

# Post-Separation Abuse Featured in the New Duluth Power and Control Wheel

by Chris Godsey and Renita Robinson\*

***Editor's Note:** In this article, authors Chris Godsey and Renita Robinson describe the Duluth Post-Separation Power and Control Wheel, which depicts the commonplace tactics used by batterers to continue their battering during the post-separation period. These tactics typically involve the manipulation of the children and of the mother's relationship to them. Any reader who is familiar with domestic violence custody cases is likely to recognize these strategies in cases they've seen. Since the post-separation period is the most dangerous time for a victim, it would seem exceptionally important for battered women, along with their lawyer and other allies, to be able to recognize these tactics and do everything to put a stop to them before the batterer is allowed to continue wreaking emotional and psychological havoc on the victims and their children.*

**B**attering survivors, their advocates, and many practitioners know that when a woman escapes a man who abuses her, she and their children usually face *intensified* dangers. Experience tells them that he will begin using their children, the effects of his past abuse, and his potential for more violence as tools in new forms of force in his efforts to engage systems and institutions in maintaining power and control over her.

In more than 20 years of working to protect battered mothers and their children while holding fathers who batter accountable, the Duluth Family

---

\*Chris Godsey lives, teaches writing, and works as an ally in the movement to end men's violence against in Duluth, MN. He can be reached at [cgodsey@d.umn.edu](mailto:cgodsey@d.umn.edu). Renita Robinson is a Trainer with DAIP, and the Executive Director Elect of the Committee Against Domestic Abuse(CADA) in Mankato, MN she can be reached by email: [renitar@inspire-hope.org/](mailto:renitar@inspire-hope.org/).

An earlier version of this article appeared in *Domestic Violence Report*, August/September 2013.

Visitation Center (DFVC) has become well-versed in articulating and accounting for post-separation violence dynamics. DFVC is a division of the Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs (DAIP), the organization that in the early 1980s developed the Duluth Model philosophy for responding to domestic violence and the original “Power and Control Wheel.” The Model and the Wheel are now international standards for people and organizations working to understand and end men’s violence against women.

DFVC is responsible for supervising and carefully documenting visits and exchanges among violent fathers, their children, and mothers who have survived abuse. This task puts DFVC employees in a unique position to identify tactics that can be easy to miss or misconstrue, and to help other practitioners to better understand these dynamics.

DFVC developed vocabulary that eventually became the “Using Children Post Separation Wheel” while supervising visits between fathers and children and working with mothers in their Safe Transitions Healthy Families Program

*All of the Power and Control Wheels show how men who batter systematically use tactics empowered by physical and sexual violence to establish and maintain power and control over women.*

and their Strong Moms and Safe Kids support group. The wheel took form after listening to themes that came out of the voices of victims, advocates, and men in batterers’ groups during focus groups conducted over a three-year period. The

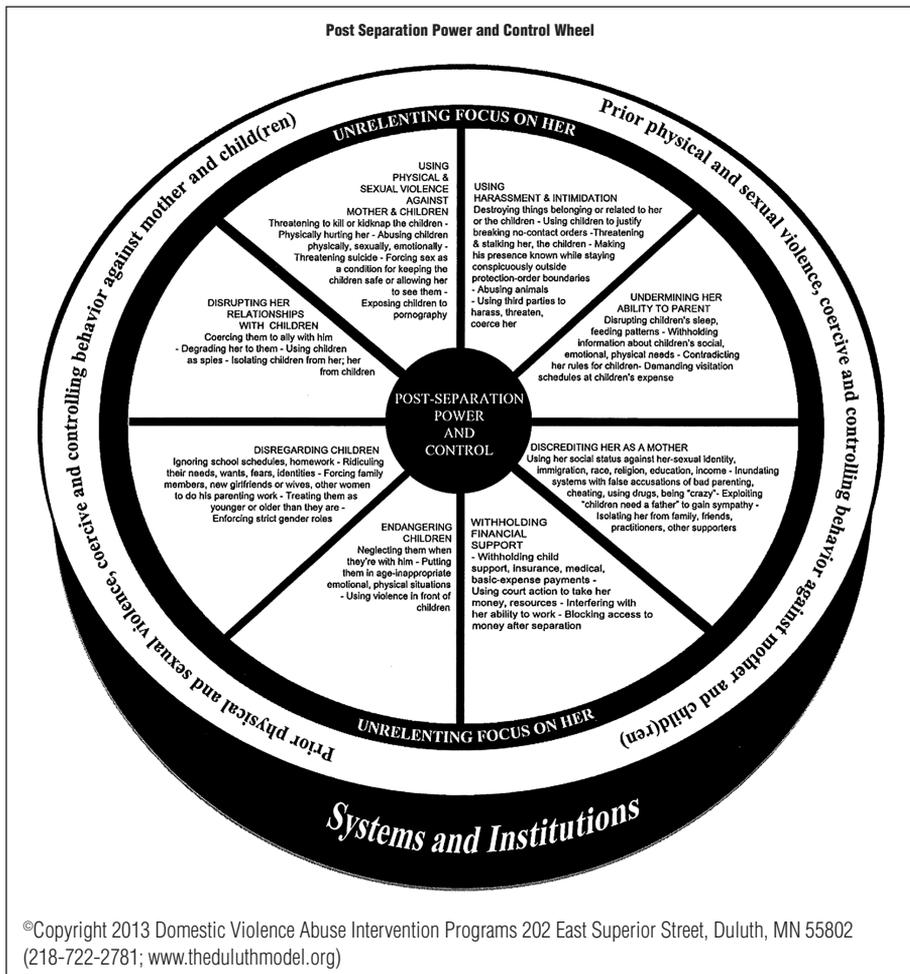
Safe Transitions Healthy Families Program is a supervised visitation center program established by DFVC that bases abusers’ transitions to less-restrictive visits (as well as restrictions on exchanges) on an abusive father’s concrete behavioral change rather than the amount of time he has been using the DFVC.

The new “Using Children Post Separation Wheel” is a graphic representation of how violent men use children to maintain post-separation power and control. In conjunction with the “Using Children Post Separation Wheel,” DFVC also developed a training manual titled *Naming the Tactics: Men’s Use of Children to Maintain Post-Separation Power and Control over Women*. This manual is a resource for a broad range of practitioners and provides a common language to discuss women’s experiences. Many women across the country who have read the manual have cried and said things like: “I knew I wasn’t crazy” and “this explains exactly what I was going through.”

The “Using Children Post Separation Wheel” was developed by the same process used for creating the Power and Control Wheel. Women who had survived, and were still enduring, battering were asked to describe their experiences, and the Wheel includes descriptive themes of the most frequently used tactics. Every effort was made to ensure that the final product was a concrete expression of women’s voices as opposed to a theory about their lives. All of the Power and Control Wheels show how men who batter systematically use tactics empowered by physical and sexual violence to establish and maintain power and control over women.

The “Using Children Post Separation Wheel” (reproduced on p. 90) uses three dimensions to reveal how fathers’ post-separation violence functions.

- The black base layer (“Systems and Institutions”) represents how systems and institutions—including visitation centers, courts, social services agencies, and shelters—often unwittingly collude with an abusive father in his controlling tactics by providing a foundation of policies, decisions, and interactions that ignore the effects of his past and potential violence on the woman he batters and their children.
- The Wheel’s white middle layer (“Prior Physical and Sexual Violence, Coercive and Controlling Behavior against Mother and Child(ren)”) represents how the abusive father’s past abuse, and its effects, support his post-separation tactics using children.
- The top layer (which consists of the same structure of hub, spokes, and rim construction as the original Power and Control Wheel)



completes the simple powerful system. The “Using Children Post Separation Wheel” shows how the batterer’s unrelenting focus on the survivor, as well as the systems and institutions (the rim) that he has engaged, allow him to use children as tools in a system of tactics (the spokes) that enable his power and control over her (the hub) even when they aren’t together—and even if he is under a court order not to contact her.

Women told DFVC workers that post-separation violence tactics are different from what they experienced while they were with the men who battered them. These tactics often focus on abusive fathers’ instrumental use of chil-

*When a woman who is being battered leaves the man who is abusing her, many people, often including practitioners from the systems and institutions with whom she and her children become part, believe that she and her children are out of danger. But the woman now experiences a new and unfamiliar type of battering.*

dren. Specifically, survivors described how violent fathers maintain power and control by using harassment and intimidation relating to the mothers or the children, undermining the mothers’ ability to parent, withholding financial support, disregarding children, discrediting the women as mothers, using physical and sexual violence against the mothers and

their children during unsupervised visits and exchanges, disrupting the mothers’ relationships with their children, and endangering the children.

Each of the above general tactics is broken down into its component parts in the “Using Children Post Separation Wheel.” For example, “Withholding Financial Support” is explained as “Withholding child support, insurance, medical, basic-expense payments; Using court action to take her money, resources; Interfering with her ability to work; and Blocking access to money after separation.” And “Undermining Her Ability to Parent” consists of “Disrupting children’s sleep, feeding patterns; Withholding information about children’s social, emotional, physical needs; Contradicting her rules for children; and demanding visitation schedules at children’s expense,” etc.

Women who were enduring post-separation violence also helped DFVC workers see how systems and institutions that could interrupt the aforementioned tactics often don’t. Thus, instead of holding a violent father accountable for the effects of his battering on a mother and their children, systems and institutions often unintentionally blame or scrutinize her for suffering battering effects that can appear as her own poor decisions or character flaws. When that outcome occurs, many mothers said, they feel a sense of hopelessness that they will never escape the battering.

Here is an example of how the process often works:

When a woman who is being battered leaves the man who is abusing her, many people, often including practitioners from the systems and institutions

with whom she and her children become part, believe that she and her children are out of danger. But the woman now experiences a new and unfamiliar type of battering. The abusive father now either repeats or makes good on threats that he used when they were together regarding what he would do to her and their children if she dared to leave him. Policies and procedures based on having equal power and access to resources tend to leave her vulnerable and looking foolish or incompetent because they fail to account for how literally battered she is physically, emotionally, mentally, financially, and in other ways. If the survivor has custody of the children, the abusive father has to meet far fewer and less challenging expectations to be seen as credible and competent. For her part, the mother appears exhausted, disoriented, frantic, suspicious, unable to work or parent effectively, and generally difficult to trust, help, or be around because of the state in which his battering has left her. In contrast, the abusive father appears as more calm, stable, and easier to work with than she does—because he is.

Family members, friends, and practitioners who do not see those dynamics play out every day—as supervised visitation center workers do—can easily perceive the abusive father’s disregard for the woman as a mother, his withholding of child support, or other tactics, as the understandable response of a “decent guy” who is trying to manage an unfortunate situation with a difficult woman.

DFVC workers see those dynamics play out, do their best to document and interrupt them, and use the Post Separation Wheel to educate colleagues about realities faced by women with children who leave abusive partners.

---

For more information please refer to: (<https://app.etapestry.com/cart/DomesticAbuseInterventionPr/default/category.php?ref=4031.0.17004592>) for ordering the manual, and to the *National Training Project*: Karen Kjolhaug, Training and Outreach Coordinator [kkjolhaug@theduluthmodel.org](mailto:kkjolhaug@theduluthmodel.org) 218-722-2781 ext. 126 to order trainings on the materials.

