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Canadian Domestic Homicide
Prevention Initiative



Staying Alive: Safety and Coping Strategies Used by Mothers and Children Living with Domestic Violence

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Preventing domestic homicide: From research and lived experiences to practice
Conference

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Background

Over 100,000 individuals in Canada were victimized by an intimate partner in 2019

Individuals experiencing violence often face systemic barriers forcing them to cope in isolation

The presence of children creates added complexities for mothers experiencing violence

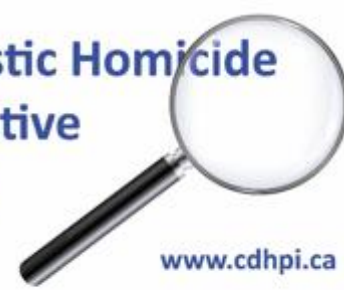
Children exposed to violence tend to develop their own coping and safety strategies

Safety planning often focuses on mothers and children separately

Present Study



How does the mother-child dyad work together to stay safe and cope with domestic violence?



Sample

- 77 interviews with women
 - self-identified as previously experiencing severe domestic violence and
 - identified with at least one of the following populations: immigrant or refugee, Indigenous, and/or rural, remote, and northern communities.
- 30 mothers and 5 adults experienced domestic violence as children
- Average age for mothers was 43 years with a range of 27 to 62 years
- The average age for child survivors (at time of participation) was 31 years with a range of 24 to 54
- The average age of children's first exposure was 4 years
- Average duration of the violent relationships was 11 years

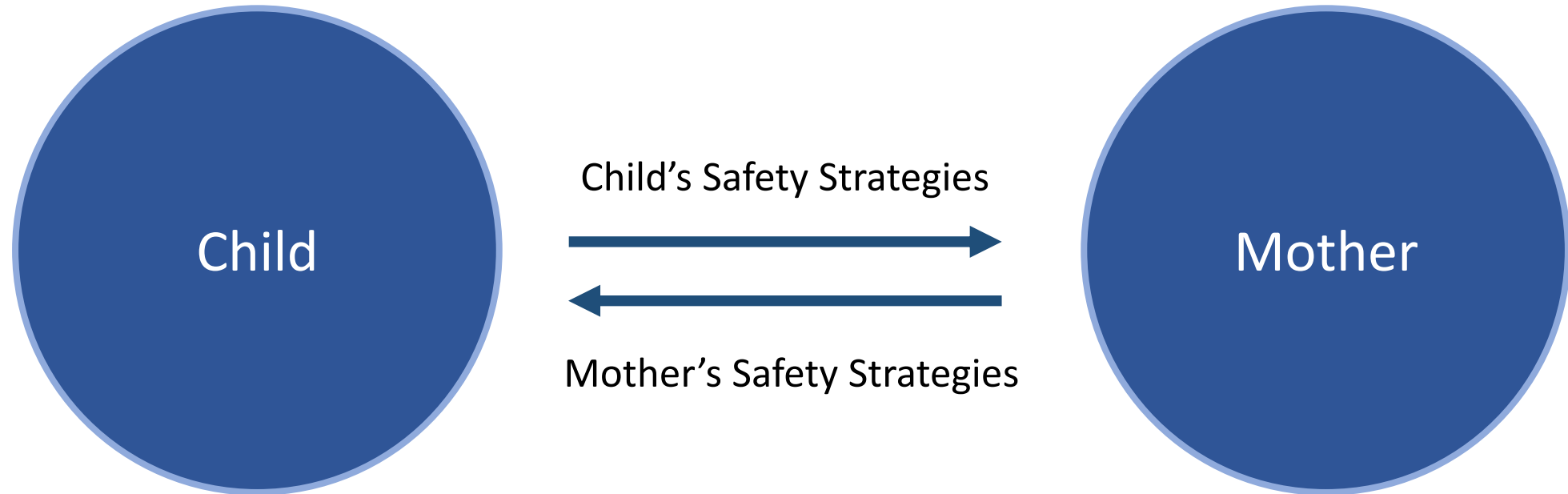


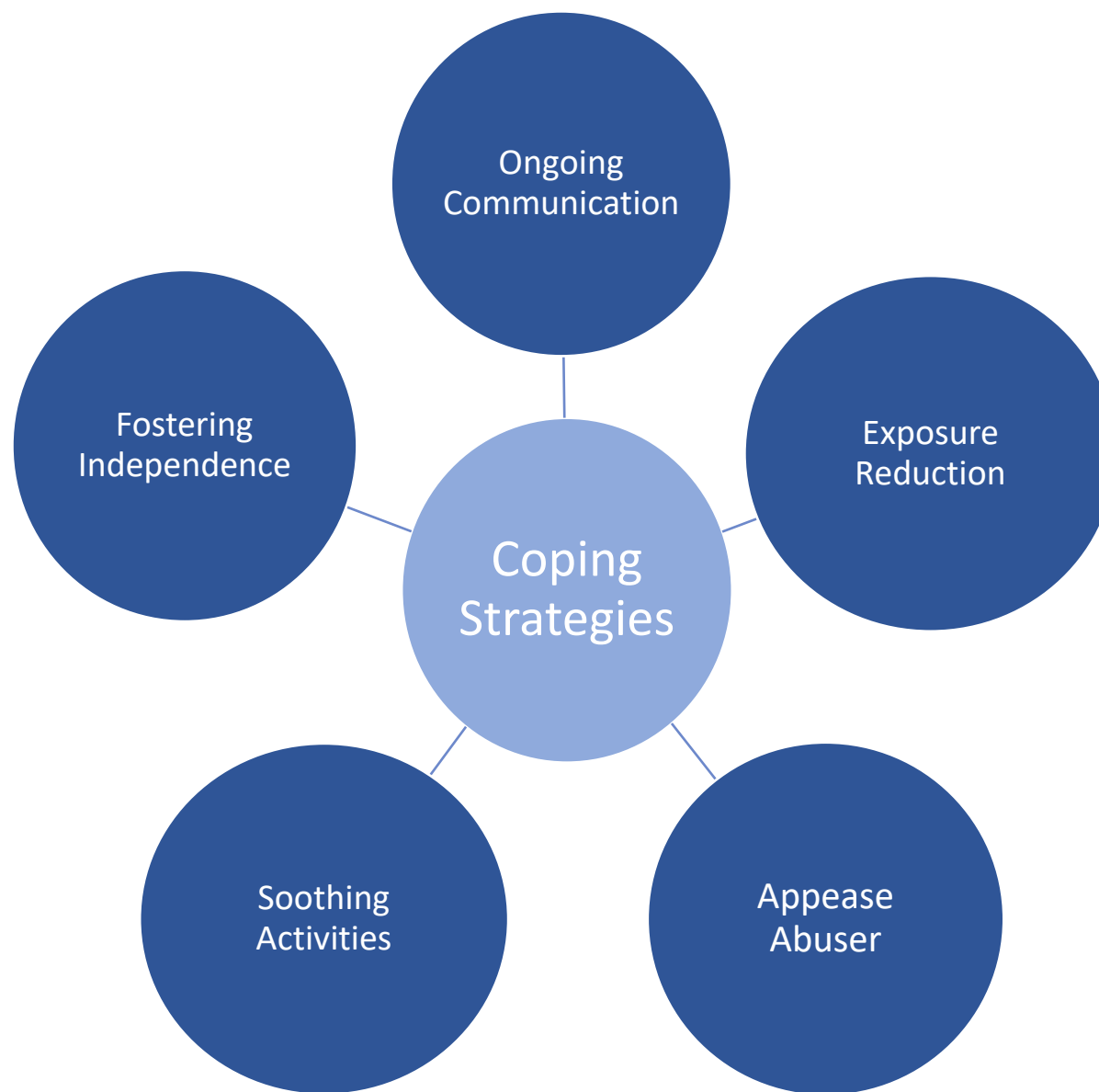
Data Analysis

Deductive/
Inductive Analysis

Coded in Dedoose
(V.8.1.8)

Dyad representing the relation between children's and mother's safety strategies





Safety and Coping Strategies Used by Mother-Child Dyads



Ongoing Communication

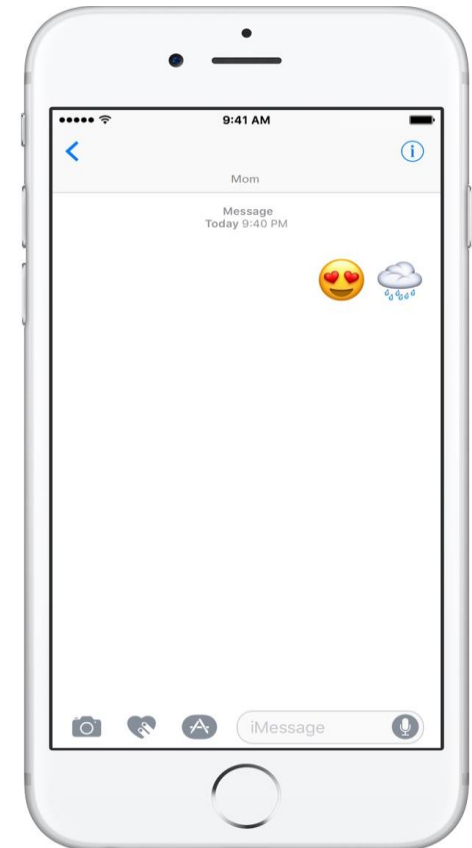


Using
Technology
and Code
Language

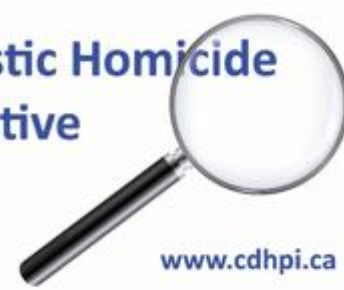
“He texts me a message with a [rain cloud] emoticon and a [heart eye] face, it means that he’s in a bad situation. He can Uber immediately, no questions asked.”

Consistent
Involvement
and
Reassurance

“He can’t hurt you anymore. The secret you kept is the power he had over you and he doesn’t have that power anymore because you told someone. We’re not letting him take anymore of our power.”



Exposure Reduction



Leaving the Residence

Short Term Exit

“I joined theatre at school so I could stay at school until seven at night.”

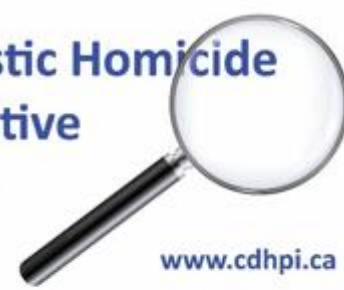
Long Term Exit

“I started planning, I’m getting out of this house and I’m moving away. I didn’t tell anyone. I would pack up all my belongings in garbage bags and would sneak them out of the house and drive them to my mom’s house.”

Emergency Exit

“I yelled at my kids, the kids were screaming, they were crying trying to come help, to protect me. They were small. So, I said, ‘Go next door, go next door right now. Go!’”

Exposure Reduction



Moving within the Residence

“To all feel more safe we ended up actually just locking ourselves in our shared bedroom and just staying in there and not allowing our dad or anything to come in for the remainder of the night.”

Appease Abuser



Agree to
Commands

Avoid Topics of
Conversation

Adjust Social
Behaviour

Soothing Activities

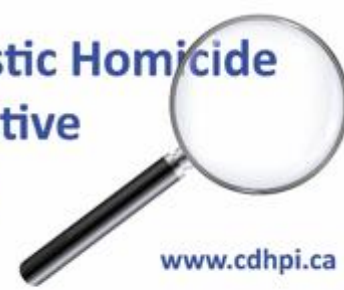


Distraction

“I [knew] my kids were hurting, and I could see my son in particular he would go and attack the piano. And he would play like, like really intensely, he’d play the piano and I could tell he was working through stuff.”

Comfort

“Yeah, they [her children] slept with me in my room because they were so afraid. And even still to this day.”



Fostering Independence

Financial Independence

“I knew that within myself I’d be ok if I left. I made sure that I was financially stable, that I wasn’t financially dependent on him. I have my own power.”

Goal Setting

“Having a goal to focus on, or having a plan to find a way out is really helpful in those situations because it keeps you from focusing on how desperate and dire everything really feels and seems.”

Personal Autonomy

“If a woman is presenting with multiple abortions, like if somebody comes to you three times, saying I want you to get rid of this baby, screen that person for abuse for heaven’s sakes.”



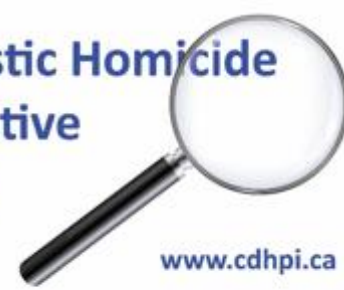
Discussion



- The mother-child dyad is extremely important when promoting safety and coping with domestic violence
- Children may be forced to take on an active role to keep themselves and their mothers safe, often unbeknownst to the abuser
- Service providers and courts should recognize the importance of working with the mother-child dyad when safety planning
- Future research should examine safety planning with mother-child dyads with children at various developmental stages

Limitations

- Participants were self-selected
- Few participants shared experiences and observations pertaining to children who were very young (under 4) at the time of their exposure to the violence
- Each survivor's experience and context of their lives are unique and often hard to generalize



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Initiative canadienne sur la
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