

**SASS: A Resiliency-Based Approach for Families Affected by Domestic Violence**  
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**SASS** (Safety, Attachment, Self-regulation, and Self-esteem/Self-agency) is a framework to help domestic violence advocates support protective parents to foster resilience and healing for their children and themselves. This handout explains each component of the SASS acronym:

**Safety**

Domestic violence can affect children's sources of safety and security. The quality of the caregiving environment may be compromised by the abusive partner's actions and behavior. This may include undermining the non-abusive parent's role and authority within the family. The abusive partner's behavior may also be confusing and frightening for children, and their parenting may not be responsive to their children's needs for nurturance and protection (both directly and indirectly through what they experience as a result of domestic violence within the home). The non-abusive parent may be unable to keep their children safe from physical and emotional harm, despite their efforts, due to the pattern of power and coercive control established by the abusive partner.

Establishing a sense of safety and security is the first component of fostering resilience and healing for survivors and their children. Re-establishing a sense of safety and felt security may need to happen over and over again as different events occur in children's lives, after they have had prior experiences of domestic violence. Some examples include: having traumatic reminders and memories related to experiencing domestic violence; when contact is resumed with the child's parent who has unsupervised visits that are court ordered; or when the abusive partner violates an order of protection.

**Domestic violence advocates can support non-abusive parents to help children feel safe and secure** by encouraging parents (1) to establish predictable routines; (2) to help children navigate transitions (e.g. change in routine, custody arrangement, teachers, etc.); (3) to offer choices that provide a sense of control; (4) to provide reassurances about how the parent is keeping their child safe (e.g. changed the locks on the door), and that the violence is not their fault; and (5) to set limits and boundaries with kindness and consistency.

Safety is interrelated with the next component, attachment.

**Attachment**

The single most important resource for children's healing and resilience can be their relationship with the non-abusive parent. The parent-child relationship may be altered or disrupted, however, as a result of experiencing domestic violence. Building or re-establishing a secure attachment relationship helps children gain or regain a sense of safety and security. The non-abusive parent is a "secure base" from which to explore the world and a "safe haven" when children experience scary or overwhelming feelings or events. Protective adults can be counted

on to be “bigger, stronger wiser and kind” and can take actions to protect and comfort children when needed (©Circle of Security).

**Domestic violence advocates can support non-abusive parents to build secure attachments by engaging in interactions and activities that promote bonding and closeness and by responding to their children’s needs** at the “top” and “bottom” of the © Circle of Security. Young children may enjoy simple games such as “hide and seek” with parents and other adult caregivers, and reciprocal interactions that promote pleasure and bonding. Encouraging parents to find ways to engage in fun activities with children of all ages can help strengthen bonding and closeness.

This component is also interrelated with the next component, self-regulation.

### **Self-regulation**

Self-regulation is an important part of the healing process, as children and teens learn to cope with overwhelming feelings, thoughts, sensations, trauma reminders and memories in ways that are more adaptive.

When we are young, primary caregivers help us regulate overwhelming feelings and sensations, and buffer stressful experiences. Parents have to be calm enough themselves and able to reflect on their children’s needs in the moment in order to help their children re-regulate when they are upset. As children become older and more independent, they are better able to manage strong feelings and stressful situations, over time, on their own. When children have experienced domestic violence and other adversities from an early age, they may not have had the same support to develop this capacity for self-soothing and self-regulation.

**Domestic violence advocates can help children and support parents by offering strategies for self-regulation.** These include relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, positive affirmations, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, mindfulness and meditation.

### **Self-esteem and Self-agency**

Self-esteem and how we view ourselves begins with positive mirroring from our parents and other important adults in our lives. Our sense of self-agency in the world comes from knowing that our needs and feelings are understood and matter! Through our relationships with parents and other caring adults, who can sensitively attune to and respond to our needs, we learn how to articulate what we want and need. We learn how to trust others to help meet our needs, and to gain skills in negotiating and solving problems when we have conflicts.

Mastering developmental tasks at each stage makes us feel proud and capable. Having an opportunity to develop our individual talents and abilities, such as excelling in sports, the arts and other pursuits, contributes to positive self-esteem.

When children experience domestic violence or other forms of interpersonal violence, this may affect their view of themselves and how they see the world around them. They may feel that

they are “bad” or unworthy of love and care, or to blame for what’s going on. Children need reassurance that the violence they have experienced is not their fault. Building positive connections with caring adults and peers can be reparative to children’s self-esteem.

**Domestic violence advocates can help children and support parents to build children’s self-esteem and self-agency based on the individual child’s developmental capacities and interests.** Infants and young children develop self-esteem through their attachment relationships and when primary caregivers can “delight in me” as I explore my world and try new things. With school age children and teens, parents can help support the discovery of what their child enjoys doing and is interested in mastering through activities, classes and participation in sports, clubs, and through other community events, such as tutoring younger children or “giving back” to others. When children feel a sense of belonging within family, cultural and community groups, this also contributes to positive self-esteem. Children’s sense of self-agency is fostered when parents can acknowledge and hold their children’s needs “in mind,” while offering choices that are developmentally sensitive and providing reasonable limits and boundaries.

### **In conclusion**

These interrelated components help children to become more resilient, to cope more adaptively with their life experiences, and to experience a greater sense of well-being and security through their connections with nurturing parents and other caring adults. The well-being and resilience of domestic violence survivors is intertwined with their children. Through our relationships with families affected by domestic violence, we can support protective parents and children to heal together and to thrive.