

Considerations when working with fathers and family violence

Andrew King

groupwork
SOLUTIONS

0437 546 560

info@groupworksolutions.com.au

www.groupworksolutions.com.au

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Family violence is a complex issue that professionals will encounter when working with men. Men accessing programs may talk about their own use of, or potential for violence. They may also want to discuss episodes of violence that they have experienced. This topic is beyond the scope of this booklet, so a few key points will be highlighted. Research indicates that children do not benefit from relationships with a parent who is violent or abusive towards them or the other parent.

Feminist, psychological approaches and strengths-based interventions are possible to use together without undermining the traditional feminist approach to understanding domestic violence.

Professionals working with men need to remember the following:

- Safety of all involved in any intervention is the first and primary consideration.
- No information obtained from the victim is passed on to the person who uses violence.
- This work requires a careful balance of engaging the man around his use of violence, whilst avoiding collusion.
- The physical and economic power imbalance that often exists between men and women.
- All violence in relationships is unacceptable.
- Children witnessing domestic violence are traumatised and affected emotionally and psychologically for life.
- Accountability practices involve having the victim's stories in mind while working with the man or woman.

Assessing safety/risk issues for working with parents when domestic violence exists

Although domestic violence is a very important factor to consider when making parenting or safety plans, capacities of perpetrators and victims to parent adequately are likely to vary greatly depending upon the nature of the violence. Other than providing clinical descriptive criteria, tools to reliably differentiate between types of violence and how they might relate to parenting are still in their infancy. Five basic factors should be considered¹:

- Potency of violence
- Pattern of violence
- Primary perpetrator violence
- Parenting problems
- Parents' perspective of the child/ren's needs

1. **Potency of violence** - The degree of severity, dangerousness, and potential risk of serious injury and lethality is the foremost dimension that needs to be assessed and monitored so

that protective orders can be issued and other immediate safety measures taken and maintained. Prior incidents of severe abuse and injuries inflicted on victims are an important indicator of the capacity of an individual to explode or escalate to dangerous levels. In some cases, explosive or deadly violence can erupt with little or no history of abuse, but other warning signs are often evident.

2. **Pattern of violence** - The extent to which the violence is part of a pattern of coercive control and domination (rather than a relatively isolated incident) is a crucial indicator of the extent of stress and trauma suffered by the child and family and the potential for future violence. It also suggests what kind of protective, corrective, and rehabilitative measures to take (e.g., high-security supervision of visits, substance abuse or psychiatric treatment). The pattern of violence is the best predictor for future violence and helps you to understand the degree of traumatic stress, potential for future violence and the need for longer term restraints on abuser.
3. **Primary perpetrator violence** - Assess whether there is a primary perpetrator of the violence (rather than it being mutually instigated or initiated by one or the other party on different occasions) will indicate whose contact needs to be restricted. Accounts of the violent incident(s) by the participants themselves should be assessed with caution, because victims may tend to assume more blame, and abusers usually minimize or deny their conduct. Moreover, the motivation to conceal or admit violent behaviour varies depending upon the aggressor's views of the consequences of doing so (i.e., he is unlikely to admit abusive behaviour to a court, but may do so in an appropriate therapeutic intervention). Nevertheless, it is helpful to obtain a detailed account of the violent incidents—within the context of the relationship—from each party separately.
4. **Parenting problems** - How is the domestic violence issues reflected in the child's behaviour? What safety plan needs to be in place to ensure this requirement?
5. **Parent's perspective of the child/ren's needs** - Does the parent appreciate the vulnerability of their child/ren? Can they clearly appreciate their child's vulnerability (as needs) as separate to their own need to be right, validated or get their own way? Does the parent have insight into how the domestic violence impacts on their child/ren's well-being? Does that insight impact on how they respond to the domestic violence issues?

The fifth factor is important when working with men as fathering was perceived as being of the utmost importance, with many men prepared to devote considerable effort to being a "good father" as they perceived it. These hopes are challenged by internal and external forces, which included:

- their own childhoods
- their personal limitations
- the children's exposure to violence
- and the experience of co-parenting.

There is often an unspoken tension within many men between the **yearning** to be a good dad and the individual **challenge** and the impact that this has on their childrenⁱⁱ to:

- 'live for your child'
- 'give your kids everything'
- 'be the best possible dad'
- 'to be a good dad'

and the tension of

- exposing the children to violence

- how domestic violence impacts on the their children
- being the controller
- being an absent dad.

Caution: Professionals need to be wary of differentiating the abuser from the victim based on who claims to be the victim; who is more charming, charismatic, and likeable; who appears more organized, reasonable, and sensible; and who feels more entitled and morally outraged. Sociopaths, narcissists, and chauvinists—who use violence for interpersonal control—can make a very smooth presentation whereas the victim can appear emotionally distraught and disorganized.

Crossing the line discussions

The roles of being a 'protector' and 'provider' have a traditional impact on many men. Most men value some expression of these roles, but they rarely discuss how they make decisions about appropriate responses. It is the assumptions in these situations that encourages inappropriate choices and incubates abusive actions. The decision to keep others safe in life, needs to be negotiated and agreed to by all parties, otherwise the protection starts crossing the line, as it only reflects the man's insight and needs.

The questions below are used when practitioners work with men to deepen their understanding about the decision to protect others and when this becomes abusive or controlling. Self-reflection by the practitioner is valuable for modelling and providing wider perspectives.

Useful questions to ask:

- Who or how do you protect others in your life?
- Who do you keep safe?
- What happens when the protection of others is misused?
- What is the difference between keeping someone safe and controlling them?
- When does protecting someone become abusive?
- How do you keep yourself safe?

ⁱ Jaffe, P., Johnston, J., Crooks, C., & Bala, N. (2008). Custody disputes involving allegations of domestic violence: Toward a differentiated approach to parenting plans. *Family Court Review*, Vol 46. No. 3. 500-522.

ⁱⁱ Perel, G. & Peled, E. (2008). *The fathering of violent men: Constriction and yearning*. Violence against Women Journal – Sage Press. Vol.14 No. 4 April