

# FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

## Factors that Facilitate Successful Cross System Collaboration

Brittany DiBella, MSW, DVS  
Judy L. Postmus, Ph.D., ACSW  
Cassandra Simmel, MSW, Ph.D.  
Catherine Buttner, MSW  
Caitlin Eckert, MSW, LSW

*Thirty million children are exposed to domestic violence before the age of seventeen.*

*Hamby, Finkelhor, Turner & Ormrod, 2011*

*The child welfare system and advocacy organizations often share the same client population.*

### Inter-Agency Collaboration as an Intervention

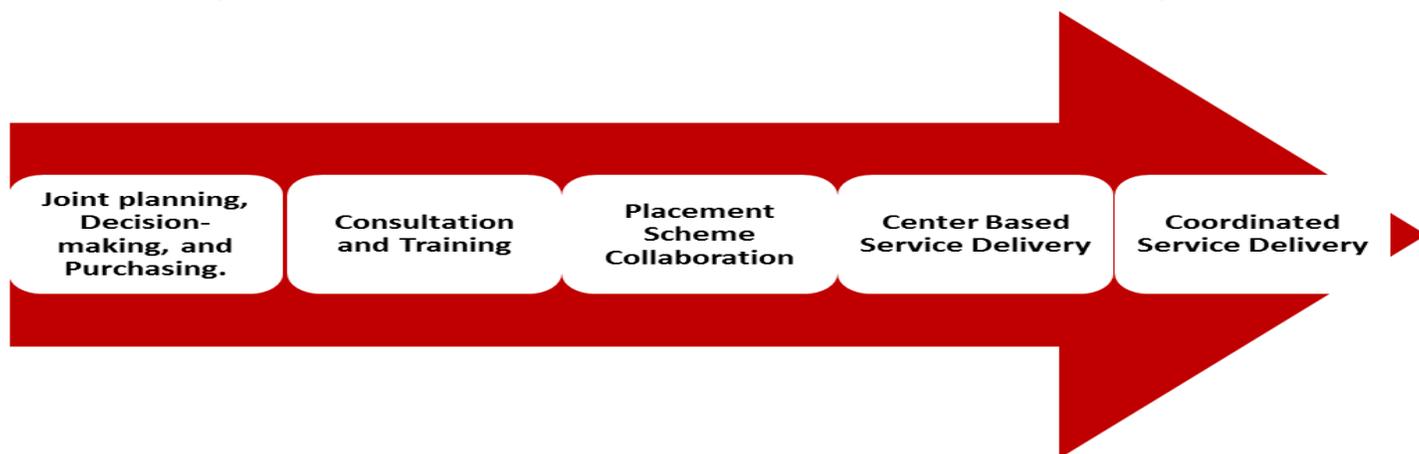
Experiencing domestic violence may result in negative outcomes for women and their children. Research has consistently shown that as many as thirty million children are exposed to domestic violence before the age of seventeen (Hamby, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2011), and about sixty percent of children exposed to domestic violence are also at risk for child maltreatment (Hamby, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2011). Children exposed to domestic violence are at greater risk for developing behavioral problems, PTSD, and other long-term negative effects such as disruptions in reaching age-specific developmental milestones. Unaddressed, these behavioral and mental health problems may persist or even worsen. Given the high prevalence of domestic violence within child welfare involved families, it is essential that there is coordination between child welfare and domestic violence agencies.

Due to the high prevalence of co-occurring domestic violence in child welfare involved families, the child welfare system and advocacy organizations often share the same client population. The child welfare system in particular has an opportunity to facilitate access to services for survivors of domestic violence that will ultimately help women and children with opportunities for healing. Domestic violence shelters and advocacy organizations are well equipped to improve outcomes for survivors by enhancing women's internal resources and social support systems through counseling, support groups, advocacy, shelter, and linkages to other community support systems. Hence, many

child welfare systems have attempted to form collaborations with local domestic violence service providing agencies in order to address the needs of the families they serve.

The challenge is to determine how these systems can collaborate together to better address the safety risks for children and support adult survivors.

According to the inter-organizational collaboration theory, for organizations to successfully collaborate, they must share similar problems or clients, have expertise to respond to the changing environment, and be willing to share financial resources and risks. As child welfare and domestic violence organizations have developed and worked to improve their collaborative efforts to address families experiencing domestic violence, it is important to understand what factors make these collaborations more likely to succeed.



Collaboration among individual professionals from different organizations may take on one of several models of collaboration along a continuum from individual to organizational collaboration. One of the most basic models of collaboration at the individual level includes joint planning, decision-making, and purchasing. For example, advisory boards frequently include stakeholders representing distinct agencies for the purpose of developing a specific project or initiative. The next model of collaboration is consultation and training, wherein professionals from one agency provide consultation or training to those in another, passing on knowledge to other professionals. Moving down the continuum to organizational collaboration, the placement scheme collaboration model, occurs when staff from one agency are placed or work in the other collaborating agency (e.g., placing a domestic violence advocate in child welfare offices). A center based service delivery model or a “One-Stop-Shop” happens when different agencies dispatch their staff to a central location to work (e.g., the Family Justice Centers). These staff may or may not necessarily deliver services together. And, finally, the coordinated service delivery model occurs when agencies share staff, resources, and locations in which a hired coordinator or liaison manages the services of all staff from the different agencies.

This research-to-practice brief will review the existing literature on collaborations between systems at both the individual-level—collaboration between professionals—and the agency-level—collaboration between two organizations, as well as known barriers to collaborations and existing gaps in research.

Sources: Alter & Hage, 1993; Anderson & Bang, 2012; Anderson, Saunders, Yoshihama, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2003; Band-Winterstein, 2014; Bellis, Lowey, Leckenby, Hughes, & Harrison, 2014; Bragg, 2003; Chemtob & Carlson, 2004; David & LeBlanc, 2015; DeVoe & Smith, 2002; Dick, 2006; Geffner, Ingelman, & Zellner, 2003; Graham-Bermann, 2000; Graham-Bermann, Castor, Miller, Howell, 2012; Hamby, Finkelhor, Turner & Ormrod, 2011

## Individual-Level Systems Collaboration

Individuals within an organization can either promote or hinder collaboration. Research highlights an extensive list of personal or professional factors that impact individuals' work with other systems. These factors include:

1. Trust, Respect, and Understanding

2. Mutual Commitment to Population and Purpose

3. Perception of Need and Best Practices for Collaboration

4. Adequate Training, Support, and Resources

### ***Trust, Respect, and Understanding.***

An individual's ability to be honest and trustworthy within the context of the work environment and their ability to trust peers, supervisors, and professionals from the collaborating agency is crucial to successful collaboration. The foundation of this trust includes a willingness to understand others' cultural and professional context and the ability to compromise with others. This trust must be mutual among agencies involved with the collaboration. Understanding of the collaborative agency's culture and professional perspective is also crucial. This understanding is most often developed through positive relationships and ongoing opportunities for communication among professionals. Front-line child welfare workers rely heavily on past relationships and daily experiences between organizations as well as on clients' stories to formulate beliefs about other organizations and their staff. Opportunities for positive interactions with a partner organization help to develop a more positive history of cooperation to draw upon in future collaborative projects. This ongoing relationship building has been found to be particularly important when there has a history of conflicting views. Clear channels of communication within and surrounding the collaborative efforts as well as clear communication about roles and responsibilities of all parties involved influence positive communication and promotes more positive understanding between agencies.

Sources: Atkinson et al., 2002; Banks, Hazen, Coben, Wang, and Griffith, 2009; Johnson, et al., 2003; Kok, 2001; Market, Brock, & Savla, 2014; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Pinchot & Pinchot, 1993; Sandfort, 1999; Wolff, 2002

### ***Commitment to Population and Purpose.***

The Inter-organizational Relations Theory suggests that professionals within different agencies come together due to a shared focus on the needs of a particular population of clients. This includes a shared understanding and positive regard for the mutual client population—a factor that has been found to be among the most influential for successful collaboration. Individuals who are both committed to the needs of the population and can find a shared vision tend to feel individual responsibility and ownership of the initiative. This sense of "membership" helps individuals to see the collaboration as in their own self-interest which will further motivate them to work collaboratively, particularly during challenging situations. Additionally, when front-line staff and supervisors from the same organization disagree on the purpose for serving clients, they diminish the shared vision and ultimately, impact the shared vision with another organization.

Sources: Alter & Hage, 1993; Banks, Dutch, & Wang, 2008; Johnson, et al., 2003; Market, Brock, & Salva, 2014; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992

### ***Perception of Need and Best Practices for Collaboration.***

In addition to having a commitment to the population and purpose of the collaboration, individuals must also view the collaboration as mutually beneficial. In order for individuals to perceive collaboration as being necessary and in their interest, they must first have a clear understanding of the initiative. Creating a mutual understanding for partners in a collaboration must start with clarity around purpose, roles, best practices and desired outcomes. This requires effective communication surrounding the collaboration at all levels: front-line, supervisory, agency leadership, and the systems level.

### ***Adequate Training, Support and Resources.***

Even if the different agencies hold positive perceptions toward each other and a shared commitment to the issue, the organizations must also have adequate support, resources and training to be successful at collaborating. Such support and resources include adequate supervision, continual training including cross-training, access to information, opportunities for positive team building as well as agency policies and practice shifts that allow for the integration of collaborative best-practices.

Sources: Alter & Hage, 1993; Banks, Dutch, & Wang, 2008; Banks, Hazen, Coben, Wang, and Griffith, 2009; Johnson, et al., 2003; Kok, 2001; Market, Brock, & Savla, 2014; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Sandfort, 1999; Wolff, 2002

## **Organizational-level Systems Collaboration**

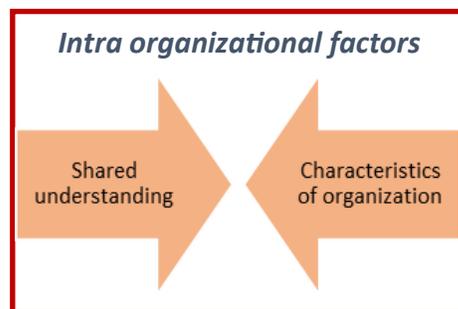
Individuals within an organization play a key role in helping agencies successfully collaborate. Additionally, there are factors beyond the individual themselves that can help or hinder collaborations; we refer to these as organizational level factors. These factors include Intra-Organizational (within organizations) and Inter-

### ***Intra-Organizational Factors***

Literature looking at intra-system collaboration factors is scarce since most have focused on collaboration factors *between* agencies, rather than what agency-level factors influence successful collaboration. In order for inter-organizational collaboration to be effective, each organization must have a certain level of readiness. Two main components of an organization, which promote collaboration include: sharing a similar mission and goals and the overall office and organization's internal environment.

#### ***Shared Understanding of Client-Focused Mission within the Organization.***

In order for a collaborative program to be successful, it is important for the needs of the clients to remain central and understood across participating organizations. Beyond just having the clients' needs in mind, it's important that participating agencies find a common outlook on how to address the needs.



#### ***Characteristics and Environment of Organization.***

A history of positive networking with other agencies can strengthen potential collaboration and assist organizations in understanding potential roles of collaborators. Additionally, effects of diversity in staff, such as race, gender, and class, also influence the approach to collaboration. Each agency's culture and environment plays a critical role in how successful collaborative efforts can be—particularly in regards to flexibility and structures in place for communication. Agencies that are able to find a balance between organizational self-interest and collective interest, are better able to achieve and maintain collaboration.

Sources: Banks, Dutch & Wang, 2008; Horwath & Morrison, 2007; Milbourne, Macrae, & Maguire, 2003

## ***Inter-Organizational Factors***

Research on key stakeholders' opinions on the extent to which specific factors contributed to the success of past interagency collaborations can be synthesized into six categories including: 1) commitment to shared purpose; 2) communication; 3) strong leadership from key decision makers; 4) understanding the culture of collaborating agencies; 5) engaging in serious preplanning; and 6) providing adequate resources for collaboration.



### ***Commitment to Shared Purpose.***

If organizations have a shared purpose and believe their goals are in line with another organization, they are much more likely to share resources, be more committed and open to collaborating, and believe such a partnership is mutually beneficial. Finding and fostering a shared commitment is important for staff at all levels of the organization including: frontline staff, supervisors, as well as executive leadership and can contribute to an overall organizational culture of willingness to work with a community partner.

### ***Communication.***

A clear communication process is also needed to ensure a solid collaboration between agencies. Such a process would include: clear pathways for communication, an understanding of the cooperating agency, and engagement across decision-making.

Particularly, shared participation in planning and decision-making is critical. When both organizations are active participants in the planning and decision-making process, and when both organizations' cultures support teamwork, flexibility, willingness to compromise and an open flow of communication, services tend to be more efficient, higher quality, and the community tends to accept services more readily. Flexibility helps to facilitate successful collaboration, as agencies which find a balance between organizational self-interest and collective interest are better able to achieve and maintain collaboration and are more able to compromise during conflict.

In addition, it is important for the objectives and aims of the collaboration, including clear roles and responsibilities across both systems, to be clearly defined and communicated to all involved agencies.

### ***Strong Leadership.***

Strong leadership that includes a multi-agency coordinating group made up of stakeholders and staff at various levels can assist in effective planning and communication. Leadership should be flexible, adaptable and committed to the purpose of the collaboration. Cross-systems training, with the purpose of understanding the other organization's role, should include staff in leadership roles and should continue throughout the collaboration.

### ***Engaging in Preplanning and Ongoing Evaluation.***

Collaborations between organizations are most successful when they engage in early process consultation. This means, organizations take the time to review policies and procedures to ensure all processes needed for the collaboration are clearly defined. In addition, the continuous monitoring and evaluation of these policies and procedures is necessary as the project progresses. Linking projects into other planning and decision-making processes is beneficial to the overall success of the integration of the collaborative program into each agency's internal processes.

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### ***Providing Adequate Resources.***

It is vital to the success of a collaboration for both agencies to provide the necessary training, support, and resources to all individuals involved. This starts with the recruitment of staff with the right experience, knowledge and an approach to the work that is in line with the collaborative effort. Further, staff involved in the collaboration should have access to necessary information and an appropriate information-sharing system should be put into place.

In addition, providing cross-training and joint team building opportunities can prepare both agencies for integrating work philosophies and increasing their understanding of the other. All staff involved should receive appropriate support and supervision throughout the collaboration.

Sources Banks, Dutch, & Wang, 2008; Fiedman et al., 2007; Gregson, Cartlidge, & Bond, 1992; Hallett & Birchall, 1992; Hudson, 1987; Huxham & Macdonald, 1992; Johnson et al, 2003; Lawson, 2009; Marrett, 1971; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Milbourne, Macrae, & Maguire, 2003; Miller & McNicholl, 2003; Roaf, 2002; Sloper, 2004; Van de Ven, 1980

## **Barriers to a Successful Multi-Systems Collaboration**

Research has also identified barriers to interagency collaboration including: inadequate resources, unclear interagency processes, unrealistic expectations of the partner agency, and differing philosophical approaches to the shared client population. In a study conducted in Australia examining the collaboration between child welfare and mental health services, even though workers had a high level of regard for and trust of one another, they reported that the lack of adequate training regarding the intersection of the two service philosophies impacted their work (Darlington et al., 2005).

### **Barriers to Collaboration**

- Inadequate resources
- Lack of support from supervisors
- Lack of on-going cross training
- Frequent staff turnover and reorganization
- Unclear staff roles
- Lack of understanding of the goal of collaboration
- Unrealistic expectations
- Misunderstanding of collaborating agency's role & authority
- Lack of trust & respect of collaborating agency
- Differing philosophical approaches
- Poor communication between staff and agencies
- Lack of sharing information; rigidly holding onto confidentiality policies
- A negative perception of the partner agency's professionals
- Resistance to change
- No consequences for staff not collaborating

## Gaps in Literature

Although there is research concerning factors that both promote and hinder a successful collaboration between systems, there are still significant gaps in the research about what facilitates the most effective inter-agency collaborative programs.

1. **Research fails to define how to achieve the mechanisms identified for implementing successful system collaboration.** Literature lists key factors and barriers that help or hinder organizations' collaborations with one another, but researchers have not yet operationalized what a successful inter-agency collaboration looks like. For instance, the "what" is defined, but the "how" is not outlined yet. We know the important ingredients for success, but we need more information and strategies on how to get there.
2. **Research fails to measure how collaborative efforts affect client outcomes.** There are examples of organizations networking together in many different fields including: mental health, community health, education, and domestic violence. However, these studies focus on the collaboration at the organizational level—based on the perceptions of key stakeholders, but they fail to demonstrate improved outcomes for the families being served from the client population's perspective. Only one known study (Sloper, 2004) touches on the impact of a poor agency collaboration on clients, explaining that it can impact clients negatively when they need to tell their stories multiple times due to agencies having poor communication and information sharing processes. This failure of the collaboration left families feeling overburdened and re-traumatized. However, this feedback came from stakeholder's self-report on observations—not from the clients themselves.
3. **Lack of understanding of organizational readiness for collaboration.** While literature is abundant around individual factors that promote collaboration readiness within an individual as well as factors that facilitate collaboration *between* agencies—there is little information about how each organization's individual-level factors influence successful collaboration such as: agency culture, efficacy or relationships within the community.

In summary, it is common for service-providing organizations in the community to work together. However, there is little empirical documentation or understanding of the definition of a successful interagency collaboration nor how successful interagency collaboration leads to improved client outcomes. Although research lists factors that facilitate and hinder collaboration—the factors identified are based upon self-reports from stakeholders only.

Sources: Allen, 2006; Anderson & Cramer-Benjamin, 1999; Banks, Dutch, & Wang, 2008; Darlington et al., 2005; Johnson et al, 2003; Provan & Milward, 1995; Roussos & Fawcett, 2000; Schechter & Edleson, 1994; Sloper, 2004; Thompson, Socolar, Brown, & Haggerty, 2002; Worden 2000.

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