

# Domestic Abuse in Dave Pelzer's *The Lost Boy* According to Charles Zastrow's Social Work Perspective

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Submission date: 23/ 3/2025

Acceptance date: 8/ 5/2025

Publication date: 28/7/2025

## Abstract:

David Pelzer's memoir *The Lost Boy* (1997) captures the dreadful circumstances of his life after suffering from emotional, psychological, and physical abuse at the hands of his alcoholic mother, and how he was rescued from his life-draining surroundings. Zastrow's social work perspective is one of the frameworks pertaining to domestic abuse that can be applied in understanding the context of Pelzer's life. *The Lost Boy* is the second manuscript in sequences that tells the story of David Pelzer. This study reveals the tragic complexities of the abusive relationship between Dave and his mother, analyzing the traumatic experiences of childhood abuse through the framework of Charles Zastrow's social work perspective. Dave's narrative springs a harrowing account of his suffering and survival under the oppressive abuse of his mother. The study also examines how Pelzer's experiences reflect broader societal issues related to domestic abuse. It addresses the long-term impacts of abuse on personal development and the process of recovery. This research aims to deepen the understanding of the nature of abuse and contribute to more effective approaches in preventing and responding to domestic abuse, both in the context of social work and broader societal frameworks.

**Keywords:** domestic abuse, Dave, *The Lost Boy*, Zastrow's Social work perspective.

**العنف الأسري في مذكرات ديف بيلزر "الولد الضائع" وفقاً لمنظور تشارلز زاسترو في**

**العمل الاجتماعي**

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المديرية العامة للتربية في محافظة القادسية

## المستخلص

تصور مذكرات ديف بيلزر (The Boy Lost 1997) - وهي سلسلة في ثلاثة أجزاء - حياة كاتبها والظروف المروعة التي عاشها بعد تعرضه في صغره للإيذاء العاطفي والنفسي والجسدي من والدته المدمنة على الكحول، وكيفية إنقاذه من هذا المحيط الذي استنزف حياته. وقد قامت هذه المذكرات على سرد مروع يحمل في طياته الكثير من معاناة طفل تعرض لأسوأ أشكال الإساءة على يدي والدته التي يفترض أن تكون ملاذه الآمن وحصنه المنيح، حتى بلغت محنته حدا أصبح معه البقاء على قيد الحياة ضرباً من الإعجاز سجل الكاتب تفاصيله بدقة مؤلمة. وتناولت هذه الدراسة الجزء الثاني من هذه السلسلة، فبحثت انعكاس تجارب ديف بيلزر على القضايا المجتمعية المتعلقة بالعنف الأسري، وسلطت الضوء على التعقيدات الأساسية للعلاقة السببية بين ديف ووالدته وحلت التجارب المؤلمة لإساءة معاملة الأطفال، والآثار طويلة المدى لعملية الإساءة على نموهم الشخصي وصعوبة تعافيهم منها. كل ذلك عبر الإطار النظري لروى العمل الاجتماعي لـ (تشارلز زاسترو) عن العنف الأسري؛ لأجل تعميق فهم طبيعة الإساءة، والمساهمة في وضع مناهج أكثر حزماً وفعالية للوقاية من العنف الأسري والتصدي له بمختلف أشكاله سواء في سياق العمل الاجتماعي أو الأطر المجتمعية الأوسع.

**الكلمات الدالة:** العنف الأسري، ديف بلزر، الصبي الضائع، تشارلز زاسترو، العمل الاجتماعي.

## 1. Introduction

Domestic abuse is defined as any instance of threatening behavior, whether psychological, physical, sexual, financial, or emotional-between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexual orientation [1]. It may result in negative effects such as physical injury, psychological effects such as post- traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and health- related behaviors such as substance misuse and economic social factors such as homelessness[2].It occurs in all communities, and there is overall dissatisfaction with the way in which criminal justice system deals with it [3]. Though it has existed for centuries, only recently we have begun to address domestic abuse as a significant societal issue that requires urgent attention and action. Socially, domestic abuse can be divided into eight categories: rejecting, humiliating, terrorizing, isolation, corrupting, exploitation, denying essential stimulation, emotional responsiveness, or availability, unreliable, and inconsistent parenting. The family is the major socializing and critical institution in our society, whose internal dynamics can have both positive and negative effects on child advancement. Likewise, the changing social climate leads to the damage of the family and its persistence[4]. The hurtful effects on children who have endured or observed abuse include increased fear, anxiety, depression, antagonism, emotional and behavioral complications and damaged social skills. Also, there are subtle signs associated with endorsing abuse that can harmfully impact on a child's future relations[3]. Social theorists hypothesize that abuse against intimate partners is originally acquired through modeling during childhood by observing parental and peer relationships[5]. Much of childhood experiences of domestic abuse comes from mothers or professionals working with children, often in refuge scenarios. Such studies provide invaluable insight and give the children a voice. However, many children who have grown up in a home where there is abuse are never brought to the attention of services and so their voices remain unheard[6]. The experiences shared by participants show that growing up in homes where there is domestic abuse has had a long-lasting impact on their lives. As a result, children who have gone through this kind of trauma may find it hard to trust others and might be wary of how people truly feel about them[7].

## 2. Zastrow's Social Work Perspective

Sociologists define domestic abuse as a form of abusive behavior including an extensive range of physical and psychological maltreatment used by one or more persons in an intimate relationship to gain power or to maintain that person's misuse of power, control, and authority. Sociologists play an important role in identifying and recording abuse as well as helping children to overcome the effects of their abusive upbringings [4, p.44]. Domestic abuse in a family may be defined as a situation requiring intervention, and developing awareness at the community level that these social problems require solutions[8]. Sociologists have established a number of theories to elucidate such criminal behavior. Yet, no single theory offers a complete clarification of all types of violent behavior. Charles Harold Zastrow (1942-) is an American social scientist who is deeply invested in supporting the marginalized and oppressed groups [9]. His work highlights the importance of social justice, focusing on inequality, discrimination, and the social systems that maintain these matters. Zastrow's Social work perspective primarily

centers on the intricate dynamics of domestic abuse, highlighting how individuals, families, and society cooperate to perpetuate abuse. He identifies several key components that help explain the causes and perpetuation of domestic abuse. According to Charles Zastrow, sociology is the study of human social behavior, examining the origins of organizations and institutions as well as the development of human society. "Despite the importance of organizations to social work practice, literature devoted to organization is limited"[10] This field helps individuals cultivate ideas and beliefs that shape their perspectives on life [11].

Zastrow stresses that domestic abuse occurs where one partner seeks to dominate the other. The abuser practices campaigns like physical, emotional, economic control, and seclusion to maintain control. Zastrow explains abuse in families in which the victims of the abuse can be husbands, wives, and children. It is important to note that the law mandates police to make an arrest if physical abuse has occurred and there is a possibility of injury or a threat of further harm. In all societies, criminal justice systems face an encounter between two goals: crime control and due course. The crime-control goal includes the need to reduce crime and keep society from convicts. It accentuates speedy arrest and punishment for those who commit crimes [11,p.84].

Zastrow argues that domestic abuse tends to follow a predictable pattern; tension-building, acute abuse, and a honeymoon phase, which may reduce the tension before escalating again. This cyclical nature traps the victim in a configuration of enduring abuse and fleeting aid. Zastrow mentions the impact and consequences that abuse brings to the victim, particularly the psychological distress, helplessness, and the emotional scars that last longer than one anticipates. The victim of abuse suffers from a deeply devastating impression of self-blame, which leads him to be cut off from the outside world and manifests as a low self-value. Besides, Zastrow emphasizes how domestic abuse is not a private issue, since it affects the broader community, perpetuating cycles of abuse through generations. The dynamics within the family can create environments where children learn to accept abuse as normal, potentially perpetuating the abuse in future generations [11,p.189].

The intensity of abuse within the family is heavily directed at women and children[12]. In her work, "Sociological Theories of Intimate Partner Abuse," Jennifer Lawson emphasizes that domestic abuse should be viewed through the lens of social structures rather than individual actions. According to Zastrow, domestic abuse occurs in several phases. He encompasses its cyclical nature, which advocates that domestic abuse is often passed down through generations. Moreover, Zastrow acknowledges that societal factors play a significant role in the popularity of domestic abuse. Social norms, cultural values, and gender roles can either reinforce or challenge abusive behavior. In some cultures, male dominance and the objectification of women may contribute to higher rates of abuse. Another aspect of Zastrow's social work perspective includes the concept of victim-blaming, where society often places responsibility for the abuse on the victim. This might prevent victims from seeking help and perpetuate the stigma around domestic abuse. He argues that societal norms and cultural doctrines prevent victims from seeking help or escaping abusive relationships [11,p.8].

The theme of child abuse appears in many literary works, often inspired by true stories. Numerous authors explore this subject in their writings. For instance, "Little Chicago" by Adam Rapp (2002) and *The Boy from the Basement* by Susan Shaw (2006) are fictional narratives that address the issue. Additionally, some authors share genuine accounts of child abuse, such as *Sickened: The True Story of a Lost Childhood* by Julie Gregory (2004) and *The Lost Boy* by Dave Pelzer (1997), which is the focus of this research. Dave Pelzer's memoir, *The Lost Boy*, is a striking account of his violent childhood, and it focuses on his life from the ages of 12 to 18. It chronicles the traumatic experiences that Dave had with his mother, a woman who subjected him to emotional, physical and psychological abuse. *The Lost Boy* is not only a personal story, but also a valuable case study to understand the dynamics of domestic abuse. It explores the multifaceted nature of domestic abuse in Dave's life and provides a deeper understanding of its psychological impact on him. As a complicated and deeply personal memoir, *The Lost Boy* not only delivers a voice to the silent suffering of its protagonist but also offers an enthralling lens through which one may explore the broader phenomenon of domestic abuse. Childhood abuse can lead to significant long-term effects on an individual's well-being if left untreated. This perspective reveals that societal expectations, norms, and stereotypes often drive individuals to resort to abuse as a means of coping. Recognizing this connection is crucial for addressing and reducing intimate partner abuse in our communities [13,p.710].

### 3. Domestic Abuse in *The Lost Boy*

*The Lost Boy* (1997) is the second book in Dave Pelzer's collection titled *My Story*. It recounts his experiences of physical, emotional, and psychological abuse at the hands of his obsessive mother. Dave was one of the three most severely abused children in California's history, while the other two children sadly did not survive. The narrative explores how Dave was beaten and starved by his emotionally unstable, alcoholic mother-who engaged in twisted and unpredictable games that put one of her three sons at risk of death. Pelzer shares his unforgettable story of the numerous instances of abuse he endured from his mother in his first book, *A Child Called 'It.'* Initially, Dave's family was filled with love and care. However, everything changed one day when his mother's behavior turned from nurturing to cruel. He reflects, "All I'm trying to say is... well, no child deserves to live like that. You treat... dogs better than... than you do The Boy" [14]. This statement illustrates how imprisoned Dave felt by his mother, fearing to open himself up to others. From this excerpt, readers can sense the darkness of Dave's childhood. Dave's description of his mother's transformation-from a loving caregiver to a wicked witch-highlights the severity of his situation. He acknowledges that it may be hyperbolic to call his mother a witch, but it effectively conveys the impact her treatment had on his personality. Pelzer illustrates how his mother used her maternal authority to systematically suppress him. Her abuse was not merely the result of sporadic anger; rather, it was a deliberate manipulation aimed at breaking his will and self-worth. As a result, Dave became introverted, at times reckless, and occasionally spoiled. This environment made it difficult for him to distinguish between right and wrong [15]. Piteously but quite stereotypically just like many abused children, Dave continued to seek

his mother's endorsement, and he was unable to bring himself to tell of the abuse. It was his teachers who finally took action by telling the authorities based on their gratitude of his unusual and suspicious circumstances [16].

Throughout the memoir, Dave describes his certainty that no one could help him, a sensitivity that reflects the concept of learned helplessness. The emotional toll of the abuse is revealed in Pelzer's diminishing sense of self-worth. He internalizes the idea that he was worthless, an outcome often seen in abused victims, according to Zastrow's social work perspective. Dave's trauma is evident in his complications with trust and self-esteem, which persisted even after his rescue. These are common effects of domestic abuse, as victims often struggle to feel worthy of love or respect after prolonged exposure to neglect and meanness. Zastrow's model of domestic abuse highlights how such scars can endure long after the cessation of abuse, and Dave's life after his rescue represents a testament to this reality. For Zastrow, the aim of communal organization is stimulating and supporting individual to estimate, plan and coordinate efforts to provide for the communal health, welfare, and recreation requests. Advancing citizen and fostering participation, coordinating efforts among agencies or groups, performing public relations, provides public education, and guiding research. Zastrow suggests that providing support and encouragement to victims of domestic abuse is essential for their recovery, both physically and emotionally [17].

In *The Lost Boy*, the Pelzer illustrates how foster mothers helped Dave regain his strength and find a safe place to live. The Catanze family, Rudy and Lilian, offered him a stable environment that marked his first permanent foster home. In this nurturing setting, Dave began to enjoy life, as Rudy and Lilian allowed him the freedom to play and explore, provided he acted responsibly. Living in their home, Dave felt a sense of safety and comfort. He also met other foster children, including Big Larry, Larry Jr., and Connie. Through these relationships, he started to understand the importance of family dynamics and mutual respect. While he gradually learned to share his feelings with his foster parents, it remained challenging for him to fully open his heart and trust them. Unfortunately, many victims of child abuse remain silent and do not take action to escape their circumstances. In this book, Dave confronts his challenges, seeks positive outcomes from his experiences, and works on changing his behavior [15,p.254].

For Zastrow, the Foster Parent Program provides care and individual attention to abused and needy children and youth. Foster care and group homes are designed to help abused remain in the community. He states:

Many adults who are currently enjoying a happy and productive life grew up under very difficult and stressful conditions. They may have been raised in a high-crime, distressed neighborhood. They may have been abused physically, sexually, or emotionally by a family member. They may have been raised in a series of foster homes. They may have a significant physical or learning disability. Some of these individuals have managed to escape serious emotional damage entirely. Others struggled as children and teenagers with school and had emotional and behavioral difficulties but then turned their lives around in their 20s [11,p.2].

Dave emphasizes the positive aspects of the foster care system. The memoir concludes with Dave beginning his career in the Air Force, where he hopes to learn how

to treat others better. After the book ends, he gets married and has a child named Stephen. One could argue that *The Lost Boy* represents a boy's search for a loving family. While navigating through multiple foster homes and relationships, Dave eventually finds loving and understanding foster parents, yet he still struggles to find his true family. It is only at the end of the memoir, when Dave and his son look out at the Russian River, that he finally feels a sense of belonging with his true family. Likewise, Pelzer's eventual success in overwhelming his childhood trauma is a testament to the resilience of abuse survivors. However, Zastrow's social work perspective suggests that not all victims have the opportunity to recover fully, making Dave's story a hopeful one amidst the broader context of domestic abuse. Zastrow's social work perspective highlights how such cultural factors create an enabling environment for domestic abuse. The lack of a strong social maintenance system or public awareness at the time exacerbates Dave's suffering, prolonging his torment and preventing intervention until he is older and more capable of seeking help. With extraordinary generosity of spirit Dave finds the strength to break free from his past and embrace a brighter future filled with love and trust. He takes the time to understand why he faced difficulties with his mother. While he doesn't blame her entirely, he finds it in his heart to forgive her and is committed to being a wonderful father to his son, breaking the cycle of abuse for good. In a beautiful turn of events, Dave meets a "princess"-the editor of his book—who later becomes his wife. Together, they work towards changing the narrative and stopping the cycle of abuse that often passes down through generations. It's a common story that those who suffer may, at some point, unknowingly repeat the same patterns with their children. But Dave is set on breaking that trend and creating a loving environment for his family [8,p.257].

Dave's experiences can be applied to Zastrow's cyclical model of domestic abuse. Early in the memoir, David describes his mother as a loving parent before her abuse was instigated. This initial phase of outward warmth corresponds to the honeymoon phase in the cycle of abuse. Conversely, as the abuse deteriorated, this disguise of love quickly thawed, and Dave was subjected to physical and psychological torment. His mother beats him, forces him to eat disgusting materials, and often locks him in a room for long periods. The cycle of tension-building, violent outbreaks, and temporary calm periods persevered throughout his childhood. This unpredictable behavior made Dave's situation more dire, as he never knew when the abuse would escalate or when it would subside. Zastrow's social work perspective highlights how such cycles of abuse deeply affect the victim's sense of peace and security, and creates a sense of constant fear and helplessness. After being taken from his mother, Dave begins the slow process of healing from the abuse he suffered. This leads him to act out, ultimately resulting in his placement in juvenile hall. His foster mother, Lilian Catanze, warns him about the consequences of his bad behavior. Dave reflects on his experience of being removed from his parents' custody and placed in foster care. After enduring years of neglect and abuse, he struggles to adjust to his new living situation and the uncertainties that come with being a foster child. In foster care, Dave finds a sense of home and family that he never had while living with his abusive mother. When he is twelve years old, the police inform his parents that he will not be returning home and place him in a temporary foster home with a woman whom the children call "Aunt Mary" [14,p.51].

By integrating values of empowerment, justice, and ecological understanding, Zastrow's social work equips social workers to navigate the convolutions of human behavior and societal structures, aiming for meaningful change and maintenance for those affected by domestic abuse [18]. Zastrow identifies the insightful damage that results from such abuse, which manifested in Dave's ongoing struggles with identity, trust, and self-esteem. However, Dave breaks the cycle of abuse by being a good father to his son. He is also actively involved in programs that focus on child abuse prevention. This sense of inferiority led him to withdraw from friendships with those he viewed as "normal." Ultimately, his past became a heavy burden, hindering his ability to socialize. He believed that his difficult background was an irreparable weakness. According to R. Taylor (1981), the story is not written in chronological order, and Pelzer wants the readers to pay attention to some facets in the story [19]. Dave struggles with identity, trust, and belonging as he moves between foster homes, but gradually begins to reconcile and build a future for himself. This memoir highlight the importance of social workers, teachers, and foster families, and how their actions can truly change a child's life. Dave's renovation from a broken child to a strong-minded, successful adult is a testament to the power of persistence and the strength of the human spirit. This is a story of survivor and willpower come to term with a horrific past, integrating that information in one's life[20].

#### 4. Conclusion:

Zastrow's social work perspective provides a framework for addressing the multiple levels of influence to prevent and intervene in domestic abuse. Zastrow's philosophy stresses the importance of understanding individual not as a passive recipient of care but as an active agents capable of overcoming harsh conditions through his strengths and resilience. This philosophy, known as the empowerment approach, is a transformative in social work, offering a more universality, client-centered model that seeks to enrich the capacity of individuals and communities to attain their own goals and report their own needs. For him, family is the basic building block of society, and the social institution in which the child grows. Therefore, steps to protect and improve the safety and well-being of children should go further. Dave's story is a poignant reminder of the devastating effects of domestic abuse, as well as the importance of intervention and support in breaking the cycle of abuse. Pelzer struggles to help readers become efficacious against the odds, touting a commonsense yet compelling message: "believe in yourself, let go of the past, take responsibility, and have faith." The three-part chapters intricate on his philosophy, share narratives from his life, and feature a list of interrogations. Zastrow's social work perspective stresses that society plays a crucial role in breaking the cycle of abuse, and Dave's rescue illustrates the importance of intervention and support systems for victims. Pelzer consumes exploring his past in order to clarify it. The power of this book is his character, and his capability to overwhelm and permeate others with optimism and hope. The abuse that Dave had is an attack on child's social and emotional development, and a threat to healthy human development. Zastrow's contributions to social work have had a reflective impact on how social workers engage with individuals facing social problems, including domestic abuse. By focusing on the empowerment of victims and advocating for broader societal changes, social workers can

help break the cycle of abuse and foster healing for those affected. Undoubtedly Zastrow's work will continue to serve as a managing framework for future generations of social workers devoted to improve the lives of individuals and families affected by domestic abuse. By examining Zastrow's social work perspective to domestic abuse, and Pelzer's story, we can better understand the role of social work in overriding in and supporting individuals affected by domestic abuse and childhood abuse.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

**There are no conflicts of interest**

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