

Intervention for Abusive Fathers: Promising Practices in Court and Community Responses

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ABSTRACT

There have been many recent and potentially conflicting developments with respect to the appropriate role of fathers in families. On one hand, across North America there has been increasing recognition and support for fathers' involvement with their families and children. These influences are seen in broad public ad campaigns promoting fathering, increases in intervention programs targeting fathers (such as new father programs), and research and policy initiatives to better engage fathers in children's education. On the other hand, our understanding of the long-term and diverse negative impacts of violence on children has grown more nuanced. Specifically, the effects of exposure to domestic violence have garnered increasing attention (Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003), and the cumulative adverse impact of multiple forms of abuse is beginning to be documented (Teicher, Samson, Polcari, & McGreenery, 2006). This greater understanding of the negative impacts of abuse and violence has led to efforts to limit or end the involvement of fathers who have perpetrated child

Fathers who have abused their children or their children's mothers constitute a significant challenge to court and community service providers. Although legislation offers direction for court dispositions, resulting court orders are only the starting point for ensuring children's safety. This article begins with a rationale for expanding services to include intervention for abusive fathers. Using the Caring Dads program as an example, we identify four principles to guide appropriate intervention with abusive fathers and discuss their theoretical and practical implications. Throughout the article we contrast the model we are proposing with more traditional court and intervention program responses to abusive fathers.

abuse or who have abused children's mothers.

In no arena other than the court system are these competing currents so evident. Legislative reforms in many jurisdictions (e.g., California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Texas) have stipulated that perpetrators of domestic violence not receive sole or joint custody of their children (Jaffe & Crooks, 2004; National

Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges [NCJFCJ], 2005). At the same time, the larger zeitgeist of divorce proceedings favors joint parenting plans and shared arrangements. Similarly, contradictions between courts are not uncommon. For example, a court hearing a case of intimate partner assault may stress the need to sanction the perpetrator and put risk management safeguards in place, while at the same time the court resolving divorce issues for this family may encourage more cooperative parenting. Finally, judges may be faced with both child and adult victims of violence who demand arrangements counter to these emerging policies and procedures (such as a child who insists on living with a perpetrator of domestic violence).

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Perhaps what has emerged most clearly is the complexity of the issues surrounding family violence. Initially, the answers seemed simpler. When allegations of fathers either abusing their children or perpetrating domestic violence were verified, the court's appropriate action was to end or severely limit contact between men and their children. However, the frequency of family violence was not anticipated, nor was the possibility that many families might intend to remain in close contact despite past violence. Clearly, more multifaceted and complex solutions are necessary. Unfortunately, previous system responses have focused almost exclusively on mothers (in the case of child protection) or on men's perpetration of violence in the intimate partner relationship (in the case of court-mandated batterer intervention). Most communities have few (if any) well-conceptualized services to intervene responsibly with men who have been abusive in their role as *fathers*.

In this article, we present a framework for understanding intervention needs and developing system-level responses for fathers who have perpetrated abuse against their children and/or their children's mothers. The term *father* is used inclusively to indicate any male caretaker(s) in a family including biological fathers, stepfathers, common-law partners, or longstanding boyfriends with a paternal relationship to the family's children. We begin by considering both the reasons for, and concerns about, providing intervention to abusive fathers. Next, we describe an intervention that we have developed for abusive fathers over the past five years. Several guiding principles are outlined, and we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of each principle in turn. Throughout the article, we emphasize important differences between interventions guided by these principles and current court and community responses to abusive fathers. Finally, we identify future directions for research, policy, and practice.

Reasons for Providing Intervention to Abusive Fathers

Although we recognize the validity of concerns about the potential of programs for abusive fathers to draw resources and services away from victims of men's abuse, we see many reasons in support of

providing intervention to abusive fathers. Key reasons include the following:

1. *Fathers perpetrate a significant proportion of child maltreatment.* Data from the Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect reveal that although mothers are more often identified as perpetrators of neglect, children are more often abused emotionally, physically, or sexually by male (67%), than female (40%), caretakers (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996; Shusterman & Fluke, 2005). Clearly, any comprehensive approach to addressing child maltreatment that hopes to have an impact on the overall prevalence must target both female and male perpetrators (Scott & Crooks, 2004). Until recently, fathers have been largely overlooked in child abuse prevention and intervention efforts.
2. *Providing intervention to fathers has the potential to increase paternal accountability and responsibility for past abusive and neglectful behavior.* Rather than simply removing fathers from the equation, intervention provides an opportunity for men to be accountable for their violence and to model taking responsibility for their children (Peled, 2000). To the extent that men are able to accept responsibility, they may play a powerful role in breaking the intergenerational transmission of violence.
3. *Children who have been abused or exposed to violence often retain an emotional attachment to their fathers.* A significant challenge for those conducting custody assessments in the case of domestic violence and/or child abuse is distinguishing between children's wishes and their best interests (Jaffe, Crooks, & Bala, 2005). In many cases, children who have been abused retain strong emotional ties to their fathers and choose to have relationships with them as soon as possible.
4. *Fathers who leave one family seldom end their involvement with children in general.* A custody or supervision order may prevent an abusive father from interacting with a particular set of children, but these men typically become involved with other romantic partners and other children. The threat that these men may pose to children of subsequent partners is heightened because risk for violence perpetration is higher for stepfathers and other non-biologically related male caretakers than for biological fathers (Daly & Wilson, 2000; Radhakrishna, Bou-Saada, Hunter, Catellier, & Kotch, 2001).

5. *Demonstrating improved parenting may be a condition of fathers maintaining a relationship with their children.* Fathers' access to a relationship with their children may be contingent upon developing safer and more nurturing parenting styles and behaviors. Stipulating these conditions presents a possible ethical obligation for providing appropriate services because it may be unfair to expect fathers to change without the availability of effective interventions (Scott & Crooks, 2004).
6. *Nurturing and involved fathers are assets for children's development.* A significant body of research suggests that children with fathers who are nurturing and involved experience more success in social, behavioral, and academic domains compared to peers without such fathers (Lamb, 2004). To the extent that appropriate intervention can help fathers develop these skills, their children may stand to benefit directly.

While the aforementioned reasons offer a compelling argument for designing and implementing intervention programs for abusive fathers, there are also several important cautions in navigating this path. First and foremost, the type of generic parenting programs available in most communities may have the potential to do more harm than good for the families of these men. Risk for harm arises from the fact that traditional parenting education and support programs have not been designed to address the dynamics of abusive relationships. As outlined throughout this article, an understanding of abuse dynamics has implications for program structure and intervention content that differ from more general parenting initiatives.

Cautions also arise around the relationships necessary among courts, case managers, and service providers. Men who have been abusive in their families may continue abusing their partners through court involvement (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Jaffe, Crooks, & Poisson, 2003). For example, men who have perpetrated domestic violence are more likely than non-abusive men to seek custody, and are as likely to be awarded custody (Zorza, 1996). Thus, there is a valid concern that fathers may try to use their attendance at a fathering program to manipulate the system and gain advantage in court proceedings, despite having made no discernable progress. Safeguards must prevent such manipulation of the system.

Third, care must be taken to ensure that introducing intervention for fathers as a requisite condition

for continued parental access to children does not inadvertently burden children's mothers. Most of our systems are set up to deal with mothers, not with fathers and families, and have varying sensitivity to the dynamics of woman abuse. In the child protection realm, this dynamic can lead to a mother being charged with failure to protect because her partner is violent toward herself and/or her children. It is possible to envision a comparable situation in which child protection services advises a mother that to protect her children appropriately, she needs to ensure that her partner attends a fathering program. Such circumstances would further propagate the dynamic of inappropriately holding mothers responsible for men's abusive behavior. They could also lead to increased hostility by the father and potential risk to the mother to the extent that he blames her for having to attend an intervention program.

A final risk derives from consideration of research on the characteristics of abusive men. Court and community responses to male batterers are sometimes predicated on the assumption that once the intimate relationship has ended and domestic violence is not imminent, these men are generally capable of being good fathers (with perhaps a bit of education and support). In reality, most batterers have a variety of significant parenting difficulties including problems in emotional involvement and availability to their children and/or in harsh, critical, and coercive fathering behaviors (Scott & Crooks, 2005). Indeed, it is a small minority of fathers who "only" expose their children to abuse of their mother and whose parenting is not also concerning for other reasons. Thus, parenting programs for abusive fathers must be designed to provide critical feedback to the courts, rather than leaving judges to assume that completing a program translates to increased safety for children as long as fathers and mothers remain separated.

To summarize, communities deciding whether to offer programs for abusive fathers are faced with a constant balancing act to maximize potential benefits to children, mothers, and fathers, and simultaneously to minimize possible harm. This balance is best achieved through adherence to clearly articulated principles and a process that entails careful consideration of community-wide issues. The remainder of this paper describes how

one community undertook this endeavor and the guiding principles that shaped the resulting program, called *Caring Dads: Helping Fathers Value Their Children*.

Caring Dads: Helping Fathers Value their Children

The *Caring Dads* program began in 2001 as a result of a community-university partnership with *Changing Ways*, an agency in London, Ontario, Canada and *Emerge* in Boston and researchers from the University of Toronto and the University of Western Ontario. The *Caring Dads* program provides a 17-week group intervention to fathers (including biological, step and common-law fathers and other men with a paternal relationship to the family's children) who have maltreated their children and/or abused their children's mothers (Scott, Francis, Crooks & Kelly, in press). Referrals to the program are mostly from child protection services or probation and parole personnel, though men also attend via direct referrals from courts, mental health agencies, batterer intervention programs, child and family services, and other community organizations. Fathers are eligible if they have physically or emotionally abused or neglected their children, exposed their children to abuse of their mothers, or are at high risk for these behaviors, and if they have at least some contact with their children. Fathers for whom the *primary* referral issue is children's exposure to domestic violence are referred to a batterer intervention program prior to attending *Caring Dads*.

The content of *Caring Dads* was informed by best practices in the fields of parent training, batterer intervention, child maltreatment, and working with resistant clients (Scott & Crooks, 2004; Crooks, Scott, Francis, Kelly & Reid, 2006). There are four broad therapeutic goals of the *Caring Dads* program: (1) To develop sufficient trust so that men can be engaged in the process of examining their fathering; (2) To increase men's awareness of child-centered fathering; (3) To increase men's awareness of, and responsibility for, abusive and neglectful fathering behaviors and their impact on children; and (4) To help men appreciate the impact of their behavior on child healing and to plan for the future. Groups are run by a minimum of one male and one female facilitator, chosen to balance strengths in the areas of child development, child protection, intervention with men, and advocacy for abused women. To date, the London site has run 16 groups,

offering service to more than 200 men. Participants have been culturally diverse and from a range of family situations (e.g., biological fathers with supervised access to their children, non-biologically related common-law partners living in the home, stepfathers who are living with a mix of biological and step-children). Quotes from these clients in sessions or in pre- and post-intervention interviews are used throughout this paper to illustrate concepts. More detail about the goals of the program and intervention activities is presented in Table 1. Further information and program examples are also available from the *Caring Dads* website (www.caringdadsprogram.com). Other notable examples of programs designed specifically for abusive fathers are described in the appendix on page 33.

Principles of Intervention

The development of the *Caring Dads* program was based on a number of important practice principles. These principles guided diverse decisions we made about the program including selection and modification of content, conditions for client eligibility, and preparation of final reports. It has become increasingly apparent that these principles also apply broadly to the response needed for a successful, integrated court and community response that avoids the potential pitfalls of most traditional parenting education and support programs. Herein, we present four critical principles for practice and consider their theoretical and practical implications. That is, we consider how each principle informs our *understanding* of the intervention needs of abusive fathers and what each entails for the *delivery* of services.

Guiding Principle #1: Priority must be given to the safety and well-being of children.

Theoretical considerations/rationale

The first and most important principle guiding our work is the priority given to the safety and well-being of children. Fathers who are involved in the justice system have already acted in ways to violate and endanger their children. We argue that, as a result, the system response should be designed primarily to protect children. Although this stance may seem intuitive and reasonable, it represents a fundamental shift in focus from most parenting interventions. Education and treatment programs for parents are most often offered through child mental health or child and family service agencies

whose mission is to *support families*. In these agencies, education, support, and skills training are provided to voluntarily attending clients. Agency personnel readily accept that some parents will choose not to attend

intervention despite relatively high levels of pathology, or will attend but fail to make progress toward healthier functioning. Family privacy is also protected, in that information is kept confidential unless the law requires

TABLE 1
Goals, strategies, activities, and indicators of successful outcomes

Goal	Dominant therapeutic Strategies	Sample activities	Preferred Outcomes
1. To develop sufficient trust to engage men in the process of examining their fathering	Motivational interviewing; Supportive stance; Building group cohesion	Genograms for each family; Reflecting on fathers' own experiences of being parented; Goal setting	Consistent and punctual attendance; Completion of early homework assignments; Less overt hostility; Goals that are focused on fathers' behavior, not children's or mothers
2. To increase men's awareness of child-centered fathering	Psychoeducational; Behavioral (homework); Family systems (indirectly)—getting dads and kids to interact in new ways	"How well do you know your child" quiz; Nurturing wheel; Developmental stages	Move away from focus on abuse as a dichotomous outcome; Embrace goal of increasing child-centered parenting
3. To increase men's awareness of, and responsibility for, abusive and neglectful fathering, including domestic violence	CBT framework; Direct challenging and confrontation to take responsibility for own behavior; Integrating skills to apply in a variety of situations	Discuss child abuse wheel; Analyze video clips; Facilitated brainstorm of child abuse definition; CBT deconstruction of incidents	Increasing ability to differentiate between thoughts and feelings; Analysis of incidents shifts away from focus on controlling child to controlling themselves; Group members question each other's motivations and perceptions of an event and provide feedback
4. To help men appreciate the impact of their behavior and to plan for the future	Shame work; Increase awareness and decrease mistrust of other helping professionals and community resources	Supportive disclosure; Guest speaker to describe programs; Brochures, information	Can take responsibility for past behavior without being overwhelmed by shame; Link to other community services

disclosure. Overall, this style of service gives precedence to parents' abilities to make decisions they believe will be best for their families and children.

When fathers have been abusive toward members of their family (thereby demonstrating a failure to make decisions in the best interests of their children), mental health models of service are not sufficient. Instead, a more prescriptive response is needed that can simultaneously offer intervention to fathers and monitor their progress in making better parenting decisions. Interventions for abusive fathers need to accommodate these changes in priority, shifting away from more clinically based models toward models of service that promote fathers' accountability and ensure child safety.

Practical implications

Prioritizing child safety in the context of parent education programs has a number of important implications for court and program policy and practice. In all arenas, the cornerstone is availability of, and responsiveness to, feedback on men's ongoing progress (or lack of progress) in becoming better able to ensure their children's safety. One model for responsive communication and ongoing monitoring of accountability is provided by drug courts. Drug courts involve intensive supervision and judicial monitoring, frequent drug testing, and swift sanctions for reoffenses and program violations. More importantly, drug courts provide structure and opportunities for participants to model good community behavior, to achieve skills in new areas, to contribute to the community, and to be recognized and rewarded for positive, sustained change. Compensating or restoring harms done is another important element of drug courts. Partly because of the success of drug courts (Belenko, 1998), there has been a variety of efforts to establish specialized courts for domestic violence. Some jurisdictions have adopted dedicated courts and prosecutors whereas other jurisdictions have piloted an integrated domestic violence court system to resolve multiple issues in one place. Still other jurisdictions have altered the internal administrative processes of their courts in an attempt to maximize victim safety and batterer accountability (see Sack, 2002; Weber, 2000 for review).

In jurisdictions where specialized models for addressing domestic violence have been developed,

it may be more straightforward to begin to integrate parenting interventions for abusive fathers. For other jurisdictions, there may be opportunities to develop new models of collaboration between courts and child protective service agencies responsible for ensuring child safety. Such collaboration would require a shift in culture in each setting, with the courts taking on longer-term responsibility for following cases of child maltreatment and child protective services expanding their willingness to deal directly with male perpetrators of family violence. Barring the adoption of these more-involved models of integrated court response, courts may wish to adopt the practice of delaying decisions about long-term placement and/or access until feedback can be provided on the extent to which fathers were able to benefit from interventions and services aimed at helping them place a higher priority on their children's needs.

Intervention programs also need to be responsive to child protective services. Again, this level of responsiveness represents a significant shift for traditional mental health services that have primarily focused on providing intervention, and have left the evaluation of risk and progress from intervention to others (e.g., child protection workers). The reality is that when men are engaged in intervention, it is likely that their group counselors know more about their family situations and their ongoing risk to their children and partners than does any other individual in the system. Requiring clients to sign consent for two-way exchanges of information is one way to allow information gathered by the intervention program to be openly shared with child protective and probation referral sources, resulting in better protection of children. For example, when a *Caring Dads* client with a history of using violence against his family members while intoxicated began to drink heavily again, his counselor shared this risk information with his family's child protection worker. This information alerted the family's CPS worker to the need to monitor this client's drinking more closely, to set clear expectations with him about risk management while drinking (e.g., to have a plan to avoid coming home when intoxicated), and to be ready to enforce consequences for violations of these expectations. More detailed safety planning was also done with this man's wife and children. As this example shows, open communication between systems results in a system

that is more flexible and sensitive to the changing needs of families.

General feedback about fathers' progress toward intervention goals should also be provided in an evaluative final report that is available to all members of the system that are working toward the goal of child safety. These reports document fathers' successes and challenges in developing a more child-centered, less abusive style of parenting (although statements must be qualified according to whether father-child observation has been done). As such, the reports are often important tools for probation officers and child protection workers who are making decisions relevant to the safety and well-being of children and their mothers. For example, positive reports from *Caring Dads* have contributed to decisions to progress toward family reunification or toward less intense monitoring by child protection services. In contrast, negative evaluations have informed decisions to supervise fathers' access to their children more closely, or to restrict or even terminate that access.

We acknowledge that developing efficient and successful models of information exchange among courts, probation services, child protection agencies, and intervention programs is difficult. At the London *Caring Dads* site, we have had some success with a model of coordinated service that brings all professionals involved with a father and his family together for information exchange and strategic planning at the time he enters and leaves intervention. Other communities have organized forums to review especially challenging and high-risk cases of family violence. Further innovations in information exchange are likely as more communities take on the challenge of responding to fathers' ongoing risk of abuse perpetration.

Guiding Principle #2: Children's safety and well-being is intrinsically connected to that of their mothers.

Theoretical considerations

Most parenting programs assume a basic level of physical and emotional safety in the relationship between mothers and fathers and focus primarily on promoting consistency in parenting. These assumptions are simply not appropriate when intervening with men who have been abusive in their families. The problem of overlooking the potential of domestic violence in these families is illustrated by the profiles of 45 men

referred to *Caring Dads* over a one-year period (Scott & Crooks, 2005). Men were primarily referred for parenting issues, but semi-structured interviews suggested that the relationship of men to their children's mothers was a key problem in 80% of cases. In 30% of cases, men displayed a pattern of coercive, hostile, and abusive behaviors toward both children and their mothers. An additional 22% of fathers were abusive toward their children's mothers and were completely emotionally unavailable to their children. These numbers are consistent with the broader literature, which has shown a 30% to 60% overlap in men's perpetration of child physical abuse and of violence against their mother (Edleson, 1999). They also resonate with clinical observations that men who are abusive toward their intimate partners often undermine the authority of children's mothers, may mistreat or deliberately endanger or threaten children in retaliation against their mother, and sometimes use the courts as a means of continued control over their intimate partners (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Jaffe & Crooks, 2005). Intervention programs for abusive fathers need to recognize these important connections between the safety and well-being of children and mothers and ensure that services promote safety for all members of men's families.

Practical implications

In the past decade, court systems across North America have recognized the importance of considering domestic violence in making custody decisions and arranging fathers' access to children (Jaffe & Crooks, 2004; NCJFCJ, 2005). The same care must be extended to fathers in court for child maltreatment proceedings outside of custody and access disputes. For one, we need to build on the excellent training initiatives underway to improve awareness of the intersection of domestic violence and parenting (e.g., Dalton, Drozd, & Wong, 2006) so that training and information flow both to courts dealing with domestic violence and those hearing child assault and child protection cases. Second, the court needs avenues to get information about past and current proceedings and findings on domestic violence when hearing cases of child maltreatment. Third, when hearing cases of men's assault against children, consideration needs to be given to the presentation of children's mothers at court. Mothers

who fear their own victimization, for example, may present as strong advocates for fathers, based on threats to their own safety or threats from the father to be declared as unfit. Due to the overlap of child abuse and domestic violence, mothers' victimization may need to be taken into consideration in deciding the nature and extent of fathers' contact with their children. In addition, supportive advocacy may be warranted to ensure that mothers do not agree to conditions that they feel are unsafe in order to avoid looking uncooperative to the court. Finally, recognizing the potential power imbalance between fathers and mothers, courts should be ready to ensure that the accountability for making fathers attend intervention and for monitoring and evaluating their progress rest with agents of the system, rather than with children's mothers who themselves may have been abused.

Recognizing the connection between children's well-being and mothers' safety also has implications for intervention services. Appropriate programs will explicitly assert that men cannot be good fathers and abusive partners—that children's emotional security depends partly on a non-abusive relationship between their mother and father. In *Caring Dads*, for example, addressing fathers' abuse of their children's mothers is a key program goal. Throughout intervention, fathers are encouraged to consider the lessons they are teaching children through the relationships they have with their children's mothers and are explicitly taught how to be more supportive of all important figures in children's lives (e.g., mothers, grandparents, teachers, neighbors). Moreover, facilitators are trained to recognize possible dynamics of woman abuse in men's explanations of the family situation. For example, facilitators would recognize that men's assertions that their children's mothers should behave in more reasonable ways or be better parents may be justifications for abuse (e.g., "If she would only listen to my views on how our children should be raised, we wouldn't argue, and things would never have gotten as bad as they did that night") and to respond appropriately.

Finally, appropriate programs will recognize the potential for risk to children's mothers by taking independent steps to ensure mothers safety and well-being. For example, programs may require men to sign consent for mother contact and may offer such contact

as a component of their services. Alternatively, programs may develop formal collaborative relationships with women's advocates who can monitor risk and provide support to children's mothers. Contact with children's mothers allows the intervention program to be responsive to women's safety needs and helps monitor fathers' potential use of their involvement in intervention as a vehicle for further abuse of women or children.

Guiding Principle #3: Systems must be prepared to address clients whose motivation for change may be low.

Theoretical considerations

Maltreating parents typically do not seek intervention voluntarily, nor are they intrinsically motivated to change their parenting behaviors. Instead, men identified by the system as being abusive are often quite angry and resistant to any further involvement of professionals. Moreover, these men generally do not identify problems with their parenting; rather, many of the men referred to the *Caring Dads* program feel quite proud of their role as fathers.

Fathers may deny being abusive for several reasons. First, they may genuinely not see their behavior as abusive. In the early stages of the *Caring Dads* program, clients tend to define abuse in very narrow terms as *actions causing severe injury and requiring medical care*. As a result, many men will not see their own behavior as abusive until this narrow definition of maltreatment is extended.

Other men enter the program taking no responsibility for their behavior because they attribute blame externally—to their partners, children, or the larger system. For example, clients of the *Caring Dads* program have explained that problems in their families result from children's mothers, as in the following quote: "*His mother's ruining it for us. She's envious...has him saying I'm an alcoholic, and now he won't come to work with me anymore.*" Other fathers shift significant blame onto their children. For example, one father explained that his son "*knows just what to say to get under people's skin*" while another discounted his child's possible distress as manipulation: "*They said he has an emotional problem but he doesn't. He's just lazy. He knows how to beat the system.*" Finally, many abusive fathers were themselves maltreated as children,

and may feel that their parenting is not abusive simply because it is significantly *less* abusive than what they experienced in their families of origin.

In traditional mental-health-based parenting intervention services, the type of resistance and denial presented by abusive fathers has often been viewed as a stable client characteristic predictive of poor outcomes, rather than as a challenge to be addressed with appropriate intervention. Indeed, given that mental health services have generally been developed for voluntary clients, it makes sense that little effort has gone into making interventions more engaging to resistant clients. Counter to this position, systems intervening with abusive fathers need to conceptualize resistance and denial as the first therapeutic hurdle to be crossed.

Practical implications

In practical terms, court and community service providers need to be ready for clients who demonstrate resistance and hostility. From a systems perspective, the willingness to mandate attendance at intervention, and to follow through on this mandate, is an important mechanism for providing service to abusive fathers. Notably, this direction counters the “invite, don’t indict” approach being touted with engaging fathers in general (Arean & Davis, in press; Crooks, Goodall, Baker, & Hughes, 2006). Although we agree with the invitational approach for non-violent men, men who have been abusive often require a more structured directive to enter intervention. Program funding models also need to reflect men’s resistance by more adequately compensating the front-end work necessary to engage clients. As is evident in batterer intervention programs, many unmotivated and resistant clients require multiple starts (or intakes) into a program before they can be engaged successfully. If resistance is conceptualized as a point along the change continuum, it can be reasonably argued that each attempt to start intervention is a small step toward change, rather than a complete failure (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992). Indeed, a significant minority of both mandated and voluntary men who have successfully completed the *Caring Dads* program did so after the first attempt.

Men’s resistance also has implications for intervention content and therapeutic style that differ from parenting programs designed for voluntary clients.

Specifically, the initial goal of interventions for maltreating fathers should be to develop rapport and motivate men toward change. The desired shift is one from a pre-contemplative state (i.e., the view that an individual needs to change absolutely nothing) to a contemplative state (i.e., acknowledging the desire and need to make *some* changes in behavior). An approach known as motivational interviewing provides an appropriate set of tools for working toward this goal with a directive, client-centered therapeutic style that enhances intrinsic motivation by providing clients with opportunities to explore and resolve ambivalence about change (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). In *Caring Dads*, for example, early activities include helping men list ways they would like to be the same or different from their own fathers, as well as using a series of questions to guide men through the implicit and explicit roles and expectations that operated in their own families of origin. The resulting sense of discrepancy (e.g., recognition that although they want to do things very differently with their own children, they are repeating familial patterns) creates motivation. It is important to emphasize that targeting motivation does not mean that fathers are somehow excused for their abusive behavior. It merely means that they are engaged early in the program so they can better tolerate the more challenging and confrontational therapy style used later in the program.

By shifting the program emphasis toward early engagement and utilizing strategies to engage men, the *Caring Dads* program has been quite successful at reducing attrition. Over a one-year period, of the 42 men who started group (i.e., attended an intake interview and at least one session), 34 completed the whole program. This 19% drop-out rate is excellent for programs working with perpetrators of violence. For example, despite having greater numbers of mandated clients, attrition rates for batterer intervention programs typically range from 50% to 75% (see Daly & Pelowski, 2000 for review).

Guiding Principle #4: Intervention programs must identify and address appropriate targets for change.

Theoretical Implications

A fourth important principle that should distinguish appropriate interventions for abusive fathers from other parenting support, education, and intervention

programs is the basic conceptualization of men's needs. In particular, men's lack of empathy, reliance on control-based parenting approaches, and sense of entitlement require direct and explicit challenge. Recent studies have supported the notion that these attitudinal and relational characteristics play an important role in differentiating abusive from non-abusive parents. For example, studies find that compared to non-abusive parents, abusive parents pay less attention to children's emotional signals, are less accurate in reading their children's emotions, and have fewer positive feelings toward their children (Kilpatrick, 2005; Perez-Albeniz & de Paul, 2003). In addition, research has documented a "power paradox" whereby the parents who act in the most punitive and controlling manner toward their children are those who feel that they have the least control over their children (Bugental & Lewis, 1999; Bugental, Blue, & Cruzcosa, 1989). Finally, in their book *Parenting by Men Who Batter*, Bancroft and Silverman (2002) draw on many years of clinical experience to describe the sense of entitlement characteristic of men who have been abusive in their families. In particular, the authors describe that abusive fathers often feel that members of their families have a duty to provide them with unconditional respect and immediate compliance.

These tendencies toward low empathy, power-based parenting, and entitlement have surfaced repeatedly in our interviews with clients of *Caring Dads*. For example, although men readily identify abusive behaviors as harmful when speaking in abstract terms, they often downplay the harm of their own abusive behaviors, as illustrated with the following quote: *"I only spanked my older son twice. I explained to him why I punched him."* Another common feature of abusive fathers is their reliance on power-based methods to gain child compliance. For example, one client explained that his son *"wouldn't do his homework properly so I grabbed the flyswatter and swatted him on the arm. He told his teacher, who told [child protective services], and they came and took the flyswatter away. Now we'll have no control over him."* The preceding quote demonstrates both the importance of control to this father and his lack of internalized locus of control (i.e., he feels that the loss of a flyswatter has left him with no viable options for managing child misbehavior). Finally, our interviews with fathers have demonstrated the need to

focus on men's sense of entitlement, particularly with respect to immediate and unquestioning compliance. In the words of one of our clients, *"Oh yeah, I reason with them. If they ask why they have to do something, I tell them that's the rules, and that they have to follow them or else."*

This combination of low empathy for children, a control-based worldview, and a pervasive sense of entitlement creates potent risk for abusive behavior. These attitudes relate to a style of parenting in which fathers often have unreasonable demands, child compliance is expected to be immediate and non-negotiable, and consequences for perceived infractions are harsh. As such, empathy, entitlement, and control-based parenting are important targets for change in intervention programs for abusive fathers.

Practical Implications

Although the court does not directly provide services for abusive fathers, it is important that judiciary and court-related professionals evaluate available services for referral. Perhaps because of the relative infancy of services for abusive fathers, or because of the larger societal focus on involving fathers at any cost, there seems to be an attitude that any fathering intervention is better than none. We would argue against this view and instead assert that an inappropriate intervention program might do more harm than good, in the same way that sending a batterer to individual therapy to increase his self-esteem would likely pose more risk than benefit. In addition to reasons we have already outlined for this position, we have two additional concerns about appropriateness of traditionally available parenting programs. First, generic parenting group interventions often normalize the idea that raising children can be a frustrating business. Within this context, a father who relays a greatly minimized account of a parent-child conflict that involved significant abusive behavior on his part may receive offers of sympathy and support. This group response may inadvertently endorse men's sense of entitlement, abuse-supporting cognitions, and abusive behavior, as well as fail to intervene in ways that will reduce men's risk for subsequent abusive behavior (Scott & Crooks, 2004).

Second, careful attention needs to be paid to the content of interventions designed for fathers who

have been abusive in their families. Many existing parenting programs emphasize the management of child misbehavior with instruction on strategies such as a 1-2-3 warning system, timeouts, and removal of privileges. Focusing on these strategies for managing child misbehavior often goes awry when intervening with men who have maltreated their children. Because these fathers lack empathy for their children's experiences, they often implement appropriate strategies in inappropriate ways. An example from our program is a father who duct-taped his child to a chair to get her to remain in timeout. Furthermore, when fathers have a history of being frightening, coercive, and abusive, children are likely to react to their attempts to implement a calm discipline strategy with high levels of anxiety unless this change is preceded by a significant period of more positive father-child interactions. Finally, because most fathers who have perpetrated violence in their families have limited insight into difficulties in their behavior and low motivation to change, it has been our experience that any focus on child management can easily degenerate into a discussion of *problems with the child* and away from the necessary focus on problems with fathers' actions.

For these reasons, the *Caring Dads* program has made a specific commitment to avoid teaching men parenting strategies designed primarily to control child behavior. Instead, we focus on increasing men's empathy for their children, promoting greater consideration of children's needs, and reducing men's sense of entitlement. We also teach men skills for positive engagement with their children (e.g., listening and praising skills). The court system must make referrals to programs similar to *Caring Dads* that demonstrate a sound theoretical understanding of abusive fathers' intervention needs, rather than programs that might inadvertently reinforce existing patterns by focusing primarily on providing support or education on methods of managing child misbehavior.

Conclusions and Future Directions

With families that come to the attention of the court due to men's abuse of their children or their children's mothers, the prevailing tendency is to either avoid consideration of men's role as fathers or to make attendance at a generic parenting program part of men's

probation orders. The parenting programs currently available in most communities have many strengths and are an important part of public health and child and family interventions. Most are not, however, designed to deal with the complexity of issues that arise when fathers have been abusive in their families. Traditional parenting programs have emerged primarily to serve the needs of voluntary clients who are relatively highly motivated to attend. Facilitators trained to run these programs seldom have a deep understanding of the dynamics of woman abuse and may miss co-occurring domestic violence. With their focus on supporting parenting and improving parents' skills in child management, they may also inadvertently support fathers' abusive behaviors. Finally, traditional parenting programs are not designed to work collaboratively with the court and the broader system of judicial and child protection services. As such, they seldom provide evaluative feedback useful to managing men's risk to their children and their children's mothers.

Despite these problems, there is significant potential for all family members to benefit from interventions appropriately targeted to the characteristics of abusive fathers. We outlined four principles to guide such interventions (see summary of principles and their practical implications on page 41). We emphasized that appropriate programs involve monitoring of men's risk, provision of feedback, and collaboration between judicial and child protection partners. Programs targeting abusive fathers should also recognize the potential for co-occurring domestic violence and address abuse of children's mothers in intervention. Finally, appropriate programs will focus primarily on altering the fundamental relationship between fathers and their children by increasing men's empathy for their children's experiences, reducing their sense of entitlement, and strengthening their capacity for nurturing their children. The *Caring Dads* program was presented as one example of these principles in action, though many other intervention models can be envisioned. For example, it may be possible to offer fathering intervention as part of probation service, as a component of comprehensive service to the entire family, or as an integrated part of supervised access. The needs of culturally diverse groups are also an important consideration. In the past ten years, considerable

progress has been made in making interventions for domestic violence more responsive to the needs of diverse groups (e.g., see Emerge programs for African American, Spanish, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and gay/bisexual/transgendered men at www.emergedv.com). Similar initiatives in training and program development are needed for interventions with men who have maltreated their children.

As we move toward greater integration of judicial and intervention systems, and as the needs of abusive

fathers become the focus of more communities, it is important to consider these opportunities for change. It is true that developing collaborative and accountable systems of response to fathers who have been abusive and their families is difficult and time-consuming. Broad-based education is needed, and multiple community players need to be involved. However, it is exactly these models of service that have the greatest potential to make a difference for the families that we all serve.

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COMPONENTS TO LOOK FOR IN INTERVENTION PROGRAMS FOR ABUSIVE FATHERS

Guiding Principle #1: Priority must be given to the safety and well-being of children.

- Program promotes open sharing of information with referral agents for the purposes of monitoring and responding to *men's* ongoing risk of child maltreatment.
- Program provides a final report that clearly summarizes *men's* progress toward intervention goals.
- Ideally, program is part of a coordinated system of monitoring and intervention with clear protocols for sharing information about *men's* ongoing risk of maltreatment among community, justice, and child protective services and for monitoring and responding to *men's* intervention progress and outcomes.

Guiding Principle #2: Children's safety and well-being is intrinsically connected to that of their mothers.

- Abuse of children's mothers is explicitly recognized as detrimental to children and directly addressed in intervention.
- Facilitators have a clear understanding of the dynamics of woman abuse and program is connected to broader violence against women services.
- Program takes independent steps to ensure the safety and well-being of children's mothers by contacting mothers or ensuring contact by a partner agency.
- Accountability for ensuring that fathers attend intervention rests with agents of the justice or child protection systems rather than children's mothers.

Guiding Principle #3: System responses must be prepared to address clients whose motivation for change may be low.

- Program recognizes that most clients will be unmotivated to change and utilizes collaborative and supportive therapeutic strategies to engage men in change.
- Program has close ties with officers of the court who are able to mandate men's attendance at intervention.

Guiding Principle #4: Intervention programs must identify and address appropriate targets for change.

- The main goal of intervention is to end men's abuse of children and of other family members rather than to simply educate or support fathers.
- Facilitators have a solid understanding of the dynamics of child abuse and neglect, and ideally, utilize facilitator teams that include members of child protective services.
- Program gives priority to countering abuse-supporting attitudes and entitlements and increasing men's empathy for their children over teaching men strategies to control child behavior.

APPENDIX

Other Initiatives for Fathers Who Have Been Abusive in Their Families

Breaking the Cycle: Fathering After Violence Curriculum Guidelines and Tools for Batterer Intervention Programs—Family Violence Prevention Fund

The Fathering After Violence program offers information and exercises to help batterer intervention programs start to address fathering issues. Available materials include a rationale for doing fathering work, staff training activities and exercises on empathy, modeling, and reparative process. For more information, see online materials at <http://www.endabuse.org/programs/display.php3?DocID=342>.

Domestic Abuse Education Project, KidSafe lessons, Burlington Vermont

Developed by the DAEP batterer intervention program, the eight KidSafe lesson plans aim to educate participants about: (1) how children are affected by being exposed to men who abuse women; (2) the effects of domestic violence on the relationship between mother and child; and (3) appropriate parenting strategies that provide safety for children while supporting their developmental tasks. Materials from KidSafe are used as a stand-alone program called DadSafe and are integrated into two domestic violence programs run in collaboration with the Vermont Department of Corrections, a 27-session DAEP group and a 169-session Intensive Domestic Abuse Program. For more information, contact the Program Co-Directors, Cate MacLachlan and Paul Hochanadel at (802) 864-7423 or by e-mail at cmaclachlan@spectrumvt.org or phochanadel@spectrumvt.org.

Helping Children who Witness Domestic Violence: A Guide for Parents

This 12-session downloadable program was developed by Meg Crager and Lily Anderson to help parents better support their children following victimization. Alternate sections are designed for use with victim-parents and batterer-parents. The curriculum is posted on the MINCAVA website, <http://www.mincava.umn.edu/documents/materials/study.doc>, for public information although it requires the authors' permission prior to use. For more information, contact the authors at megcrager@comcast.net or lily.anderson@metrokc.gov.

Non-Violence Alliance, Connecticut

Being Connected: A Group for Fathers is a four-module program that focuses on: (1) the effects of violence on children; (2) ending domestic violence after separation; (3) healing damage from earlier violence; and (4) positive parenting skills. For more information, contact David Mandel at 1-800-349-6682 or www.endingviolence.com.

Restorative Parenting Activities: A Group Facilitation Curriculum—Domestic Abuse Project, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Emerging from the restorative justice framework, Restorative Parenting focuses on promoting healing and resolution following violence. The Restorative Parenting curriculum is being used as a stand-alone program or as part of batterer intervention programs and parenting classes. For more information, see http://toolkit.endabuse.org/Resources/Restorative/FVPPFResource_view?searchterm=None or contact Dr. Mathews at (612) 874-7063, ext. 210 or dmathews@mndap.org.

Note: For more information about the *Caring Dads: Helping Fathers Value their Children* program profiled in this article, see the program website at www.caringdadsprogram.com or contact Katreena Scott kscott@oise.utoronto.ca or Claire Crooks (ccrooks@uwo.ca).

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