

Harmful, abusive and potentially abusive fathering to listen for

In doing outreach to Caring Dads fathers during COVID 19, it is critical to keep our eye on the main purpose of our work – enhancing the safety and well-being of children and their mothers. Caring Dads is not a parenting program – it is a program designed to reduce men’s abuse of their children and children’s mothers. **This means that we need to go beyond supporting men’s parenting, reducing their isolation, and helping fathers manage their children – all of which are primarily about fathers (i.e., goals for dads).**

In making sure that we continue to be child-centered, it is important to concentrate on, listen for, and respond to patterns of thinking and behaving that lead to harmful and abusive fathering (i.e., Do we have a clear understanding of the needs of children here? Given what men are saying, what children and mothers are experiencing?). We need to “stay the course” in helping men focus on being child-centred, respectful and non-abusive. This is our key goal.

Here is a reminder of some harmful patterns of thinking and behaving to listen for in working with fathers to keep their children and families safe from their abuse.

Taking control of the situation

We know that fathers who cause harm may feel like things are “out of control” and/or may see himself as a victim of his partner having “all the control.” In either case, he may respond by engaging in coercive and controlling behaviours towards those who have less options and power, i.e., their partners and children. COVID-19 is very likely to have heightened men’s feelings of loss of control for real (e.g., job loss), perceived (e.g. the government is using this as an opportunity to screw us) and unjustified (e.g., not being able to continue my supervised access visits is my partner’s fault, she is keeping the kids from me) reasons. Fathers may attempt to cope by taking control of their families with rigid schedules and demands of their partners and children, increase in controlling behaviours and with a sense of justification around “making things work properly” in the family. Listen for this and appreciate that men’s desire to “be in control” is very likely experienced as coercion, control, and abuse by his partner and children.

Isolation within isolation

Isolation is an established tactic and pattern for those who cause harm, even outside of social distancing. Efforts to isolate children and children’s mothers can continue and intensify during social distancing. Fathers may prevent children and children’s mothers from talking to friends and family members or may monitor contact and listen in on conversations. He may insist that he be the one to go to the grocery store or pharmacy because she “can’t be trusted” or “because it is safer”. We know from advocates and crisis lines that there are many women who are currently being prevented from talking to anyone outside the family and that trips outside the home might be the only time that she can make a private call. Fathers may be restricting children to their rooms and maybe be cutting off their access to electronic devices as punishment. Keep your ears open for these patterns. Ask men how they are supporting the social connections of their children and their children’s mothers.

Disparaging children's mothers

Mothers and mothering is often a focus and target of abuse in men attending *Caring Dads*. In the context of social distancing, these patterns of disparagement and abuse are likely escalating. Social distancing is putting substantial pressure on family relationships. Tempers are fraying and conflict is escalating even in families that are generally harmonious. Listen for patterns of fathers blaming mothers for these situations, his complaints about the "terrible job" she is doing and for his grievance that she is not doing "what she could" to make the situation better. Listen also for any implication that "my children would be better off with me than with her" as such sentiments are likely associated with perpetrating disrespectful and potentially abusive behaviours towards children's mothers. Fathers may be successful in bringing the whole family (i.e., extended family and children) into disparaging mothers and treating her like the family's servant. Fathers be downplaying mothers' anxiety with statements like "she is blowing this out of proportion" or "she is just being crazy about this". Instead of being respectful and supportive, fathers may be "piling on" and using this against her as another way for dad to "prove" that she is a terrible mother, to make her feel worse and to undermine her in the eyes of their children.

Using COVID-19 as a means to abuse

COVID-19 has opened a number of new ways to abuse. Fathers may using COVID 19 as way to further alienate the children from mom. They might refuse to return children from access visits, citing COVID related concerns. They might prevent other members of the family from having access to hand sanitizer or protective gear as a way to ensure that they stay in the home. They might blame mom for keeping children away from them on purpose even though she is following COVID measures. He might also accuse her of trying to infect him with COVID. Fathers may also use COVID against children. For example, he might use a threat of exposure to gain compliance from an anxious child (e.g., "do you want me to drop you at the hospital?"). Fathers may also be refusing isolate (e.g., "if you don't behave, I am going to have to go out to get away from you. It will be your fault if I get sick") or be isolating without symptoms as a means to control others.

"Nothing bothers my children"

It would be nice to have a child that is entirely not bothered by social distancing and worries about COVID 19 and maybe these children do exist. More often, however, fathers' assertion that their children are fine and not bothered at likely results from "poor knowing" of children. As outlined in *Caring Dads*, the problem with not knowing their children is that fathers are more likely to misinterpret his children's behaviours (i.e., he did that to get me rather than understanding that he was tired/worried/missing friends) and less likely to be able to provide them with the child centred support they need from their fathers. Fathers may, for example, be constantly playing or talking about COVID-19 related news without recognizing the harm that this may be causing to their children and/or not accounting for how children at different developmental stages may understand and worry about what is happening.

My children are impossible

Facilitators of *Caring Dads* are already trained and attuned to listening for instances of father hostility and blame of children. We know that an important risk factor for abuse is men's perception of their children as the problem, their interpretation of children as acting in ways to deliberately annoy them, and their hostile thought about children. Listen for these dangerous thoughts. Fathers might, for example, refer to his children as spoiled, complain that his children never leave him alone or tantrum on purpose to ruin his day, that children won't (go to sleep, eat properly, comply immediately when asked, etc.). Listen also for signs of escalation in fathers' frustration, endorsement of harsh, physical and/or abusive punishment and in conflict between him and his children. We work in group to reframe his thinking to be more child-centered – to understand that children have their own needs, worries and concerns. Do the same thing here. Their children are not impossible – this is an impossible situation that children are having to cope with. Fathers need to find ways to support their children in this time.

This one child is the worst

When doing *Caring Dads* genograms, facilitators think and ask about children who might be targeted more often for abuse by their fathers. These are usually children that fathers see as “more difficult.” Children with higher needs as a result of mental, behavioural or physical health challenges are more at-risk. Step children are also at higher risk of being targets of men's abuse. Remember to listen for these patterns. For example, are fathers leaving some children out of activities, targeting them within the family, blaming some children for their level of distress?

Inappropriate expectations

OK – let's be real. All parents are all struggling to figure out new routines and rules in this difficult time. In this context, fathers should EXPECT that children are going to be more irritable, dysregulated, non-compliant, unhappy and generally more annoying. Such is the reality of being cooped up all the time, missing friends, lacking regular routines and having to spend all your time with your family. This is NOT the time to have high expectations of children to do as they are told, to put harsh limits on electronics (which is likely children's only way of connecting with friends) or reduce electronics time as punishment, to get into battles about what foods will and will not be eaten, etc. Instead, it is important for fathers to be extra tolerant and understanding. Fathers should also remember that children may also be reacting to the stress by acting in “younger” ways. Help fathers orient to this new reality – if such challenges are predictable, they are preventable. Encourage fathers to be proactive and child-centered instead of reactive and parent-centered.