I worked in Baltimore city...it wasn’t until when we met with [fathers] and went through peer facilitation and exposed them to another way of understanding family dynamics... that they acknowledged and said ‘Oh, I didn’t know that verbal abuse was also abuse; I didn’t know that action of mine was physical abuse.’”

## Closing

We at CANTASD are grateful to Dr. Rice, and to everyone who shared their observations, experiences, and recommendations with us. Your input helps to inform the work that we all do to support children and families. We look forward to your continued engagement and feedback.

For more information, see the following related resources:

- [Breaking Free from the Web of Violence: Asset-Based Approaches for Boys & Men of Color](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Care for Children Exposed to Violence: Tips for Engaging Men and Fathers](#)
- [Promoting Resiliency Infographic](#)
- [Responding To the Long-term Needs of Adult Children Exposed to Domestic Violence: Exploring the Connection to Suicide Risk](#)
- [Child Welfare information Gateway: Web Resources on Domestic Violence](#)
- [Children’s Bureau Express Spotlight on Domestic Violence](#)
- [State and U.S. Territory Domestic Violence Coalitions](#)

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