

Caring Dads and the Covid-19 Pandemic

March 30, 2020

Rationale

In the wake of COVID 19 and necessary social distancing measures, it is almost certain that rates of domestic and family violence and abuse are going; with women and children most likely being harmed and the men and fathers in their families most likely causing this harm. The reasons for this increase in vulnerability and risk for causing harm are numerous and include: the need to be constantly in close space with others; increased stress due to job loss, medical concerns; interruption of access to activities and locations that would regularly offer protection against abuse (e.g., work and school environments); and reduction in social monitoring and control of risk for those who have caused harm through criminal justice, child protection and intervention programs for men who cause harm in their intimate relationships and families.

Should we move our groups online?

We appreciate that there are a range of factors that are going to go into a decision about whether to run groups online or not, including funding provisions, agreements with other agencies and recommendations from your local public health services. Our thinking about this is focused on the safety of women and children who might be victims of men's abuse. From this standpoint, we believe that there are a number of challenges to simply "continuing as normal" online. Here are some of our thoughts:

- 1. Our main goal is to contribute to the safety of women and child victims of men's abuse. At this time of crisis we need to provide crisis work that is responsive to the specific risks men pose to women and children.** In this time of increased risk, it makes most sense to focus on managing crises. Crisis services are designed to manage immediate risk. They are individualized and context specific. Through connecting with, monitoring and managing men's risk of engaging in abusive and violent behaviour, we have stronger potential to keep women and children safer during this critical period.
- 2. Change of long term patterns of behaviour is likely not a realistic goal at the current time.** In intervention programs like *Caring Dads* we are aiming to help men *change* key patterns of thinking and behaviour. Although change process can often be kick-started by crisis, people then need periods of security and stability in which to work towards this kind of long-term change. The current context is not likely conducive to this sort of work. Crisis response is likely a better fit to the safety needs of women and children.

3. **Expecting our clients to be able to engage in change “as normal” is also not realistic.** Just as it doesn’t make sense for our programs to run “as normal”, it is not realistic for our clients to be focusing on change in the same way as they were before this crisis. Fathers are likely dealing with a range of new stressors and new risk situations. For example, access visits that were formerly non-problematic might now have become a point of conflict between him and his partner. Children’s annoying behaviour may be heightened due to their anxiety and because children are missing their social connections and normal routine. It is these new stressors and situations – and their impact on his abusive behavior – that is likely the most important focus for increasing safety.
4. **Risks that women and children are dealing with right now are not necessarily the same as the ones that were present before.** The kinds of risks that men pose to their partners and children might be quite different right now due to COVID, social distancing measures and to major changes that have occurred in families (e.g., closed childcare, schools, job loss). For example, there may be families where mothers are at work and fathers are not, meaning that fathers are suddenly having considerably more responsibility for caring for children. Even if mothers are doing the majority of caregiving, it may be the case that fathers who don’t normally spend a lot of time in the home may be around constantly which may elevate risks because it may limit mothers’ privacy and ability to access support and children’s ability to escape from his coercion, hostility, anger and abuse.
5. **Survivors have expressed concern about agencies offering online groups.** There is an important discussion being held online that is drawing on voices of survivors for their recommendations. These interviews with women partners of abusive men caution against the risks to them and their children of running groups online during this time. Their concerns include worry about him being “triggered” by group material and having no one to manage that, children overhearing men’s group discussions, and the potential stress to survivors of having to overhear men in the program engage in minimization, denial and blame.
6. **We don’t normally consider COVID-specific risks.** If we were to provide “regular” groups right now, we would really need to look at the content and modify material to account for this specific context. Some change strategies that we may commonly recommend will not work in this context and we don’t typically cover information on stresses associated with being in close and constant quarters or by types of abuse that perpetrators now have access to that they didn’t before. As one example, a father might decide not to return children after an access visit as a control strategy.

If not online groups, what do we need? Some Initial Suggestions

1. Make available a “distress” line for men to call into that is open to current and past Caring Dads fathers.
2. Do check in calls with fathers already in service.
3. When you make contact with fathers, focus on the following:
 - Making a connection so that he has someone to reach out to and so that his partner is not the only one bearing the load of risk

- Ask questions that allow you to assess and monitor men's risk to their families. This includes thinking about recent and current stressors that men and their families are facing.
- Working with men to understand their risk to others and to counter this with prosocial desires such as being a good father, keeping their relationship, avoiding arrest, etc.
- Collaborating with men and, as needed, with other social service providers to manage and reduce dynamic risk (e.g., support implementation of harm reduction strategies in substance using men, address immediate housing needs, "talk men down" from revenge and anger)
- Providing as much practical support as you can to help manage immediate stress. Service could include helping fathers complete employment insurance forms, access food banks, etc.