



SOJOURNER

Hope & Healing for Children Who Experience Domestic Violence

Spring 2023 | Erin Schubert, PhD

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Domestic Violence and Children

Domestic violence is an experience causing ripples that go far beyond the adult couple at the center of this dynamic. It affects all family members, including children and adolescents growing up in homes impacted by violence and abuse.

Established in 1975, Sojourner provides an array of support to families impacted by domestic violence seeking to achieve safety and well-being. As an agency, Sojourner has long recognized the need to serve all members of a family impacted by abuse. We know that **the majority (78.4%) of the adult clients we serve are parents.** As such, Sojourner serves children and adolescents alongside their parent who has been victimized. Later in this report, we will discuss specific programs offered to children and adolescents at Sojourner as well as outcomes associated with those programs.

The Children and Teens We Serve

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of clients' experiences and the experiences of their children, we conducted evaluation interviews with a sample of our adult clients.

From December 2016 to May 2022, we interviewed 125 clients ranging in age from 19 to 59 years old (**average age = 36.6 years**).

The majority of these adult clients are mothers (78.4%). There were a total of 274 children among



98 mothers. Mothers had an **average total of 2.8 children each** (range 1-9 total children in the family). Some of these clients' children

have reached adulthood themselves (25.5% of all children of adult clients in our sample) while most are still minor children (74.5% or 204 total minor children).

Homelessness and Instability

In addition to the violence between adults in their families, the children and teens we serve experience extraordinarily high levels of homelessness as well as housing and school instability.

Half of all children and teens served (49.5%) have experienced homelessness at some point in their young lives. Some of these children were staying with their parent in our emergency shelter at the time of the interview while others were staying elsewhere in the community (e.g., doubled up with friends or family, in a car, on the street, in a homeless shelter not specific to domestic violence).



An even greater number, **62.1%**, of children and teens have had to move homes because of the domestic violence situation in

their families. These moves are often made by protective parents in order to obtain safety. Other times, these moves are involuntary, for instance if child welfare removes children from a home experiencing domestic violence or if custody and placement is awarded in family court to the other parent. **Finally, 21.0% of school aged children (4 - 17 years) have had to move schools because of the domestic**



violence situation in their family. This instability and inconsistency in the home and school context can, if not mitigated by a protective caregiver or other intervention, add to the damaging impact of domestic violence on children's well-being.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Trauma in childhood is linked to adverse outcomes later in life, including becoming involved in an abusive relationship.

Examining our adult clients' own childhoods, we can see this link quite clearly. We asked the 125 adult clients that we interviewed about experiences of trauma in their own childhood. Out of a possible 10 adverse childhood experiences we asked about, **clients experienced an average of 4.62 of these traumatic events in their own childhood. This average is strikingly high.** When other researchers have asked the same questions of the average population in the United States, they have reported much lower averages, around 1.61 (Ford et al., 2014).

Sojourner serves clients who have endured far more trauma in their own childhoods, prior to



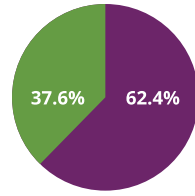
a violent intimate partner relationship in their adulthood, than the average American. These traumatic experiences in childhood, especially if not given the opportunity to heal, may have made some of these folks vulnerable to the path of violence and abuse they have experienced in their adulthood.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Amongst Adult Family Peace Center Clients

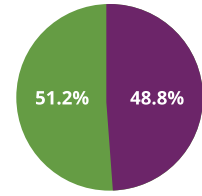
Average ACE score = **4.6**

● Yes
● No

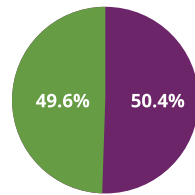
Adult clients have already experienced significant trauma in their own childhoods prior to their current abusive relationship.



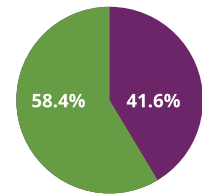
Emotional Abuse



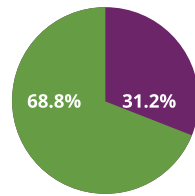
Physical Abuse



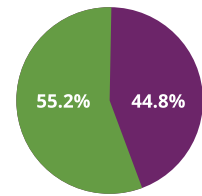
Sexual Abuse



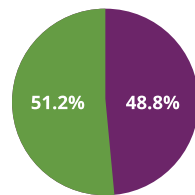
Emotional Neglect



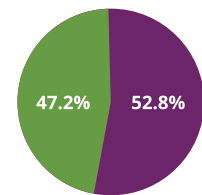
Physical Neglect



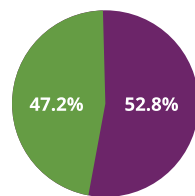
Parental Separation/
Divorce



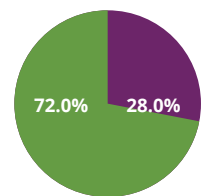
Witnessed Domestic
Violence



Parental Substance
Abuse



Parental Mental Health
Issues



Parental Incarceration

Resilience

While the experience of trauma in childhood is linked to undesirable outcomes, it is *not destiny*.

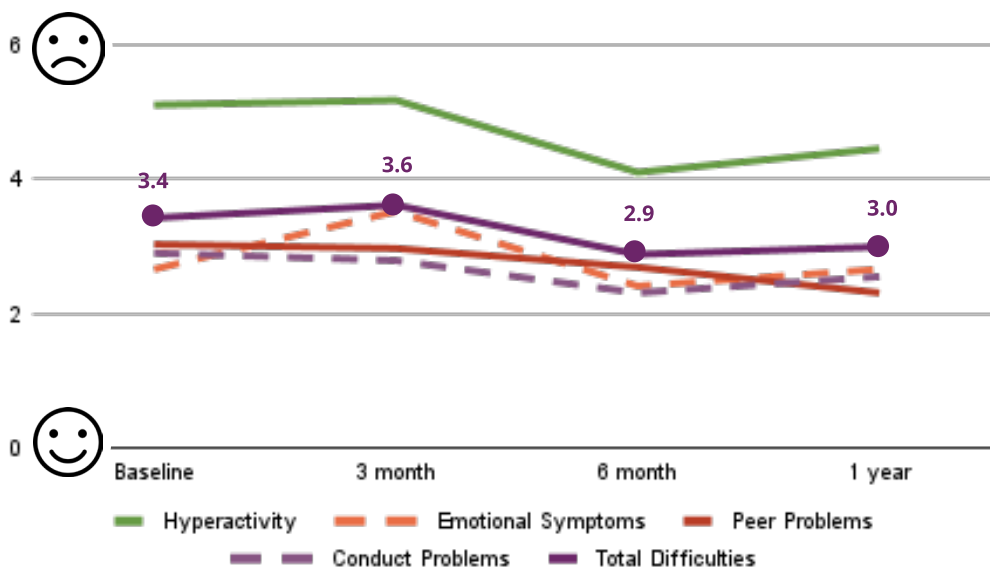
Many children who experience trauma in their childhoods go on to live peaceful, successful lives.

The single greatest predictor of children's resilience in spite of childhood trauma is the presence of a *safe, predictable adult caregiver who invests in their well-being.* Beyond a protective caregiver, connecting children with programming and support to help them heal while they are still young can likewise promote resilience despite their difficult experiences. In this section we will highlight evidence of the effectiveness of Sojourner's youth programming in promoting resilience and well-being.

We followed up with the families we interviewed (described above; 98 mothers and their 204 minor

children) at 3 months (58.4% participation), 6 months (48.0% participation), and 1 year (39.2% participation) after their initial interview to see how their well-being changed over time. We asked mothers to report on their children's behavior and functioning at each of these time points. Over the first year of a family receiving Sojourner services, we saw children's behavior and functioning improve. A year into their mothers receiving domestic violence services, children showed less hyperactivity, fewer negative emotional symptoms, fewer peer problems, fewer conduct problems, and more prosocial (positive) behavior (see graphs below). These results are particularly impressive because not all of these children were receiving direct services themselves, but all of their mothers were receiving support from Sojourner.

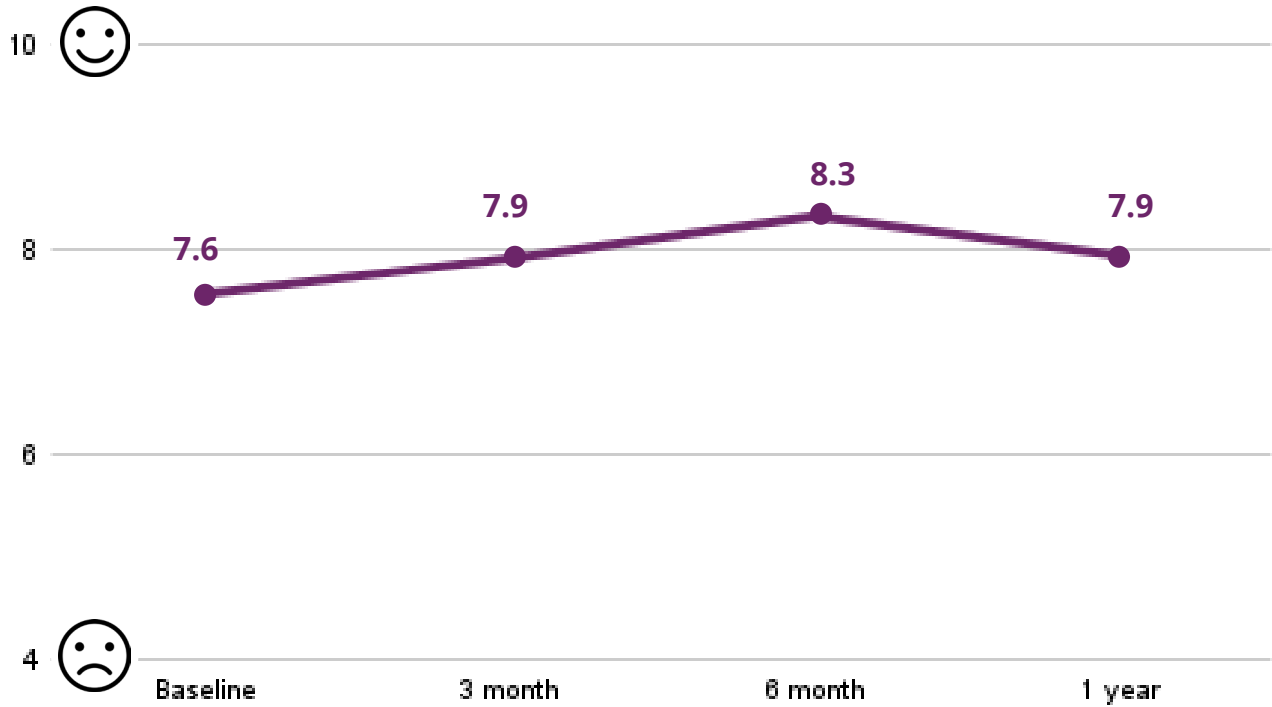
Child Behavioral Difficulties



Children's behavioral difficulties decreased as their parent was receiving support from Sojourner.

Child (age 2 - 17) behavioral difficulties over a year of Sojourner services as measured by the Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

Child Prosocial Behavior



Child (age 2 – 17) positive behavior over a year of Sojourner services as measured by the Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

Children's prosocial behavioral increased as their parent was receiving support from Sojourner.



In addition to measuring children’s behavior and functioning, we asked mothers about their parenting, specifically mindfulness in parenting. **Mindful parenting is characterized by presence and**

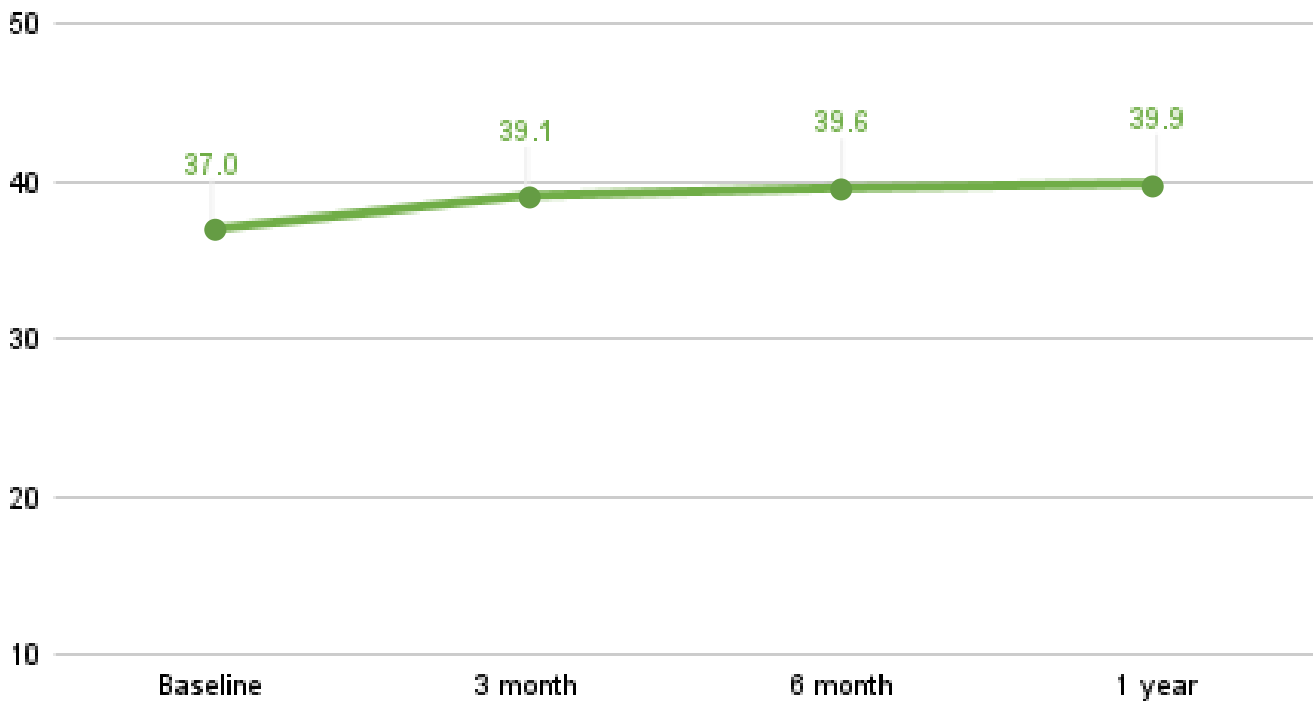


attendance to the child, awareness of the child’s emotions and thoughts, and self-awareness of the parent’s own emotions and how

those may impact the child. Mothers’ mindfulness in parenting increased over the course of the year after receiving Sojourner services (see graph below). Being mindful, particularly in as complex a task as parenting, requires significant mental and emotional effort. It also requires other more pressing needs (physical safety, food, financial security)

to be sufficiently met so the person can attend to something else. One reason for this increase in mindful parenting among the mothers we serve may be that the services and support they are receiving from Sojourner help meet some of those pressing needs, making them safer, more secure, and more able to spend their mental and emotional energy on the parenting of their children. It is a lot easier, for instance, to attend to a child’s story about their day at school if you are not simultaneously worried about where the family will sleep that night. It is easier to be aware of and regulate your own emotions while a child is upset and crying if you are not simultaneously on guard and fearful for your physical safety from an abusive partner.

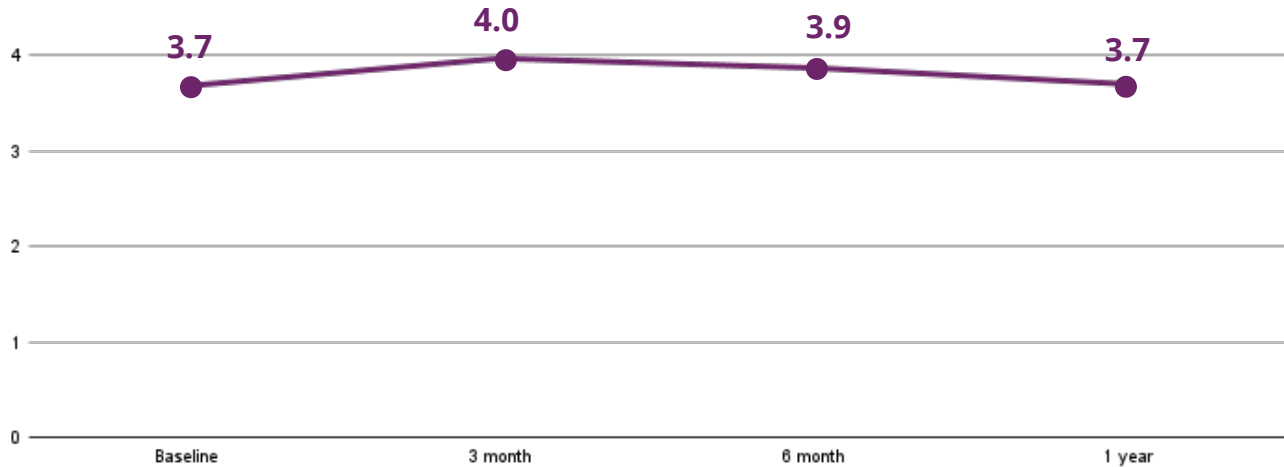
Mindful Parenting



Mindful parenting over a year of Sojourner services measured by the Interpersonal Mindfulness in Parenting (IEM-P) scale



Family Routines and Sleep



Mindful parenting over a year of Sojourner services measured by the Interpersonal Mindfulness in Parenting (IEM-P) scale

Routines and predictability are key to children’s feelings of security and safety. Further, routine and predictability in childhood are essential building blocks of children’s developing self-regulation. We asked mothers we served about the routines in their family such as having a regular bedtime routine and eating together as a family at least once a day. We saw that this increased after their initial interview. Unlike some of the other measures of child well-being, family routines and sleep were rated higher at 3 months and 6 months than at 1 year after intake. The high level of routine found at

3 months into services may reflect the higher likelihood that children are with their one non-abusive parent more often during this time period (e.g., if she fled the household shared with an abusive partner and took the children with her). Later in families’ journeys, children may be more likely to return to living part time with the other parent, because of a family court mandate or simply because many children and parents desire some degree of ongoing contact with the other parent despite their past behavior.



Youth Specific Programming

While not all of the children of our adult clients receive services directly, Sojourner does offer services specifically for children and teens experiencing domestic violence in their families. Two of those services include Child Witness to Domestic Violence Groups and Camp Hope America, Wisconsin.

Child Witness to Domestic Violence (CWDV) is a 12-week group-based curriculum and support program for protective parents and their children. This program aims to provide psychoeducation to parents and youth on domestic violence, trauma, and healthy relationships, promote youth and parent coping and well-being, and improve family relationships amongst participating youth and caregivers. Each session begins with a meal to provide families quality time together. Following the meal, parents and youth attend separate group sessions based on

age and developmental level (e.g., infants/toddlers, school-aged children, teens, and parents). Lessons and materials for each group follow the same theme each week but are tailored to be appropriate for each age group. Themes include encouraging open discussion about violence and breaking the taboo and secrecy, normalizing reactions and feelings, safety planning, positive conflict resolution, safe vs. unsafe touching, and building self-esteem. From our program evaluation efforts, we know these groups are effective for both the youth and adults. We collect information about participating youth and parents at the start of the group (pre) and after the group (post). Over the course of the group, we see youth's behavior problems decrease and participating caregivers' well-being (e.g., hope) increase.





Two children pictured at Camp Hope sleep away camp.

Camp Hope

Each summer youth aged 8 to 16 attend a **week-long sleep away camp facilitated by Sojourner**. Through the Camp Hope curriculum, designed by Alliance for Hope International, **youth participate in a variety of activities teaching resilience despite traumatic experiences and finding kinship amongst other youth who have been through similar things**. Alongside pieces of curriculum focused on reflecting on and overcoming traumatic experiences, youth attending camp also are afford-


ed the **vital opportunity to simply be a child** at camp, free of worries and concerns that may characterize their home life. To that end, they engage in traditional camp activities like field games, swimming, rock climbing, ropes courses, art projects, and silly campfire songs. After the summer camp week, youth and their families are invited to attend year-long reunion events, maintaining support and connection throughout the year.

Camp Hope Voices

“
I loved how the counselors helped me with my problems and how we got to do new things.
 - Camper
”



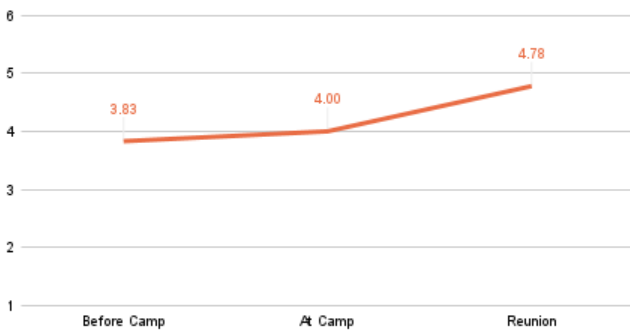
“
Camp Hope is fun. Every year I never want to leave camp.
 - Camper
”



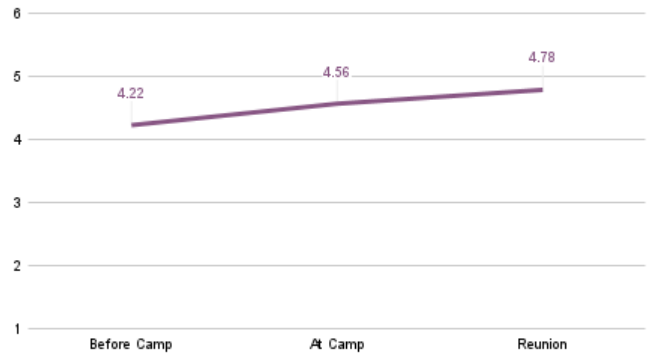
“
My kid came back home with new friends and so much joy. A beautifully safe, supportive environment for all children. Every single counselor was happy, warm, and engaging to the kids.
 - Parent
”



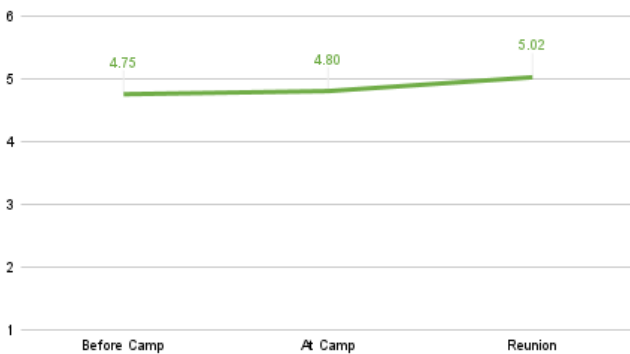

Campers “Even when bad things happen to me, I still feel hopeful about the future”



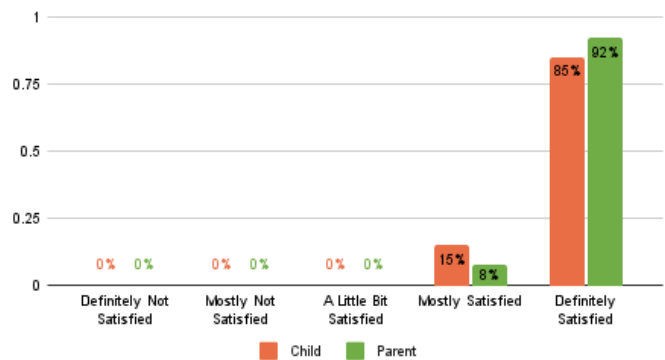
Campers “I like to encourage and support others”



Campers’ Overall Resilience



Overall Satisfaction with Camp Hope



Future Directions

Data presented in this report as well as knowledge from clients and staff show the effectiveness of our existing programs for youth and point to some Future Directions that Sojourner will engage in the upcoming year to further enhance our work with children and teens.

Expand capacity to provide direct services for children and teens.

Though Sojourner has long recognized the importance of providing direct service to the youth impacted by violence, our capacity to provide direct service to youth has not always met the demand. Thanks in part to a large award from SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), Sojourner is able to dramatically expand capacity to provide these vital services. Specifically, we will be expanding our capacity to offer the **Child Witness to Domestic Violence groups described above from one or two cohorts a year to four cohorts per year.** In addition to our long running

CWDV program, Sojourner also recognizes the need to provide **services to pre-teens and adolescents who have already begun dating or will soon.** We will be starting new group programming designed for this age group to help ensure a healthy, safe introduction to their own intimate relationships especially in cases in which healthy intimate relationships have not been modeled in that youth's experience at home. Finally, Sojourner will have increased capacity to provide **one-on-one family advocacy support** delivering individualized support that responds to each family's unique situation and needs.



Child Witness to Domestic Violence cohorts per year



Pre-teen healthy relationships programming



1:1 family advocacy support

Partner with youth-serving organizations across the city to identify and serve children and teens.

While Sojourner serves youth in families whose parents are already receiving services at the Family Peace Center, we recognize that there is an expansive array of other talented, dedicated youth-serving organizations in the Milwaukee area. Connecting youths and their families to resources in their own neighborhood is essential to breaking the intergenerational transmission of violence. Sojourner

plans to **expand our partnership with youth serving organizations throughout the city** to establish referral relationships amongst our programs and provide capacity building and technical assistance to youth serving organizations seeking support around identifying families who are experiencing domestic violence.



Partner with other community youth-serving organizations



Leverage technology innovations to strengthen referral relationships



Offer technical assistance

Examine and improve systems impacting children and families impacted by domestic violence.

Beyond the services offered to youth and their families directly, there are larger systems that intersect with the lives of many domestic violence survivors and their children that can have a tremendous impact on their safety and well-being. Sojourner is dedicated to systems change and advocacy work to help survivors and their children navigate these systems and to improve them for all survivors and youth. Interaction with the family court system, for instance, is a necessary part of many survivors' journeys as they divorce or otherwise negotiate custody and placement of children shared with an abusive partner. Sojourner is currently conducting

research in this area, collecting information from court records and directly from parents who have gone through family court to discover what's working well and uncover opportunities for improvement. Further, Sojourner will sub-contract with an entity to expand the availability of custody investigations in contested family court cases in which there are allegations of domestic violence to help establish a custody and placement schedule that keeps children and their parents safe. Finally, we are exploring funding opportunities to support additional legal representation for clients with family court matters.



While difficult, the experience of domestic violence does not have to define a child's path in life. Through supporting protective, loving caregivers as well as providing direct services for children and teens

themselves, we can help break the intergenerational transmission of violence, allowing these youth to lead their own peaceful, safe, and happy lives.

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