

COERCIVE CONTROL IN FAMILY COURT

Training Guide & Resource Library

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A comprehensive resource for mental health professionals, family law attorneys, guardians ad litem, child advocates, social workers, and family court judges.

This guide covers:

- Statistics around family court failures to protect children
- The nature of coercive control
- The crisis in family court
- Case histories that drove legislative reform
- The gap between law and implementation
- How coercive control appears in children across developmental stages
- Screening tools and their limits
- The Safe & Together Model
- Role-specific guidance for every professional working in this system
- Current and pending legislation by state (as of July 2026)

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1. The Crisis: What the Data Shows

The consequences of family court's inability to recognize coercive control are not abstract. They are measured in children's lives. The following data, drawn from the Center for Judicial Excellence (updated weekly), Department of Justice-funded research, and expert testimony, establishes the scale of the problem.

980+

Children killed by a parent since 2008 when divorce, separation, custody, visitation, or child support was a factor (Center for Judicial Excellence, updated weekly) (number as of July 2026)

~20%

Child murders by a parent in the U.S. are attributable at least in part to a family court placement decision. This is likely an undercount due to systematic record concealment (Dr. Bandy X. Lee, citing CJE, 2022)

58,000+

Children per year **ordered into unsupervised custody or visitation with a physically or sexually abusive parent** as a result of custody orders

78%

Of abuse cases where **the judge had initially dismissed the protective parent's allegations** — in cases where child abuse was later verified (DOJ-funded study, 2019)

70%

Domestic violence custody cases in which **family courts award joint or sole custody to fathers accused of domestic violence**; alleged abusers are frequently granted unsupervised parenting time unless their child was the direct and documented target

75%

Of women killed by an abusive partner are murdered after they leave. Separation is not safety — it is the most dangerous period for both mothers and children

Sources: Center for Judicial Excellence (centerforjudicialexcellence.org); Dr. Bandy X. Lee, testimony to Colorado Legislature, 2022; U.S. Department of Justice-funded study, 2019.

2. Case Histories: Children Who Died — and the Laws That Followed

Each of the following cases shares a defining feature: a protective parent documented danger, presented it to the court, and was dismissed. The children named in these cases — and the laws that carry their names — represent a direct line between systemic failure and legislative reform.

Kayden Mancuso

2011–2018 | Age 7 | Bucks County, Pennsylvania

A talented athlete who loved dancing and singing. “Everyone wanted to be her best friend.” — Kathy Sherlock, Kayden’s mother

- **What the court knew:** Kayden’s mother submitted **documented evidence of Jeffrey Mancuso’s violent history: criminal records, documented suicidal ideation, a Protection from Abuse order, and death threats against family members.**
- **The court’s response:** Custody visits were shortened. **Unsupervised access was maintained.** The court’s reasoning: there was no evidence Mancuso had ever directly abused Kayden.
- **August 6, 2018:** Kayden was beaten to death by her father during a **court-ordered unsupervised visit.** He wrote a message on her body directed at her mother and stepfather, then died by suicide.
- **At the time of her death,** Kayden was the 647th child of a divorced or separated parent to be murdered since 2008, by advocates’ count. She was entering second grade.
- **Result:** Kayden’s Law — incorporated into VAWA, signed March 2022 (federal); Pennsylvania SB 55, signed and effective August 2024.

Aramazd “Piqui” Andressian Jr.

2012–2017 | Age 5 | South Pasadena, California

A five-year-old boy whose mother fought in family court to protect him. “Ana pleaded with the court not to let Piqui be with his father. She had documented abuse. She had a restraining order.” — Sen. Susan Rubio

- **What the court knew:** Piqui’s mother, Ana Estevez, documented her husband’s abuse and obtained a restraining order. **She warned officials repeatedly that he was dangerous and begged the court to restrict access.**

- **The court's response:** Joint custody was granted. The documented restraining order and Ana's ongoing safety concerns were not sufficient to restrict the father's access.
- **April 2017:** Aramazd Andressian Sr. took Piqui to Disneyland, then killed him. He later pled guilty to murder.
- **Result:** Piqui's Law (California SB 616) — mandatory domestic violence training for family court judges; aligns California with VAWA provisions for federal safety funding up to \$5M per year.

Om Moses Gandhi

2007–2023 | Age 16 | Salt Lake City, Utah

"A kind, compassionate teenager who loved playing saxophone and spent years asking when the court would finally let him speak in his own case. His name means peace." — Leah Moses, Om's mother

- **14 years in family court:** Om's mother, Leah Moses, documented abuse, filed protective orders in 2009 and 2011, and presented extensive evidence. Professionals told her the situation was "the worst they'd ever seen." The court kept granting the father access.
- **Parental alienation weaponized:** Every protective action Leah Moses took was reframed as parental alienation. She was ordered into high-conflict parenting courses. The abusive parent — a neuropsychologist who presented as calm and credible — was granted full sole custody of Om in January 2022.
- **Mother's Day weekend, 2023:** Om was shot twice in the back and once in the face by his father. His father then died by suicide. Om had asked for years when the court would allow him to speak.
- **Result:** Om's Law (Utah HB 272, signed 2024) — courts **must** (not merely "may") consider safety risk evidence; restricts reunification therapy to credentialed professionals using proven, safe methods.

3. Legislative Progress and the Persistent Gap

The laws described above represent genuine, hard-won progress. They exist because mothers and advocates refused to allow children's deaths to be treated as isolated tragedies. But legislation is only as effective as the people who implement it — and the tools they use to do so. **The core structural problem remains unsolved.**

There is currently no national, across-the-board standard for identifying or measuring coercive control in custody proceedings. Training requirements vary dramatically by state, are rarely enforced, and are often insufficient in depth. Many professionals making life-altering decisions for children have no formal framework for recognizing what coercive control looks like — how it presents, what it sounds like, and why it so consistently appears as 'high conflict' rather than danger.

The Education Gap

- Training requirements, where they exist, are **inconsistently defined, rarely enforced, and often grossly insufficient** in depth and duration
- **Parental alienation theory** — lacking peer-reviewed scientific support — **continues to be applied in ways that penalize protective parents** for raising safety concerns, effectively punishing the behavior most predictive of child safety
- Court-appointed **custody evaluators are not uniformly required to hold any training** in domestic violence or coercive control
- **Children's disclosures of abuse are routinely processed by adults who lack the training to recognize what they are hearing**, or who filter them through frameworks that pathologize the child's response rather than the parent's behavior
- **Litigation itself becomes a weapon**: abusive parents use repeated motions, false allegations, and procedural exhaustion to drain the protective parent's resources and maintain control through the court

The Measurement Gap

- **No validated, child-facing coercive control screening instrument currently exists**
- Adult-facing tools (Danger Assessment, DASH, CCB, Legal Abuse Scale) are **not systematically required** in custody evaluations even where available
- **The Safe & Together Model and similar frameworks remain optional and unevenly adopted**

- Family court records in most jurisdictions are **not systematically reviewed** for patterns or outcomes, making accountability structurally impossible
- Without consistent measurement, **outcomes cannot be tracked, reforms cannot be evaluated, and the scale of preventable harm cannot be accurately documented**

4. Understanding Coercive Control

Coercive control was first formally theorized by Evan Stark in his landmark 2007 work *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* (Oxford University Press). Stark argues that coercive control is fundamentally a liberty crime — it is not defined by individual incidents of violence, but by a **sustained pattern of domination that strips away the victim's autonomy, identity, and freedom.**

Coercive control is not about what happened on a specific day. It is about what the victim lives inside every day — a landscape of surveillance, restriction, and fear in which every action is monitored and every deviation is punished.

Core Tactics

Isolation

The abusive person **systematically cuts the victim off from support networks:** family, friends, colleagues, community, and institutional help. This is often achieved gradually and **disguised as protectiveness or jealousy.** The goal is to ensure that the victim has nowhere to turn and no one who can corroborate their experience.

Surveillance and Monitoring

Location tracking, monitoring of messages and social media, controlling access to finances, reviewing mail and phone records, showing up unexpectedly. In post-separation contexts, surveillance **often continues through the children** — who are asked to report on the other parent's activities, relationships, and household.

Micro-regulation of Daily Life

Controlling what the victim wears, eats, says, how they parent, when they sleep, who they speak to. **Rules are arbitrary, inconsistent, and impossible to fully comply with** — which ensures the abuser always has grounds for punishment. This is one of the **most psychologically damaging aspects of coercive control** and one of the **least visible** to outside observers.

Psychological Manipulation

Gaslighting (making the victim doubt their own perceptions), degradation, manufactured dependency, **intermittent reinforcement** (alternating punishment with affection), threats (against the victim, the children, pets, or the victim's family). The

cumulative psychological impact is often **more damaging than physical violence** and more difficult to document.

Financial Control

Preventing employment or sabotaging job opportunities, **controlling all household finances**, running up debt in the victim's name, **withholding money** for necessities, demanding financial accounting for every expenditure. Financial control creates dependency that outlasts the relationship and is frequently **escalated through post-separation litigation**.

Using Children as Instruments of Control

Children are uniquely vulnerable to weaponization in coercive control dynamics. The abusive parent may use children to **monitor the other parent**, relay messages, report on activities, or as leverage in custody proceedings. Post-separation, the abusive parent may **undermine the protective parent's authority**, use court filings to destabilize the household, or use parenting time as an opportunity to extend surveillance.

Why Family Courts Miss It

Standard family court processes are designed to assess incidents, not patterns.

Coercive control is a pattern — and each individual tactic, viewed in isolation, may appear trivial or ambiguous. This structural mismatch produces predictable, well-documented failures:

- The abusive person, skilled in managing appearances, typically presents in court and with court-facing professionals as calm, cooperative, and credible in court
- The protective parent, experiencing trauma consistent with ongoing abuse, may present as anxious, emotional, or disorganized — a profile easily pathologized as mental health instability
- **The pattern of coercive control is invisible without training**; each element is treated as a discrete allegation rather than part of a system
- High-conflict framing places equal responsibility on both parties, obscuring a fundamentally asymmetric power dynamic
- Parental alienation theory is routinely applied to protective parents who raise safety concerns, inverting the danger signal into evidence of the protective parent's instability

Key finding: A 2019 DOJ-funded study found that in 78% of cases where child abuse was later verified, the judge had initially dismissed the protective parent's allegations. This is not an anomaly. It is the predictable output of incident-based assessment applied to pattern-based harm.

5. Exposure Is Harm: Children Who Witness Coercive Control

A child does not have to be the direct target of violence to be profoundly and permanently damaged by it. A child who lives in a family system where coercive control exists is impacted at the very core of their development.

This is one of the most critical and most consistently misunderstood principles in child welfare and family court practice. Family courts routinely distinguish between abuse “directed at” the child and abuse the child “merely” witnessed — as if witnessing a parent’s systematic domination were a passive, harmless experience. The neurological and developmental research is unambiguous: it is not.

The Neurological Impact

- Children living with domestic violence are **15 times more likely to be physically abused** or neglected themselves (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence)
- Witnessing coercive control **activates the same neurological stress-response architecture as being the direct target**. The developing brain does not meaningfully distinguish ‘witness’ from ‘target’ in its threat-detection systems
- Chronic stress exposure — the sustained hyperactivation of the HPA axis — literally **rewires the developing brain, altering threat-detection, emotional regulation, attachment systems, executive function, and learning capacity**
- **These are not behavioral problems. They are survival adaptations** — the brain doing exactly what it is designed to do in a threatening environment, at enormous cost to development
- ACE (Adverse Childhood Experience) research consistently shows that children who grow up in households with domestic violence carry **significantly elevated lifetime risk for physical health conditions, mental health disorders, substance use, and interpersonal violence**

Post-Separation: The Control Continues Through the Child

A fundamental misunderstanding in family court is that separation ends the abuse. For children, it often does not. The abusive parent frequently uses parenting time, custody exchanges, and court proceedings to extend their reach into the protective parent’s household. Children become surveillance tools, message carriers, and emotional weapons.

- Children are **questioned about the other parent's relationships**, household, finances, and activities
- Children **are coached on what to say to evaluators**, therapists, and judges
- Children often **face repercussions with the controlling parent when disclosures are shared and relayed to the controlling parent by professionals**, limiting future disclosure
- Children are **placed in loyalty conflicts** that require them to choose between parents under implicit threat of losing the abusive parent's approval or access
- Children who express distress about visits or disclose abuse are **told they are wrong, that it didn't happen**, or that the protective parent is "making them think" that way
- The **ongoing exposure to litigation, conflict, and parental instability** creates a secondary trauma environment independent of direct abuse

Emma Katz's landmark 2016 study Beyond the Physical Incident Model documents this with precision: children are harmed not only by witnessing violent incidents, but by the cumulative experience of living with a parent whose autonomy, safety, and authority are being systematically destroyed. The harm is not a single event. It is the texture of daily life.

6. How Coercive Control Appears in Children: Recognition and Assessment

These are not behavior problems. They are communications. A child showing these signs is telling us something about their environment — often the only way they know how to tell us.

Recognizing coercive control in children requires a fundamental reframe: **behavioral presentations are not the problem to be solved. They are the signal.** The question is always: what is this behavior telling us about the child's environment?

Signs at Exchanges and Transitions

Custody exchanges are high-stress moments that concentrate and externalize the child's internal experience. **What a child shows at the moment of transition is among the most diagnostically significant behavioral data available** — and among the most consistently misread.

- Clinging, crying, or refusing to go with one parent at exchanges
- **Physical complaints** — stomach aches, headaches, nausea — appearing predictably before visits with one parent
- **Eloping behavior**: attempting to flee, hide, run away, or lock themselves in rooms or cars before exchanges
- Prolonged, **inconsolable tantrums at exchanges** that are qualitatively different from typical toddler distress: they persist regardless of soothing, they begin anticipatorily rather than reactively, and they stop quickly once the threatening exchange has passed or the child has been taken
- Marked **behavioral contrast between demeanor at drop-off and at pick-up**: a child who leaves distraught and returns subdued, flat, or hypervigilant
- **Explicit refusals**, in children old enough to articulate them, that are dismissed as parental coaching rather than assessed as data

The Volcano Effect: Why Children Act Out With the Safe Parent

One of the most misunderstood and most frequently misused patterns in custody evaluations: the child behaves well with the concerning parent and acts out explosively with the protective parent. This pattern is routinely cited as evidence of parental alienation. It is not. It is evidence of safety.

Understanding this pattern is essential for every professional working in family court. It is also one of the most common ways that coercive control dynamics are inverted in evaluations and recommendations.

Why it happens

- Children who live with or regularly visit a coercively controlling **parent learn to suppress their emotional responses in that environment**. Expression of fear, distress, or need is unsafe. **Compliance is survival**.
- With the safe parent, the child finally has permission to fall apart. **The meltdown is the trust** — it means the child believes this adult can handle their full emotional reality.
- Suppressed stress does not dissipate; it accumulates and **discharges in the environment where it is safe to do so**.
- **A child who presents as consistently calm and well-regulated in the abusive parent's presence is not demonstrating preference, happiness, or safety. They are demonstrating the behavioral outcome of chronic threat suppression.**

What it looks like

- Intense tantrums, aggression, or emotional flooding immediately following exchanges or visits
- Hitting, biting, screaming at the safe parent — not at the concerning parent
- “I hate you / I want to go back to [abusive parent]” — often said at the peak of emotional flooding rather than as a sustained, calm preference
- Crying for no apparent reason; emotional dysregulation hours after a visit has ended
- Recovery time required: the child needs decompression and co-regulation, not discipline

What NOT to conclude

- **Do NOT** interpret composed behavior with the abusive parent as evidence the child is safe, happy, or prefers that environment
- **Do NOT** interpret the safe parent's reports of distress as exaggeration, mental health instability, or parental alienation
- **Do NOT** use the volcano effect pattern to support parental alienation claims against the protective parent
- **DO** assess what is happening in the home that requires the child to suppress their emotional reality while there

Signs With the Safe Parent

- Acting out, aggression, or emotional meltdowns at home with the protective parent following visits
- Testing limits persistently — the safe parent becomes the container for all unexpressed distress
- Parentification: taking on emotional caretaking of the protective parent, monitoring their distress, trying to protect them
- Repeated, distressed asking: “Why can’t I just stay with you?” or similar expressions of not wanting to go, accompanied by genuine fear rather than typical childhood negotiating
- Hypersensitivity to conflict or tension in the safe household, even minor conflict triggering outsized fear responses

General Behavioral Signs

- Hypervigilance: scanning rooms, sitting with back to walls, watching exits, startling easily at unexpected sounds or movements
- Sleep disturbance: nightmares, fear of the dark, fear of being alone, difficulty falling or staying asleep surrounding visit periods
- Dissociation or emotional flatness: a “checked out” presentation, difficulty being reached, a glassy or absent quality particularly when asked about the concerning parent
- Sudden changes in academic performance, concentration, or peer relationships coinciding with custody transitions
- Sexualized behavior or language inconsistent with developmental stage and without other explanation
- Somatic presentations: recurring physical complaints without medical explanation, particularly clustered around custody transitions

7. Developmental Stage: What to Look For and Why

Children's responses to coercive control are shaped by their developmental stage, their temperament, and their particular family circumstances. What follows is a guide to presentations across the developmental spectrum. In all cases, the cardinal principle applies: **these are communications, not character flaws.**

Infants and Toddlers (0–3 Years)

Infants have no language for their experience — but their bodies record everything.

Very young children cannot name or explain what is happening to them or around them. **Their experience of chronic stress registers entirely in their bodies and behaviors.** The presenting signs are often attributed to developmental variation, colic, or “difficult temperament” rather than to the environment.

- **Inconsolable crying** that does not respond to typical soothing; difficulty being regulated
- Persistent **feeding difficulties or refusal**; failure to thrive without organic cause
- **Sleep disruption** that is severe, persistent, and unresponsive to intervention
- **Heightened startle response**; extreme clinginess and separation distress disproportionate to developmental norms
- **Developmental regression or stagnation**: loss of milestones previously achieved
- **Prolonged, inconsolable tantrums at custody exchanges** that are qualitatively different from typical toddler distress: they begin before the transfer (anticipatory), persist through soothing, and cease quickly once the exchange has resolved or the child has been taken
- **Eloping behavior** in toddlers: attempting to run, hide, or attach immovably to the safe caregiver at transitions

Assessment note: These presentations are frequently dismissed as normal developmental variation or attributed to the protective parent's anxiety “transferring” to the child. The question to ask is whether the presentation clusters around specific transitions, specific environments, or specific people — and whether it resolves in their absence.

Preschool Age (3–5 Years)

Preschoolers are beginning to construct narrative, but their stories are often fragmented, inconsistent, and easily dismissed. Their behavior is the primary text.

- **Eloping:** bolting, hiding, locking themselves in rooms, clinging immovably to the safe parent at exchanges
- **Nightmares, new fears,** fear of the dark, fear of specific environments or people
- **Bedwetting or toilet regression** that correlates with custody transitions
- **Physical aggression** with peers, siblings, or the safe caregiver that escalates around visit periods
- **Sexualized play,** language, or behavior inconsistent with developmental stage or prior exposure
- **Magical thinking about the family situation:** “If I’m really good, they won’t fight anymore”; persistent fantasy about rescuing a parent
- **Inconsistent or confusing narratives about events** at the other parent’s home — not evidence of lying, but evidence of cognitive and emotional processing that is still developing.

Assessment note: Preschool children’s disclosures are often dismissed because they change across tellings, mix fantasy with fact, or include details that seem implausible. This is developmentally normal and does not indicate fabrication. The appropriate response is not to dismiss but to refer to a forensically trained child interviewer.

School Age (6–12 Years)

School-age children are developing logical reasoning and beginning to understand adult relationships. They often protect adults by withholding what they know. Their behavior across settings is the most reliable data.

- **Decline in academic performance,** concentration, or engagement that correlates with custody transitions or court activity
- **Parentification:** taking on emotional responsibility for the protective parent — monitoring their mood, avoiding topics that cause distress, becoming a confidant or protector
- **The volcano effect in full expression:** acting out exclusively or disproportionately with the safe parent while presenting as compliant and contained at the other household

- **Telling different stories to different adults:** tailoring their account to what they believe each adult wants to hear or will act on, not as deception but as a survival strategy
- **Psychosomatic complaints** — stomach aches, headaches, nausea — that appear predictably before visits and resolve afterward
- **Explicit statements of fear, distress, or refusal** that are dismissed because the child “presents fine” in evaluations (often conducted in neutral settings with an unfamiliar evaluator)
- **Social withdrawal**, difficulty sustaining peer friendships, presentation as older than their age

Assessment note: School-age children are often assessed primarily through structured interviews in clinical settings. These settings do not capture the behavioral presentations that appear in naturalistic contexts — at home, at school, and at transitions. Collateral information from teachers, pediatricians, and coaches is essential and frequently absent in evaluations.

Adolescents (13–17 Years)

Adolescents are capable of articulating their experience with sophistication. When they do, they are routinely disbelieved, pathologized, or dismissed as under the influence of the protective parent.

- **Withdrawal, depression, anxiety disorders**, or flat affect that develops or worsens in correlation with custody arrangements
- **Substance use** as self-regulation: using alcohol, cannabis, or other substances to manage states they have no other tools for
- Refusing visits: ***this is one of the most significant and consistently misread presentations. Adolescent refusal of visits to an abusive parent is almost universally treated as parental alienation.*** It must be assessed on its merits — not presumed to be manipulation. A teenager who has experienced years of coercive control is capable of recognizing and naming their experience.
- **Running away** from the abusive parent’s home — treated as behavioral disorder rather than protective response
- **Parentification** at a sophisticated level: becoming the primary emotional support for younger siblings, mediating between parents, managing the household’s emotional climate
- **Dissociation, depersonalization, or other trauma responses** that are misdiagnosed as primary psychiatric conditions without assessment of the relational context
- **Suicidality or self-harm** as expressions of trapped, hopeless, and unwitnessed distress

Assessment note: Adolescents who are dismissed, disbelieved, or court-ordered back into contact with an abusive parent have a high rate of later disclosing that this experience compounded their trauma significantly. Their stated experience deserves direct, careful assessment — not presumptive skepticism grounded in alienation theory.

8. Screening Tools and Their Limitations

A range of mental health screening tools are commonly used in custody evaluations. Each has genuine clinical utility in its appropriate context. **None were designed to detect coercive control**, and all carry structural blind spots when applied in cases where it is present. Understanding these limitations is not a critique of the tools themselves, but a recognition that tools alone **cannot substitute for clinical judgment grounded in coercive control training**.

Commonly Used Tools

Tool	Purpose / Clinical Utility	Limitation in Coercive Control Contexts
Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI)	Measures child conduct problems via parent self-report, capturing both frequency and the parent's perception of problems. Good for broad behavioral screening in non-adversarial contexts.	Entirely reliant on parent self-report. A coercively controlling parent can easily manipulate scores to pathologize the child, appear as the engaged and concerned parent, or underreport symptoms. Does not assess environmental cause of behavioral presentation. Will not distinguish a child whose behavior reflects trauma from a child with a primary behavioral disorder.
Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)	Brief multi-informant screening across emotional, behavioral, and social domains. Multi-informant versions (parent, teacher, child self-report) improve reliability.	Trauma responses in children — hypervigilance, emotional dysregulation, aggression, withdrawal — are captured as individual pathology without reference to environmental cause. The SDQ can accurately describe a traumatized child while providing no information about why the child presents this way or what is producing the symptoms.
Parenting Scale (PS)	Assesses dysfunctional parenting practices through self-report. Useful for identifying specific maladaptive parenting behaviors in non-adversarial clinical contexts.	Assumes honest disclosure. A coercively controlling parent who is skilled at managing appearances — as most are by definition — can produce a profile that appears functional, child-centered, and engaged. Does not assess the relational power dynamic between parents or the impact of that dynamic on the child.
Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS)	Symptom-based measurement of psychological distress. Well-validated for clinical populations.	A protective parent experiencing trauma symptoms consistent with ongoing abuse may produce an elevated DASS profile that appears as clinical impairment —

		while their abuser presents as psychologically healthy. This profile can be, and routinely is, used in court to invert the actual danger: the traumatized protective parent appears unstable; the controlled, strategically calm abuser appears fit.
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Shared Structural Blind Spots

- Reliance on **parent self-report**, which a coercively controlling person is highly motivated and often skilled to manipulate
- **Symptom-based rather than pattern-based** assessment: captures what is happening to the child without illuminating why
- **Framing coercive dynamics as mutual** “high conflict”: positions both parents as equal contributors to a shared problem
- Risk of **misattributing child trauma responses** to individual pathology rather than environmental cause
- **No capacity to assess perpetrator pattern across time**, across multiple relationships, or in structural context

Tools with Coercive Control Specificity

Tool	Focus / Type	Key Notes
Checklist of Controlling Behaviors (CCB)	Broad pattern-based assessment of controlling behavior in intimate partner relationships.	Useful as a general-purpose screen when a more specialized instrument is not available or appropriate.
CIPR Scale	Coercive and controlling behavior in intimate partner relationships.	More specific than general domestic violence instruments.
Brief Interview of Coercive Control (BICC)	Structured clinical interview.	Requires a trained administrator — not a self-report or informal screen.
Danger Assessment (Campbell, 1986; revised 2004)	Validated lethality risk instrument.	Captures risk elevation at separation — the period of highest danger.
DASH Risk Checklist	UK-developed risk checklist, validated internationally.	Captures coercive control indicators beyond physical violence.

Legal Abuse Scale	Addresses litigation as a continuation of coercive control.	Critical for high-litigation custody cases; the only tool here that treats court filings themselves as a measurable tactic.
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Critical gap: No validated child-facing coercive control screening instrument currently exists. Children's exposure to coercive control must be inferred through adult-facing tools, clinical observation, and thorough case history. This gap is significant and its remediation is an urgent research and clinical priority.

Where These Tools Come From: Origins, Access, and Example Use in Family Court

The instruments above vary widely in age, development process, and availability. Some are freely accessible; others require purchase, training, or direct contact with the developing researchers. The table below is a starting point for locating each tool and understanding the kind of family court question it is best suited to answer — it is not a substitute for reading the source publication before adopting any instrument into practice.

Tool	Origin & Year	Access	Example Use in Family Court
Checklist of Controlling Behaviors (CCB)	Developed by Peter Lehmann, Catherine Simmons, and Vijayan Pillai; validated 2012.	Lehmann, Simmons, & Pillai (2012), Violence Against Women , 18(8), 913–933 (DOI: 10.1177/1077801212456522). Available through academic databases; contact the authors for the instrument itself.	Pinpointing which specific tactic — isolation, economic control, intimidation, and so on — is driving a pattern, to give an evaluator report or pleading more precision than a general “high conflict” label.
Coercion in Intimate Partner Relationships Scale (CIPR)	Developed by Mary Ann Dutton, Lisa Goodman, and colleagues; first reported to the National Institute of Justice in 2007, building on Dutton & Goodman's 2005 coercion framework.	Dutton et al. (2007) NIJ technical report; subscale structure further validated in Wilson & Timmons Fritz (2021), Assessment . Not a free public form — request through the published studies.	Separating demand, threat, and surveillance tactics from one another when an evaluator needs to name which coercive mechanism is operating, rather than treating “control” as one undifferentiated category.
Brief Interview of Coercive Control (BICC)	Developed by forensic and clinical researchers; described in a 2025 article in the Journal of Forensic	Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice (2025). Administration requires interviewer training.	A structured, in-person interview — conducted by a trained GAL or forensic evaluator — to draw out concrete behavioral

	Psychology Research and Practice. Designed for use across partner violence, sex trafficking, and other coercive-control contexts.		examples of specific tactics, rather than relying on whatever a party happens to volunteer.
Danger Assessment	Developed by Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell; first published 1986, revised 2004.	Free public access and training at dangerassessment.org .	Prioritizing supervised-exchange or safety-planning conditions at or immediately after separation — the period of highest lethality risk.
DASH Risk Checklist	Developed by Laura Richards; implemented across UK police services beginning March 2009, building on the earlier SPECSS+ model; accredited by ACPO (now the National Police Chiefs' Council).	dashriskchecklist.com . Formal use requires accredited training.	Establishing a shared risk vocabulary across agencies — useful when a GAL or caseworker is coordinating with law enforcement or DV advocates who are already using DASH on the same case.
Legal Abuse Scale	Developed by Ellen Gutowski and Lisa Goodman; published 2022/2023. The 14-item scale was derived from 27 candidate items through expert consultation and a sample of 222 survivor-mothers with family court experience.	Gutowski & Goodman (2023), Journal of Family Violence , 38, 527–542 (DOI: 10.1007/s10896-022-00408-3). Available through academic databases.	Documenting litigation abuse itself as a quantifiable pattern — to support a motion for sanctions, a fee-shifting request, or a protective order grounded in abusive use of court process rather than the underlying relationship abuse.

9. Coercive Control in the Co-Parenting Arena: What It Looks Like After Separation

Separation does not end coercive control. For many victims, it intensifies it. When the abusive parent can no longer control their partner directly, they redirect that control through the one channel the family court system keeps open: co-parenting. The tactics shift, but the goal is the same — to dominate, destabilize, and surveil.

The family court system does not end coercive control — it gives it a new set of tools. Litigation, custody exchanges, parenting communications, and evaluator contact all become extensions of the same pattern of domination. Professionals who cannot recognize this will mistake ongoing abuse for “high conflict co-parenting.”

Litigation as a Weapon: Weaponized Court Filings

One of the most significant and consistently underrecognized forms of post-separation coercive control is the use of the court itself as a weapon. The abusive parent files motions, petitions, and modification requests not because they are legally meritorious, but because the process of responding to them is itself punishing.

- **Repeated modification motions** filed in rapid succession, including requests to revisit custody, parenting time, child support, and extracurricular decisions — each requiring the protective parent to retain counsel, respond, and appear
- **False allegations of parental unfitness**, abuse, or neglect filed strategically to trigger investigations, evaluations, and emergency hearings — designed to drain resources and destabilize the protective parent's household
- **Emergency motions filed on minor pretexts** to force immediate court contact, demonstrate control over the protective parent's schedule, and signal that the court remains a tool of ongoing harassment
- **Subpoenas for financial records, therapy notes, school communications**, and medical records — used not to build a legal case but to surveil, intimidate, and expose vulnerabilities
- **Using litigation to deplete the protective parent's financial resources** — a continuation of financial control that forces the protective parent into pro se status, settlement under duress, or withdrawal from legal proceedings
- **Violating orders** — arriving late to exchanges, withholding children, contacting the other parent outside designated channels — and then filing counter-motions when the protective parent seeks enforcement, inverting accountability

What professionals should recognize: *A high volume of litigation initiated by one party, particularly after documented abuse allegations, is not evidence of a “difficult co-parenting relationship.” It is a data point. The Legal Abuse Scale was specifically developed to help practitioners identify litigation as a tactic of coercive control. Volume, timing, and content of filings should be assessed as a pattern — not evaluated motion by motion in isolation.*

Manipulation of Evaluators and Court-Facing Professionals

The same skills that make coercive control effective in private — the ability to manage appearances, present as calm and reasonable, and frame the victim as the problem — are directly transferable to court-facing contexts. Abusive parents who are skilled at impression management can present extraordinarily well to evaluators, GALs, therapists, and judges.

- **Presenting as cooperative, child-focused, and reasonable** in evaluations while engaging in documented harassment, non-compliance, and intimidation outside the evaluator’s view
- **Coaching children before evaluator contact:** what to say, what not to say, how to characterize the other parent’s household, and what they will face at home if they disclose accurately
- **Providing evaluators with curated documentation** — selectively presenting communications, records, and witness accounts while withholding or discrediting contradictory evidence
- **Reframing all safety concerns raised by the protective parent as evidence of that parent’s pathology:** paranoia, mental instability, alienating behavior, or coaching — exploiting the evaluator’s professional tendency toward “both sides” framing
- **Identifying and cultivating evaluators, GALs, and parenting coordinators** known to be skeptical of abuse allegations or predisposed toward parental alienation frameworks — effectively shopping for favorable court professionals
- **Filing complaints against evaluators and GALs** who make findings unfavorable to the abusive parent — a form of professional intimidation that shapes future professional behavior in the case and in similar cases

What professionals should recognize: *A coercively controlling parent who presents well in structured professional settings is behaving consistently with coercive control, not inconsistently with it. Impression management is a core competency of controlling behavior. Collateral contact — with teachers, pediatricians, prior therapists, and prior partners — is essential, as is longitudinal pattern review across the full history of the case.*

Co-Parenting Communication as a Vector of Harassment

Required communication about the children becomes one of the primary mechanisms through which harassment continues post-separation. Court-ordered co-parenting apps, email, and text are not safeguards in themselves — they are channels through which abuse migrates.

- Sending an **extremely high volume of messages about minor or pretextual parenting matters** — a form of contact flooding that forces constant engagement and maintains psychological presence in the protective parent's daily life
- **Hostile, demeaning, or threatening language** embedded in otherwise child-focused messages — designed to be difficult to report in isolation but cumulatively terrorizing
- **Deliberately misrepresenting or documenting communication for future court use** — sending messages specifically designed to provoke a reaction that can later be presented to a court as evidence of the protective parent's instability or hostility
- **Refusing to communicate or respond to essential child-related information** — withholding medical, educational, or safety information to destabilize the protective parent and then using that parent's lack of knowledge as evidence of disengagement, blocking recommended therapy, medical care, or extracurricular activity enrollment
- **Contacting the protective parent through channels outside court-ordered communication platforms** — via extended family, mutual contacts, the children themselves, or the protective parent's employer — to circumvent documentation and extend surveillance

What professionals should recognize: *Communication records should be reviewed as a whole and over time, not as individual messages. A single message may appear neutral or minimally hostile; a pattern of messages across months reveals volume, targeting, and function. The presence of a co-parenting app does not indicate that harassment has stopped — it indicates that harassment has a new venue.*

Intrusion into the Protective Parent's Parenting Time

Physical separation creates legal parenting time boundaries. Coercive control does not respect those boundaries. **The abusive parent's reach into the protective parent's household is one of the most damaging aspects of post-separation abuse** — both for the protective parent and for the children, who are used as instruments of that intrusion.

- **Calling or texting the children repeatedly** during the protective parent's parenting time — creating an ongoing obligation for the child to manage both parents' emotional needs across households
- **Instructing children to monitor the other household** — questioning them about who the protective parent is seeing, what they are spending money on, where they go, and what they say — and debriefing them upon return
- **Sending children back with demands, instructions, or parenting directives** designed to undermine the protective parent's authority — "Dad says you're doing it wrong," "Mom said you have to let me," "At the other house we always..."
- **Showing up unannounced or driving past the protective parent's home** — physical surveillance that signals ongoing monitoring and destabilizes the child's sense of safety in the other household
- **Installing tracking software on children's devices** or sending children with hidden recording devices — technological surveillance that turns the child into an unwilling instrument of monitoring
- **Scheduling extracurricular activities, medical appointments, or family events during the protective parent's designated parenting time** without consent — forcing the protective parent to either comply (ceding control of their time) or refuse (appearing obstructive or child-unfriendly)

What professionals should recognize: *Children who are regularly questioned about the other parent's home are being placed in an impossible loyalty bind and are being used as surveillance instruments. This is a form of child-directed coercive control. Children who report this pattern in naturalistic settings — to teachers, therapists, or pediatricians — are providing critical evidence that should be taken seriously and documented.*

Using Children as Instruments of Ongoing Control

Children are uniquely vulnerable to weaponization in post-separation coercive control. They love both parents, they cannot protect themselves, and they are present in both households. The abusive parent exploits all three of these facts.

- **Making derogatory comments about the protective parent** in the child's presence — demeaning, belittling, or making frightening statements about the other parent's fitness, mental health, or intentions
- **Withholding affection, approval, or access to activities** as conditional punishment when the child expresses positive feelings about the protective parent or household
- **Telling children that the protective parent does not love them**, cannot keep them safe, or is responsible for the family separation — embedding narrative distortions that the child carries into therapeutic, evaluative, and court-facing contacts

- **Using custody transitions to pass adult information, threats, or demands** to the protective parent through the child — burdening the child with content they cannot process and placing them in a messenger role that creates profound anxiety
- **Threatening to withhold visitation, seek sole custody, or “take the children away”** in ways the child can hear — using the child’s fear of losing a parent as a lever of behavioral control over both the child and the protective parent

What professionals should recognize: *When a child expresses negative views about the protective parent that seem scripted, shift suddenly after visits, or include language clearly sourced from an adult, this warrants careful assessment — not automatic attribution to parental alienation by the protective parent. The question is always: which parent’s behavior is putting this child in the middle, and which parent is attempting to provide a safe, low-conflict environment?*

Distinguishing Co-Parenting Conflict from Post-Separation Coercive Control

The single most important distinction for professionals in this arena: high-conflict co-parenting and post-separation coercive control are not the same thing and must not be treated as equivalent. Applying a “both sides” conflict framework to a coercive control dynamic does not neutralize it — it conceals it.

High-Conflict Co-Parenting	Post-Separation Coercive Control
Conflict is mutual and bidirectional	One parent drives the conflict; the other responds or defends
Both parents may be dysregulated or difficult to work with	The protective parent’s dysregulation reflects trauma; the abusive parent’s calm reflects strategic management
Litigation volume is roughly comparable between parties	One party is a disproportionate driver of filings, motions, and enforcement actions
Children show distress, but it does not cluster around one household	Children’s distress, behavioral signs, and somatic complaints cluster directionally around one parent or household
Parenting problems are shared and improvable through co-parenting intervention	Co-parenting therapy is contraindicated; it provides a new venue for abuse and typically makes outcomes worse

The goal is workable co-parenting	The goal is safety, accountability, and protection of the children and non-offending parent from ongoing abuse
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Referring a coercive control case to co-parenting therapy is a clinical and ethical error. It places the victim in a therapeutic relationship with their abuser, provides the abusive parent a new audience for manipulation, and sends the message that the protective parent's concerns are a communication problem to be resolved mutually. Standard co-parenting interventions are designed for conflict, not for control. Applying them interchangeably causes harm.

10. The Safe & Together Model

The Safe & Together Model is the most comprehensive, evidence-based framework currently available for assessing and responding to coercive control within child welfare and family court contexts. Developed by David Mandel and the Safe & Together Institute, it directly addresses the structural failures that allow coercive control to be invisible in standard evaluations.

Unlike models that treat domestic violence as one factor among many to be balanced against parental rights, Safe & Together centers child safety and explicitly names the perpetrator's behavior as the problem to be assessed and addressed.

Safe & Together is not a therapy model. It is a practice framework for the professionals who make decisions about children's lives — child welfare workers, evaluators, GALs, judges, and family court practitioners. It provides the conceptual tools and assessment structure to make coercive control visible.

Three Core Principles

1. Keep Children Safe by Keeping Them Together with the Non-Offending Parent

The model challenges the default assumption in child welfare and family court that removing children from both parents (or from the non-offending parent in the name of "neutrality") serves child safety. The **non-offending parent is not a problem to be managed — they are the child's primary protective resource**. The goal is to support and strengthen that resource, not to treat it as equivalent to the source of danger.

2. Map the Pattern of Perpetrator Behavior, Not Just Incidents

Safe & Together explicitly **shifts the assessment lens from incident-based to pattern-based analysis**. Rather than asking "what happened on a specific occasion," practitioners are trained to ask: What is the full pattern of controlling behavior? What tactics has this person used, across time and across relationships? How has that pattern affected the children's daily lives, development, and safety? This is the only framework capable of capturing coercive control as it actually operates.

3. Center the Child's Experience as the Primary Lens

Children's wellbeing and safety are the central focus of every assessment and decision. Not parental rights. Not equal parenting time. Not the administrative convenience of the court. The question is always: what does this child need to be safe, and what is the perpetrator's behavior doing to that safety?

Five Critical Practice Components

Partnering with the Non-Offending Parent

The non-offending parent is assessed as a protective resource rather than an equal party in a dispute. Their knowledge of the perpetrator's behavior, their protective actions on behalf of the children, and their capacity to provide safety are all assets to be strengthened — not evidence of conflict or alienation.

Perpetrator Pattern Mapping

The Perpetrator Pattern Mapping Tool is the operational core of the Safe & Together Model. It guides practitioners to systematically document:

- **Tactics used by the perpetrating parent:** physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, financial, and legal abuse
- **Pattern across time:** when did each tactic begin, how has it escalated, what has changed post-separation
- **Impact on children:** how has the perpetrator's behavior directly affected the children's safety, development, daily functioning, and wellbeing
- **Non-offending parent's protective responses:** what has the protective parent done to keep the children safe, and how have those actions been interpreted by the system
- **Cross-relationship history:** evidence of coercive control with former partners or other family members

This tool is explicitly designed to resist the “neutral third party” framing that treats both parents as equally suspect and coercive control as one element in a complex conflict rather than the central organizing dynamic.

Assessment of Perpetrator Behavior's Impact on Children

Rather than assessing children's symptoms in isolation, Safe & Together requires practitioners to trace the connection between specific perpetrator behaviors and specific impacts on children. A child's hypervigilance is not a trait to be treated — it is a response to a specific threatening environment that must be named and addressed at its source.

Strengths-Based Assessment of the Non-Offending Parent

Standard evaluations often produce asymmetric assessments in which the perpetrating parent's presentation is evaluated as evidence of fitness while the non-offending parent's trauma responses are evaluated as evidence of unfitness. Safe & Together explicitly counters this by assessing the non-offending parent's protective capacities, resilience, and knowledge of their children's needs — not just their clinical symptoms.

Safety Conditions That Address Perpetrator Behavior

Safety planning under this model targets the perpetrating parent's conduct — not the victim's movements. Rather than restricting the non-offending parent's freedom in the name of keeping the peace, conditions are designed to hold the perpetrating parent accountable for specific behaviors that create risk.

Evidence Base and Adoption

The Safe & Together Model has been implemented across child welfare agencies in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. Implementation research demonstrates:

- **Improved safety planning and outcomes** for non-offending parents and children
- **Reduction in unnecessary removal of children** from non-offending parents
- **Stronger practitioner recognition of perpetrator-specific risk factors**
- **Improved cross-systems collaboration** between child welfare, DV services, and family courts

The model is endorsed by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) and is referenced in federal VAWA guidance as an evidence-based approach to child safety in domestic violence contexts.

Training and Implementation

The Safe & Together Institute **provides practitioner training at multiple levels**, from introductory workshops to advanced certification. Training is available for individual practitioners, organizations, and entire court systems.

- **Foundational training:** core concepts, pattern mapping, non-offending parent partnership
- **Advanced practitioner certification:** detailed application across child welfare, legal, and clinical contexts
- **Organizational implementation:** system-wide practice change, supervision frameworks, outcome measurement
- **Custom consultation** for court systems, child welfare agencies, and DV organizations

To access training, consultation, and the Perpetrator Pattern Mapping Tool:

Safe & Together Institute — safeandtogetherinstitute.com

11. What You Can Do: Guidance by Professional Role

Coercive control is only visible to professionals trained to see it. **Every role in the family court system is a point of intervention.** The following guidance is specific, actionable, and grounded in the evidence presented in this guide.

Family Law Attorney

- **Do not assume ‘high conflict’ is mutual.** Assess specifically for coercive control patterns. Asymmetric dynamics require asymmetric analysis.
- **Use the Legal Abuse Scale** to identify and document litigation itself as a tactic of coercive control.
- **Request coercive-control-competent evaluators.** Not just credentialed ones. Ask specifically about training in coercive control, Safe & Together, and post-separation abuse.
- **Educate your clients about the volcano effect.** A client whose child acts out at home after visits is not evidence of parental unfitness. Help them document and contextualize it.
- **Advocate for supervised exchanges and neutral handoff locations** in cases with documented abuse history or significant behavioral signs at transitions.
- **Document the pattern, not just incidents.** Build the case chronologically and across domains — financial, communication, behavioral, medical.

Guardian ad Litem

- **Spend meaningful time in both homes.** Do not rely only on what children say in front of each parent or in an office setting.
- **Treat behavioral signs at transitions as evidence, not nuisance.** Document what you observe at exchanges with specificity.
- **Understand that a child’s stated preference may reflect conditioning, fear, or loyalty conflict** — not genuine preference. Assess the context of the preference, not only its content.
- **Never cite the volcano effect as evidence of the safe parent’s unfitness** or as support for parental alienation claims. Understand what it actually means.
- **Consult with a coercive control specialist** before finalizing recommendations in cases with abuse allegations.
- **Obtain collateral information** from teachers, pediatricians, coaches, and other adults who see the child across contexts.

Mental Health Professional

- **Use the Safe & Together Perpetrator Pattern Mapping Tool** in all custody evaluations where coercive control may be present.
- **Recognize trauma presentations in the protective parent as evidence of abuse** — not as evidence of clinical incapacity or parental unfitness.
- **Document the child's behavioral patterns across both homes longitudinally**, not only in the clinical setting.
- **Refuse to participate in reunification therapy without demonstrated safety** and without a clinical rationale grounded in the child's — not the abusive parent's — needs.
- **Seek specific, ongoing training in coercive control**, post-separation abuse, and the Safe & Together Model. General DV training is not sufficient.
- **Do not diagnose the child's trauma responses as primary disorders** without assessment of the relational and environmental context.

Social Worker / Child Protective Services

- **Apply the Safe & Together Model** as the primary framework: keep children with the non-offending parent whenever possible.
- **Do not treat every domestic violence case as 'failure to protect' by the non-offending parent.** The protective parent is not part of the problem. They are part of the solution.
- **Document perpetrator behavior specifically and systematically** — not just child symptoms or general 'domestic violence.'
- **Assess for coercive control, not just physical violence.** Use coercive-control-specific instruments in your assessments.
- **Connect families with DV-specialized services**, not generic parenting programs that are inappropriate for coercive control dynamics.
- **Treat children's behavioral presentations as environmental data**, not evidence of parenting failure by the protective parent.

Family Court Judge

- **Demand coercive-control-competent evaluators.** Ask specifically what training evaluators have received in coercive control and Safe & Together.
- **Treat abuse allegations by a protective parent as safety data to be assessed**, not as a litigation strategy to be managed.
- **Do not interpret a child's composed behavior with one parent as evidence of safety** or preference. Understand the volcano effect and the behavioral dynamics of threat suppression.

- **Apply the rebuttable presumption in Kayden's Law provisions** where enacted in your jurisdiction. These laws exist because courts have failed to act on documented danger.
- **Seek ongoing, mandatory training — not one-time certification —** in domestic violence, coercive control, and child safety. The field advances; training must too.
- **Scrutinize parental alienation claims carefully** in cases where abuse allegations have been raised. *PA theory has no peer-reviewed scientific validation and is frequently weaponized against protective parents.*

School, Pediatric, and Community Professionals

- **Document and report observed behavioral changes** around custody transitions. You may be seeing what no evaluator sees.
- **Do not pressure children to explain their reactions.** Document what you observe and refer. The child's explanation is not required for a report.
- **Inform the safe parent when concerning disclosures or behavioral changes occur.** Your observation may be critical to their legal case.
- **Understand that a child acting out at school may be communicating home danger.** Behavioral referrals warrant inquiry into the custody context.
- **Know your mandated reporter obligations** — and use them. You are often the first person outside the family to see the child's experience.
- **Connect families with DV resources early**, without waiting for a crisis. Prevention requires early identification.

12. The Obligation of Every Professional in This System

These children are not statistics. They were real. They were loved. They were failed. Kayden was entering second grade. She loved dancing and singing. Piqui was five years old. He had just been to Disneyland. Om was sixteen. He asked for years when he would be allowed to speak.

The family court system will not change on its own. It changes when the professionals inside it change — when they acquire the training to see what they have been missing, the language to name what they are observing, and the professional courage to act on it.

Coercive control is visible to those trained to see it. Every behavioral sign a child shows at an exchange, every meltdown with the safe parent, every stomachache before a visit, every adolescent who says they don't want to go — these are communications. They are the evidence the system has been ignoring.

The gap between what the law now requires and what happens in courtrooms across the country is an **education gap**. It is a **measurement gap**. It is a **training gap**. And it is a gap that every professional in this system has both the opportunity and the obligation to close.

Every professional involved is a point of intervention. The question is not whether you have the power to protect these children. You do. The question is whether you have the training to recognize what you are looking at.

Key contacts:

- Safe & Together Institute: safeandtogetherinstitute.com
- Center for Judicial Excellence: centerforjudicialexcellence.org
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: thehotline.org | 1-800-799-7233
- NCJFCJ: ncjfcj.org

Annotated Resource Library

The following resources are selected for their direct relevance to practitioners working in family court, child welfare, and related fields. Annotations focus on practical utility and the specific contribution each resource makes to the evidence base.

Foundational Texts

Stark, E. (2007). Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life.

Oxford University Press.

The foundational theoretical work that defines coercive control as a liberty crime rather than a violence crime. Stark argues that the cumulative pattern of tactics — isolation, monitoring, micro-regulation — is the primary harm, not individual assaults. Essential reading for understanding why incident-based court frameworks systematically fail in these cases. Written for a broad audience; accessible to non-academic practitioners.

Katz, E. (2016). Beyond the Physical Incident Model: How Children Living with Domestic Violence are Harmed By and Respond to the Coercive Control of Their Mother.

Child Abuse Review, 25(1), 66–77.

Establishes children's experience of coercive control as distinct from and often more damaging than exposure to physical violence incidents. Katz demonstrates that children are harmed by the cumulative restriction of the non-offending parent's autonomy — not only by witnessing violent incidents. Critical for custody evaluators, GALs, and any professional assessing children's presentations.

Meier, J. (2020). U.S. child custody outcomes in cases involving parental alienation and abuse allegations: What do the data show?

GWU Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2019-56.

Large-scale empirical analysis of custody case outcomes across the United States. Documents the systematic disadvantage faced by protective parents who raise abuse allegations, and specifically the role of parental alienation theory in reversing custody outcomes against protective mothers. Essential for legal professionals and any practitioner who encounters parental alienation claims in custody proceedings.

O'Hagan, K. (2014). Filicide-Suicide: The Killing of Children in the Context of Separation, Divorce and Custody Disputes.

Palgrave Macmillan.

Examines over 120 cases of filicide in custody contexts, identifying the relational and family patterns in which children become the ultimate weapon in disputes between separating partners. Important scholarly context for the case histories in Section 2 of this guide.

Bartlow, R.D. (2017). Judicial response to court-assisted child murders.

Family and Intimate Partner Violence Quarterly, 10(1), 7–54.

Documents how courts have failed to create systematic reforms in response to child murders in custody contexts, finding that court leaders consistently treated each murder as an exception rather than a pattern. Directly relevant to understanding why legislative pressure has been necessary to drive change.

Organizations and Data Sources

Center for Judicial Excellence

centerforjudicialexcellence.org

The primary national source tracking child murders by a parent when custody, separation, divorce, visitation, or child support is a factor. Their database documents 980+ child victims since 2008, updated weekly. Approximately 20% of all U.S. child murders by a parent are estimated to be attributable at least in part to family court placement decisions. Also tracks cases where courts were asked to intervene and declined. Essential data source for advocacy, training, and policy work.

Safe & Together Institute

safeandtogetherinstitute.com

The training, consultation, and research home of the Safe & Together Model. Provides practitioner training at all levels from foundational to advanced certification, organizational implementation support, the Perpetrator Pattern Mapping Tool, and an extensive resource library. For any professional or organization seeking to implement evidence-based coercive control practice, this is the primary resource. See Section 9 of this guide for a full description of the model.

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ)

ncjfcj.org

The leading judicial education organization for family court professionals. Has endorsed the Safe & Together Model, published extensive resources on domestic violence and child safety in custody proceedings, and provides training and technical assistance to courts across the country. An essential resource for judges, court administrators, and practitioners seeking judicial education materials.

National Safe Parents Organization

nationalsafeparents.org

Advocacy organization focused on legislative reform, survivor support, and systemic change in family court. Tracks legislation advancing and enacted across states. Maintains resources for protective parents navigating the family court system. Useful for connecting families with peer support and staying current on state-level legislative developments.

Crisis and Support Resources

National Domestic Violence Hotline

thehotline.org | 1-800-799-7233 | TTY: 1-800-787-3224

Provides crisis support, safety planning, and referrals 24/7. Available in multiple languages. Online chat option for situations where calling is not safe. An essential referral for protective parents and the first-line resource for practitioners supporting families in active danger.

SAMHSA National Helpline

1-800-662-4357 | Free, confidential, 24/7

Substance use and mental health referral service. Relevant in cases where coercive control exposure has produced trauma-related substance use or mental health crises in adults or adolescents.

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline

1-800-422-4453 | Available for children and adults

Crisis intervention, information, and referrals for child abuse. Staffed by professional crisis counselors. Can receive disclosures from children directly and connect adults with local reporting resources.

National Alliance for Eating Disorders

allianceforeatingdisorders.com | 1-866-662-1235

For cases involving trauma-related disordered eating in adolescents or adults. DV and coercive control are significant risk factors for eating disorders; practitioners should be aware of this connection and have appropriate referral pathways.

Legislation Reference

Kayden's Law (Federal — VAWA Reauthorization 2022; Pennsylvania SB 55, eff. August 13, 2024)

Federal + Pennsylvania

Child: Kayden Mancuso, age 7, murdered August 6, 2018 (Bucks County, Pennsylvania)

Context: Beaten to death by her father during a court-ordered unsupervised visit. Her mother had submitted documented evidence of the father's violent history, criminal records, and a Protection from Abuse order. The court maintained unsupervised access because there was no evidence of direct abuse of Kayden.

Key provisions: Federal: financial incentives for states to restrict court-ordered reunification treatments, strengthen evidentiary and procedural standards, and prioritize child safety over parental access. Pennsylvania SB 55: adds rebuttable presumption for supervised custody where parent has abuse history; expands list of relevant criminal offenses; requires safety conditions; mandates judicial training.

Piqui's Law (California SB 616)

California

Child: Aramazd "Piqui" Andressian Jr., age 5, killed April 2017 (South Pasadena, California)

Context: Killed by his father following a trip to Disneyland. His mother had documented abuse, obtained a restraining order, and repeatedly warned the court. Joint custody was granted despite these protections.

Key provisions: Mandates domestic violence training for family court judges. Aligns California with VAWA federal provisions, making the state eligible for up to \$5 million per year in federal child safety funding through 2027. First state law in the nation specifically to modernize family court laws in response to child murders in custody contexts.

Om's Law (Utah HB 272, signed 2024)

Utah

Child: Om Moses Gandhi, age 16, murdered Mother's Day weekend, May 2023 (Salt Lake City, Utah)

Context: Shot by his father during a court-mandated unsupervised visit after 14 years of documented abuse that courts repeatedly dismissed. His mother had provided protective orders, evidence of sexual abuse, and expert assessments over more than a decade. The father was granted full sole custody of Om in 2022.

Key provisions: Mandates (not merely permits) that courts consider safety risk evidence before granting parenting time. Restricts reunification therapy to credentialed professionals using proven, evidence-based methods. Requires training for judges and court personnel on trauma, coercive control, and domestic violence. Passed with bipartisan support and endorsed by medical, legal, and DV advocacy organizations.

Abrial's Law (Tennessee, signed April 23, 2024)

Tennessee

Child: Named for all child victims — Abrial means “protected and secure”

Context: Passed in recognition of systemic loopholes that routinely returned children to abusive parents. Referenced cases include a child with PTSD from abuse being court-ordered into reunification therapy with her abuser because her younger sibling’s visitation created a legal opening; and children placed in sole custody of abusive parents despite multiple substantiated allegations.

Key provisions: Closes loopholes allowing courts to return children to abusive parents without considering full abuse history, including abuse of former partners and other children. Bars court-ordered reunification treatment without demonstrated proof of safety and effectiveness. Passed unanimously.

Additional state activity: Maryland (enacted Kayden’s Law aligned provisions); Colorado (enacted related provisions, 2023); Arizona and Idaho (pursuing legislation modeled on Kayden’s and Om’s Law).

State Legislation: Current and Pending

The following directory tracks coercive control legislation affecting custody proceedings, state by state. Entries are organized into two categories: laws currently in effect, and bills introduced but not yet enacted. Each entry notes what the law requires and where its practical limitations lie, reflecting this guide's core theme that legislative progress and on-the-ground implementation are not the same thing.

Current Legislation by State

Arizona — Alec and Lydia Act (HB 2995)

What it means: Recognizes coercive control as legally significant in custody cases, requires clearer judicial findings, and lets courts weigh a parent's prior abuse history in modification requests.

Gaps/challenges: Very new (June 2026); no implementation track record yet. Sponsors were explicit that it clarifies existing standards rather than creating a presumption — so its practical force depends heavily on judicial interpretation.

California — Family Code § 6320(c)

What it means: Creates a rebuttable presumption against custody for a parent found to have perpetrated coercive control; burden shifts to that parent to prove safety.

Gaps/challenges: Presumption can be rebutted, and outcomes still depend on evaluators and judges recognizing coercive control patterns in the first place — the law doesn't fix the training gap underneath it.

California — Piqui's Law (SB 616)

What it means: Mandates DV training for family court judges; ties California to federal VAWA funding.

Gaps/challenges: Training mandate doesn't specify depth, frequency, or coercive-control-specific content — easy to satisfy with minimal compliance.

Colorado — HB26-1309

What it means: Requires a mandatory two-step process — courts must screen for DV/coercive control before applying the best-interests standard; presumption against custody if found.

Gaps/challenges: Effective May 2026; only applies to cases filed after that date, so a large backlog of pending cases proceeds under the old standard. Implementation timeline for judicial training is still being established.

Connecticut — Jennifer’s Law (Public Act 21-78)

What it means: Adds coercive control to the legal definition of domestic violence; makes DV the first factor considered in custody decisions.

Gaps/challenges: Attorneys have raised concern that the broad definition is vulnerable to misuse — i.e., alleged by the controlling parent against the protective parent. Implementation has also been slowed by court backlogs.

Hawaii — Haw. Rev. Stat. § 586-1

What it means: Criminalizes coercive control (petty misdemeanor) and incorporates it into civil/family definitions of abuse.

Gaps/challenges: Enacted as a five-year pilot program — its permanence is not guaranteed, and criminal exposure raises a higher evidentiary bar than the civil standard most other states use.

Kentucky — HB 96

What it means: Defines coercive control and adds it as grounds for a protective order in domestic and dating relationships.

Gaps/challenges: A protective-order statute, not a direct amendment to the custody standard — its effect on custody determinations is indirect. Lawmakers also flagged concern about false-allegation risk during debate.

Louisiana — La. Stat. Ann. § 46:2132 and related resolutions

What it means: Existing domestic abuse statute is broad; legislative activity has focused on resolutions directing further study of coercive control in custody evaluations.

Gaps/challenges: No binding statutory presumption or explicit “coercive control” definition in custody law yet — Louisiana lags behind states with codified standards.

Maine — 19-A M.R.S. § 4002

What it means: Adds “coercion” to the statutory definition of abuse under the protection-from-abuse law.

Gaps/challenges: The legislature struck more detailed coercive-control language during drafting, leaving a single added word rather than a fully defined standard — advocates and critics alike flagged the resulting vagueness.

Maryland — HB 1586

What it means: Expands the definition of “abuse” for adult protective-order petitions to include coercive control.

Gaps/challenges: Effective October 2026; protective-order statute only, not a custody-standard amendment. A separate bill to raise custody evaluator training standards (HB 137) remains pending, not enacted.

Massachusetts — An Act to Prevent Abuse and Exploitation (H.4744)

What it means: Adds coercive control to the legal definition of abuse for restraining-order purposes.

Gaps/challenges: Does not directly amend the custody statute (c. 208 § 31A) — practitioners are still untangling how the new restraining-order standard will be applied in custody proceedings. Also covers only “family or household members,” potentially excluding some post-dating relationships (the “boyfriend loophole”).

New Jersey — N.J.S.A. 9:2-4 amendments

What it means: Removes the presumption favoring “frequent and continuing contact” with both parents; makes child safety a threshold concern; limits reunification programs; requires detailed judicial findings.

Gaps/challenges: Effective January 2026 — too recent for outcome data. Standard still requires judges to make the safety/preference distinction correctly case by case.

Pennsylvania — Kayden’s Law (SB 55)

What it means: Rebuttable presumption for supervised custody where a parent has an abuse history; expands relevant criminal offenses; mandates judicial training.

Gaps/challenges: Rebuttable presumptions can still be overcome; mandatory training requirements don’t guarantee depth or coercive-control specificity.

Tennessee — Abrial’s Law

What it means: Closes loopholes allowing courts to return children to abusive parents without considering full abuse history; bars unproven reunification treatment.

Gaps/challenges: Passed unanimously in 2024 — still early in implementation; relies on courts actually requesting and reviewing full abuse history rather than treating each case in isolation.

Utah — Om’s Law (HB 272)

What it means: Mandates courts consider safety-risk evidence before granting parenting time; restricts reunification therapy to credentialed providers using proven methods.

Gaps/challenges: “Credentialed professionals using proven, evidence-based methods” still leaves room for interpretation of what counts as proven — a known weak point in reunification-therapy oversight nationally.

Vermont — Act 103 (H.27)

What it means: Adds coercive controlling behavior as grounds for an abuse-prevention order, with downstream relevance to custody.

Gaps/challenges: Like Kentucky and Maryland, this operates through the protective-order system rather than a direct custody-standard rewrite.

Washington — RCW domestic violence provisions

What it means: Expands DV definition to include coercive control, technology-facilitated abuse, and abusive litigation; directly addresses weaponized court filings.

Gaps/challenges: Washington’s effort to add a standalone criminal coercive-control offense failed — the protections remain civil-only, with the same enforcement-depends-on-judicial-recognition limitation as other states.

Pending Legislation by State

Idaho — No bill number yet (Child Custody and Domestic Relations Task Force recommendations)

What it means: A bipartisan legislative task force spent 2025 holding public hearings statewide and is expected to push a coercive control definition into Idaho Code § 32-717 (the core custody statute) during the 2026 session, explicitly modeled on Kayden’s Law.

Gaps/challenges: Still pre-bill — recommendations only, not yet drafted into formal legislation. The task force is also pushing a competing baseline 50/50 joint-custody presumption absent “clear evidence of danger,” which advocates worry could work against coercive-control recognition rather than reinforce it, depending on how “clear evidence” gets defined.

Indiana — HB 1080

What it means: Would prohibit the Department of Child Services and courts from ordering reunification programs that use harmful conditions (no-contact orders, forced overnight stays,

forceful transporters, threats, coercion, isolation). Requires annual judicial training covering coercive control, trauma, and DV dynamics.

Gaps/challenges: Pending; scope is limited to reunification-program restrictions and training rather than a broader custody-standard rewrite. Annual training mandate doesn't specify minimum depth or coercive-control-specific curriculum.

New York — S8633 (coercive control bill)

What it means: Defines coercive control, creates a civil cause of action for victims, makes it a custody best-interest factor when proven by a preponderance of the evidence, and mandates judicial and court-clerk training.

Gaps/challenges: Introduced December 2025; still moving through committee. Civil cause of action is deliberately not a new crime — a calculated choice to ease passage, but it also means no criminal accountability mechanism for the underlying conduct itself.

New York — Kyra's Law (A6194)

What it means: Named for Kyra Franchetti, killed in 2016 during unsupervised court-ordered visitation. Would require courts to review coercive control, lethality risk factors (threats to kill, stalking, violence during pregnancy, image-based abuse), and abuse history before issuing custody/visitation orders, and would make child safety a threshold consideration.

Gaps/challenges: Has been introduced in prior sessions without passing. Faces the same "high conflict vs. danger" interpretive challenge as enacted laws elsewhere — codifying the safety-first framing doesn't guarantee evaluators and judges apply it correctly.

New York — S5650

What it means: Would make coercive control a Class E felony — the lowest felony classification in New York.

Gaps/challenges: Pending without action for multiple sessions. Criminalization approach draws the same concerns raised in Hawaii and Washington's failed criminal bill — proving a pattern of non-physical conduct beyond a reasonable doubt is a much higher bar than the civil standard.

South Carolina — Bill 702 (Criminal Coercive Control)

What it means: Would criminalize coercive control as a standalone offense, amend grounds for divorce to include criminal domestic violence/stalking/harassment, and require judges to consider coercive/stalking behavior in custody best-interest determinations.

Gaps/challenges: Prefiled December 2025; sitting in Senate Judiciary Committee. This is the fourth time a version of this bill has been introduced in South Carolina without passing —

questions persist about evidentiary proof standards for a pattern-based, often undocumented form of abuse.

West Virginia — HB 5336

What it means: Would update the statutory definition of domestic violence to include coercive control.

Gaps/challenges: Introduced February 2026; sitting in House Judiciary Committee with minimal progression (25%) and no indication yet of custody-specific provisions beyond the definitional change.