

### Advancing Change with Maltreating Fathers

Timothy Kelly, Changing Ways for Men

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**In this commentary we highlight some of the ways that our current views of fathers who maltreat their children or partners may be outdated, and consider appropriate services for these men and their families. We examine barriers to intervention with men, including the societal bias that mothers are more amenable to change than fathers as well as the reality that these men are difficult to work with. Help providers must possess the skills necessary to challenge and motivate maltreating and at risk fathers. These skills are described as a combination of those derived from working with male batterers and those working with children and families. A paradigm shift that promotes more accessible help for men and fathers is needed to end men's violence against women and children.**

**Key words: male batterers, fathers, woman abuse, child abuse, treatment. [Clin Psychol Sci Prac 11: 116-119, 2004]**

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**T**he client population of maltreating and at-risk fathers is unique in several ways, and this has contributed to, or has been exacerbated by, systemic responses that impede progress. Notably, most of our service systems have been geared largely toward separating maltreating fathers from their families and using coercive measures to ensure that these men are limited in their access to their children. Although this strategy often is defensible in relation to child protection, it nonetheless contributes toward the child's paradox of wanting to belong to a family, but wanting the violence to end. In this commentary we highlight some of the ways that our current views of fathers who maltreat their children or their partners may be outdated, and we examine some difficult issues with regard to appropriate services for these men and (when appropriate) their families.

There are two compelling reasons for the existing strategy of separating maltreating and at-risk men from their families. The first of these is philosophical and stems from a societal bias that mothers are more amenable to change than fathers. As a result, child advocates and other service providers typically focus intervention on children and mothers while minimizing the father's involvement with his children. This focus on the development of children's treatment programs is important and we are not suggesting that it should be altered or diminished. Rather, these efforts may be the result, as Scott and Crooks suggest, of the emphasis on the paramount importance of the mother/child relationship. There may be another explanation at play here as well. Mothers are seen as more easily coerced into addressing concerns around child safety and care. Because policy makers and service providers are reluctant to engage the father in this process in a meaningful manner, they may inadvertently

pressure the mother to cooperate in intervention planning. This pressure often involves curtailing her involvement with the children's father. A common illustration is using the mother to monitor the father's compliance to nonassociation orders, at the risk of having her children apprehended and taken into care. This tactic has two potentially harmful consequences: it places the mother in an untenable situation to limit access to the children's father (a man who may be abusing her), and it sends a potential message to the children that it is the mother who is preventing the children's access to their father.

The second barrier to intervention with these men is more practical and related to the characteristics of the population. Given these men's hostile attribution bias and often limited communication skills, there is a decreased willingness and ability of service providers to confront or engage them in an effort to protect children and women. Simply stated, these men are not easy to work with and often produce discomfort in the other party. Because they are intimidating and well versed in using power and control tactics to achieve their personal goals, this group of men poses a particular threat to the treatment provider/child advocate. In response to these men's overt and covert displays of hostilities towards any attempt to intervene in their behaviors, service providers may bring the full force of the legal system to bear or may avoid interaction with them. Unfortunately, this combination of factors creates an approach that is reactive or crisis-based, and it fails to address critical intervention needs effectively. Moreover, from the men's point of view, the service system appears to be arbitrary in the way it vacillates between periods of nonintervention and full legal intervention. Not surprisingly, this pattern in turn builds resentment and alienation in these fathers and serves to reinforce stereotypes that service providers may have about these men.

#### **CRITICAL SKILLS OF INTERVENTION PROVIDERS**

Unquestionably, greater consideration must be given to selecting persons who provide intervention services and determining the form the intervention should take. It is extremely important to understand the skill set that is required to intervene with maltreating and at-risk fathers, since the population is adept at providing interference and resistance to intervention. Ideally, the

service provider would have a thorough knowledge of the issues of child welfare and batterer-intervention dynamics and practice. Because this combination is rarely found in any one individual or setting, careful attention should be paid to the selection of individuals who would facilitate an intervention program.

The ideal combination is someone who possesses the skills necessary to challenge and motivate maltreating and at-risk fathers (which are typically derived from working in batterer intervention programs or forensic settings), as well as a strong knowledge and skills in working with children and families. Service providers also need to understand the impact of trauma on children, which provides a proper context for the child's difficult or unpredictable behavior. The combined need to address difficult and often intense challenges in counseling sessions through confrontation, along with the importance of developing a trusting and supportive relationship, requires a specialized skill set that is rarely found in any one therapist. There should be no reluctance on the part of service providers to address abusive and controlling attitudes and behavior directly so as not to give any impression of collusion and support to the client for maltreatment of children. At the same time, the importance of empathy and rapport building cannot be forfeited to appease philosophical perspectives. We can support men in the change process and express empathy for their own experiences of childhood victimization (for example) while maintaining a clear stance on accountability and responsibility.

#### **STEREOTYPES OF ABUSIVE MEN AND FATHERS**

Clearer understanding of the issues that are presented by the maltreating and at-risk fathers is paramount. Historically, there has been a tendency to stereotype abusive men as having a clearly defined set of shared negative characteristics, and a corresponding lack of attention has been paid to potential opportunities for change. Consequently, this has produced reluctance on the part of advocates for children and women to consider each individual's history and background, which may be important in engaging him in change. In effect, our service systems and policies have operated on the assumption that removing abusive men from the home is the predominant and preferred "treatment." However, many of these men live chaotic lives that affect their

ability to commit to treatment, and this instability must be taken into consideration in service planning. Often by default, such lack of involvement or commitment is viewed as indifference, resistance, or defiance, further limiting the ability of the fathers to deal with a myriad of life circumstances. In response, additional sanctions or restrictions may be placed on their role in the family, sending them further from the likelihood of engaging in the change process in a meaningful way.

Another consideration to take into account is the historical context of the maltreating or at-risk father. Rather than viewing their personal histories as excuses or justification for their behavior, this information can provide the child welfare advocate/service provider a view into the potential origins of attitudes and coping strategies that the maltreating father adheres to or is affected by, and which affect his current parenting behavior. In addition, collecting the historical context may provide an opportunity of joining with the man in developing alternative behaviors. As discussed by Scott and Crooks, using the historical context can often provide points of discrepancies to be used to provide motivation for change. Asking simple questions regarding the fathering models that the men were exposed to as children and challenging the experiences that their own children are now experiencing from them has a high potential to motivate for change.

#### **REFRAMING BEHAVIOR**

“Fathering” is often viewed by maltreating or at-risk men as the one thing they are competent in providing for their children, and as such they are often resistant to criticism on this front. Because they see their parenting strategies as working in the best interest of their children they reject the point of view that they are abusing the power relationship between them and their children. The act of hitting or spanking children is seen as instilling respect in their children towards their parents, not as abuse of the child. Similarly, their desire to teach children to “survive in a tough world” provides justification for punitive and harsh life lessons.

While not shying away from naming abusive behavior for what it is, one way that has been useful in motivating maltreating and at-risk fathers to change behavior is to provide a model of analysis that is based on a continuum of behaviors. Wolfe (1999) describes

a continuum of childrearing approaches that ranges from more child-centred to more adult-centred, based on the degree to which the parent balances the needs of the child with their own needs and demands. The actions of maltreating fathers, from this perspective, are not motivated entirely on the basis of power and control over the children; rather, such behavior also reflects a troubling deficit in understanding the complexity of the father role and its impact on the children due to a propensity to rely on actions (often controlling and abusive) that are geared to meet their own needs and demands at the expense of their children. Again, using this model of understanding creates an opportunity for discrepancies in the man’s reporting, in accordance with information processing deficits (Milner, 1993). Often he will report behaving in the child’s best interest while acting in ways that are clearly self-centred, making the child do what he wants rather than what the child needs at that time. A view of childrearing along a continuum of child- to parent-centered provides a less “black-and-white” division between those who are “abusive” and those who are “good parents.” Educating men about this continuum provides them with a framework for moving a step in the right direction in their childrearing methods and reduces the stigma and shame associated with a categorical division that misrepresents the complexity of parenting and abuse.

#### **ADDING CHILD BEHAVIOR AND FAMILY DYNAMICS TO THE MIX**

There might be some usefulness in addressing other family issues affecting men’s change. While not wanting to diminish the impact on children of abuse or of witnessing the abuse of their mother, focussing entirely on the behavior of the father without consideration of other family needs might miss some important treatment issues. His children may be exhibiting some difficult behaviors that pose a challenge to even the most skilled parents. Consequently, gains in the father’s childrearing skills may not lead to commensurate or proximal changes in child behavior. Similarly, assuming that his children are developing typically (without assessing their emotional or behavioral differences) may be inaccurate and incongruent with his day-to-day reality. The paradox, as Scott and Crooks point out, is that these fathers are often less skilled than most

parents, and yet they may be raising or interacting with children who are among the more challenging.

Finally, it is important to consider the mother, children, and father triad vis a vis men's responsibility for change. Often overlooked in traditional parenting programs, this triad is important for recognizing, respecting, and supporting the relationship between the children of a maltreating and at-risk father and their mother. Often engaging in highly conflictual and abusive control tactics against the mother, the father frequently will resist any suggestion that he has some

responsibility for repairing and supporting his children's relationship with their mother.

In closing, we need a paradigm shift that makes it easier for fathers to get help. Our communities also need to provide a spectrum of services that address the needs of different fathers. We need to take responsibility, as well, for examining our own stereotypes and biases and find creative ways to offer services for this difficult-to-treat population.

Received July 25, 2003; accepted October 1, 2003.