

Engaging with Domestic and Family Violence Perpetrators as Fathers

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DFV, fatherhood and behaviour change

- Male entitlement and the need for a feminist framework
- Invisibility of fathers in policy & practice
- Fathering and child safety in the context of DFV
- Beyond the feminist framework
 - Addressing complex underlying issues
- Fatherhood identity as a motivational factor for behaviour change

Gendered nature of DFV

- Primarily male-to-female perpetrated (WHO, 2013)
- Patriarchy and male entitlement
 - Stereotypical beliefs around gender roles
 - Coercive control and systematic oppression
- Feminist framework needs to form foundation
- **But:** complex issues often require intervention beyond gender equality

Fathering and child safety in the context of DFV

- Relationships often don't end because DFV is present
- Ending relationship doesn't necessarily end DFV
- Ongoing contact between children and abusive parent (Hart, 2010)
 - Putting children at risk
 - Putting victims at risk
 - Children as ongoing tool of abuse and control
- Increasing victims' and children's safety by engaging with fathers?

Invisibility of fathers in policy and practice

- Historical invisibility of fathers in child protection (Humphreys & Absler, 2011; Featherstone & Peckover, 2007)
 - Focus on mothers as primary caretakers
 - Responsible for child wellbeing
 - ‘Failure to protect’
 - No expectation for fathers to engage
 - No expectation for fathers to change
 - ***Expectation to change and ensure child wellbeing*** placed on ***mothers***
- Problematic framing of parenting responsibility
 - Invisibility allows denial of accountability

Fathering in the context of DFV

- **Detrimental impact on child wellbeing and development** (Richards, 2011)
 - Behavioural
 - Education
 - Mental health
 - Respectful relationships
- **Impact on own ability to parent** (AIFS, 2010; Peled, 2000)
 - Rigid and/ or absent
 - Role modelling/ social learning
- **Impact on victim's ability to parent** (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001)
 - Disrupted parent child relationship
 - Shame, self-blame
 - Mental health issues

Recent shift towards greater accountability of fathers

- **In child protection** (DCCSDS, 2013; Stover & Morgos, 2013)
 - General
 - DFV-related
- **In family law** (AIFS, 2015)
 - Fewer cases involving DFV with shared custody outcomes
 - But: many children remain in contact with abusive parent
 - Overnight contact
 - Day contact
 - Supervised contact
 - Highlights importance of behaviour change to increase capacity to be a safe parent

Perpetrator intervention programs

- Increasing emphasis on **perpetrator accountability** through **behaviour change** programs
 - E.g. Qld Taskforce (2015), RCFV (2016)
- However, **evidence of effectiveness varies** (Day, Chung, O’Leary & Carson, 2009) with:
 - program content & duration
 - facilitator qualifications
 - varying needs of participants
 - **motivation to change** in mandated cohorts



***YOU'VE GOT TO BE COMMITTED IF
YOU WANT TO MAKE IT
PERMANENT. (SB 6)***

**BUT WHAT CAN COMMIT ABUSIVE
MEN TO CHANGING THEIR WAYS?**

The study

- **Interviews with 21 men**
 - 18 fathers
 - Age range 24-62years
 - 17 Australian-born (non-Indigenous)
- **Court mandated men's behaviour change program**
 - 'visible' cohort with complex needs
- **24 weeks duration**
 - Interviewees ranging from 3-24 weeks

Participants' lifestyles

- **'Chaotic lifestyles' (n=11)**

- Criminal histories
- Parents with criminal histories
- Histories of abuse and neglect

→ note: inconsistency in intake records and interview descriptions

→ suggests lack of awareness of what constitutes abuse/
normalisation of abuse

- Child safety interventions
- Inconsistent employment
- Education < grade 10

Participants' relationships

- **Volatile relationships (n=8)**
 - Alleged reciprocal violence (n=7)
 - Alleged drug & alcohol use by victim (n=8)
 - Drug/ alcohol misuse by perpetrator (n=10)
 - ***Patriarchal beliefs***
 - Poor conflict resolution skills
 - Poor communication skills
 - 'Revenge cheating'

DVO breaches

- **All had breached**
 - Ranging from 1-6 breaches (self-reported)
- **Consequences of breaches**
 - ***Custody (n=7)***
 - All had at least short (≥ 6 days) watch house experience
 - Five custodial sentences for '**breaches**' (between 1 and 3 months)
 - 2 DVO extensions
 - 2 fines (up to \$10,000 accumulated)

Fatherhood

- **18 fathers**

- 4 only had children with a previous partner
 - Teenagers & young adults
- 14 fathers of dependent children with most recent victim
 - **9 fathers of children aged 5 or younger**
 - Some also had children from previous relationships
- **11 fathers still living with partner** (victim) & children
- **Separated** fathers:
 - **1 with no contact/ visitation**
 - 1 with supervised contact
 - 1 with 'regular' contact



Fathers continue to play a significant role in children's lives

Situational circumstances of breaches (I)

- Common themes for **existing couples**:
 - Substance misuse (often both parents)
 - Parenting
 - Money
 - Jealousy
 - ***Issues of entitlement***
 - Some with **history of serious abuse & control** (n=3)
 - ➔ ***Reflected in child contact:***
 - 1 without contact;
 - 1 with supervised contact;
 - 1 where children had been removed (still living with victim)

Situational circumstances of breaches (II)

- Common themes for **separated couples** (includes some with temporary separation)
 - ***Primarily in context of custody/ visitation***
 - Fathers often accused victim of being neglectful
 - E.g. driving drunk to handover
 - Parents argued over scheduled visitations
 - Via phone, text or in person
-  **Verbal abuse/ threats most common breach**

Tensions around contact

I used a lot of bad language, but you dangle someone's kids in front of them and that's going to happen and I acted badly, whether it be verbally or not I still acted badly and things I said I blew right out of the water but you could plainly see [...] what it's over. It's not over jealousy of her, it's not over her, it's not over anyone else, it's to do with my kids. (SM 6)

Breaches around children/ visitation

- Many fathers justified their breaches
 - ‘Breaching for the greater good’
- Many seemed ***stuck between reality of repercussions and their fatherhood identity***
 - Perception of needing to protect children
 - Desire to see children even if risking a breach
 - Some concerned about increasing severity of punishment
 - However: bottom line for most was, they’d behave the same way again ‘if they had to’

‘I would do it again despite the consequences’

I think it was rational and irrespective of the outcome if it was to prevent potential dangers that are involved with excessive alcohol intake and driving I'd probably go through the same actions again. (SM7)

As a breach, yeah. But then at that time I hadn't been in jail. I desperately wanted to see my son. I wanted to hear his voice. I wanted to know that he was okay. [...] I'd probably still do it again knowing what I know. (SM1)

Impact and consequences

- Emerging themes
 - **Limited awareness of adverse impact of DFV on children**
 - ‘no direct exposure’
 - ‘I’d never hurt them’
 - ‘they’re ok’
 - However: **awareness of adverse impact on relationship/ contact with children**
 - Going to jail means ‘losing the children’
 - Starting to realise impact of limited contact with children
 - Missing out on children growing up
 - Disrupted parent-child relationship

Risking breaches to see the children

My son had gone from two to three years old. I did find out where she was living, [...], I drove down the street where they lived and went, “Wow. This is next door to another client of mine” who I do annual deck oiling. I’d better inspect to see whether his deck needs oiling. So I went in the backyard and then I could hear my son playing in the backyard. I went down on their pontoon, because it was on the Cooma river, and I saw [my son] play. It just broke my heart. I just started crying. I left quickly before [my ex-partner] saw me and I got in my car and I was like determined, I’ve got to [...] get my son back. (SM 1)

Implications for engaging fathers

- Limited deterrent effect of CJS repercussions

➔ *suggests need for different angle*

- **Men voice clear desire to be a father**

- Many didn't seem to know how to be a good father

- Role of upbringing
- Parenting within chaotic lifestyles and volatile relationships
- Normalisation of violence/ aggression
- Stereotypical gender role perceptions

- *However: men indicated desire to change for the sake of their children/ their parent-child relationship*

Making child safety and wellbeing a priority

- Responses to fathers as perpetrators need to:
 - ➔ **identify risk and coercive control**
 - ➔ **self-serving vs genuine intentions**
 - At DVO level
 - At CJS level
 - At Child Protection level
 - At Family Law level
- Need for **well-informed custody and contact decisions**
- Need for **better management/ facilitation of handovers**
- ➔ Child contact key issue associated with DVO breaches and ongoing abuse

Motivating perpetrators to change

- **Focus on fatherhood** role/ identity as motivational factor
- Perpetrator **interventions need to highlight impact of DFV** on
 - Child wellbeing
 - Father-child relationship
- Perpetrator **interventions need to highlight impact of DFV-related consequences** on
 - Bonding/ attachment
 - Contact with children
 - Opportunity to be a father

➡ To increase engagement and motivation to change

Implications for additional support

- **Many couples don't separate permanently**
- Substantial number seemed to experience DFV in complex relationships (see also Hart, 2008)
 - Underlying issues (substance misuse, poor communication skills, education/ employment) of both parties

 ***requires multilayered response beyond men's behaviour change program***

- Both parties may need to address underlying issues

Being a better role model

At the same time being a father, being a parent, is being a role model. So I've got to show my kids how to grow up and how to behave and how to do things right and know wrong from right. Instead of doing the wrong thing, doing the right thing [...].
(SB 6)

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