

## Effecting Change in Maltreating Fathers: Critical Principles for Intervention Planning

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**Although fathers perpetrate a significant proportion of child maltreatment, the intervention needs of abusive and neglectful fathers have not been adequately addressed or researched. This paper argues that well-designed treatment has the potential to benefit men, their children, and their families. However, the treatment needs of maltreating and at-risk fathers are unique, and programs must be designed accordingly. Based on the integration of parenting, child abuse, change promotion, and batterer treatment literatures, five principles to guide intervention with maltreating fathers are advanced: (a) overly controlling behavior, a sense of entitlement, and self-centered attitudes are primary problems of abusive fathers; thus, the development of child-management skills should not be an initial focus of intervention; (b) abusive fathers are seldom initially ready to make changes in their parenting; (c) fathers' adherence to gender-role stereotypes also contributes to their maltreatment of children; (d) the relationship between abusive fathers and the mothers of their children requires special attention; and (e) because abusive fathers have eroded children's emotional security, the need to rebuild trust will affect the pace of change and potential impact of relapse on the child.**

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**These principles are contrasted with the supportive and child-management goals of conventional group parenting programs, and the implications for providing service to fathers are considered.**

**Key words: child maltreatment; fathering; treatment; change motivation; emotional security; domestic violence. [Clin Psychol Sci Prac 11: 95–111, 2004]**

Our human tendency toward dualistic thinking has too often resulted in the conception of mothers as the protectors of children and fathers as their abusers . . . We know that mothers as well as fathers neglect and abuse children. Although abusive mothers are separated from their children, repairing the mother-child relationship usually remains a social policy priority. Abusive fathers who are sincere in their motivation to establish positive relationships with their children should be treated in a similar fashion. (Silverstein, 1996, p. 11)

Contact centers and supervised contact should be abolished, since contact with violent and abusive fathers is unnecessary and not in the child's best interest. (Harne & Radford, 1995, p. 83)

Although there is consensus about the damage that abusive and neglectful fathers and stepfathers can cause to their children, the appropriate role of social services for men who have maltreated their children is still intensely debated. As illustrated by the above quotes, expert opinions vary widely on when and how abusive men should be supported in a fathering role, with some advocating little to no contact between maltreating fathers and their children and others advocating greater supports for men who wish to improve their parenting. Proponents of both arguments draw from existing literature to support their stances.

Research in the past decade has documented the role that fathers can play in facilitating healthy child

development. Fathers who are involved, nurturing, and supportive have children who thrive cognitively, academically, socially, and emotionally (Biller & Lopez Kimpton, 1997; Dubowitz et al., 2001; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Zimmerman, Salem, & Maton, 1995). Healthy fathering also leads to lower rates of delinquent and antisocial behavior, in particular among boys (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002; Harris, Furstenberg, & Marmer, 1998).

Unfortunately, not all fathers have positive influences on their children's development and a few are fatally dangerous. On the basis of data collected through the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System in the United States, it is estimated that 1100 children died in 1999 as a result of abuse or neglect. One third of these cases involved fathers as sole or joint perpetrators, which means that fathers were at least partially responsible for 363 child deaths (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2001). These child fatalities must be placed in the context of the staggering number of nonfatal child abuse and neglect cases investigated and substantiated each year by child protective agencies (Trocme et al., 2001; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2001). Although over half of child abuse and neglect cases investigated by child protective services in Canada and the United States involve mothers as alleged perpetrators, this is partially an artifact of the number of families on child protective caseloads where no father is involved. In Canadian two-parent families, fathers are alleged perpetrators in an estimated 71% of the physical abuse cases and 69% of the cases involving emotional maltreatment. In sexual abuse cases, fathers or stepfathers are about three and a half times as likely to be investigated as mothers and stepmothers (24% versus 7%), regardless of the family composition. In fact, only in cases of neglect are mothers more likely to be referred to child protective services regardless of whether the family is headed by one or two parents (Trocme et al., 2001).

Despite the prevalence of father-perpetrated child abuse and neglect, research and clinical attention has tended to focus on abusive mothers (Phares, 1996). The sparse information that is available on abusive fathers comes mostly from the literature on batterers—men who are abusive towards their spouses. Although clearly

an important component of child abuse, witnessing partner violence represents only one of a variety of ways that children are abused by their fathers, and wife batterers represent only part of the population of fathers who abuse their children.

Because fathers typically have not been included in research or clinical service, few guidelines currently exist to help professionals decide when and how to safely nurture a relationship between an abusive man and his children. The current paper was written to provide a forum for discussion of these issues. We begin by outlining arguments for the need to provide intervention services to maltreating fathers. We then advance five principles to guide intervention services targeting these men. These principles are derived from our knowledge of the literature on effective parenting, the effects of abuse on children, and the process of promoting changes in behavior. Consistent with recent calls for greater integration of theories and services for abusive parents and spouses (Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2001), these principles are also strongly influenced by our knowledge of batterer interventions.

#### **THE VALUE OF INTERVENING WITH ABUSIVE MEN**

Popular opinion about the appropriate level of involvement of abusive parents in children's lives has undergone rapid change in the past few decades. At the start of the child welfare movement in the early 1970s, it was generally believed that ties between children and their abusive mothers and fathers should be severed in favor of a new start with a different set of parents. With increasing caseloads and mounting evidence that separation was not generally better for children, child protection services began to support abusive mothers' efforts to keep their children and to improve their parenting (Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980; National Council of Welfare Canada, 1979).

Although need still exceeds demand, many communities now have at least some service available to high-risk and maltreating mothers (Wang & Daro, 1998). Most often, intervention programs for this population seek to reduce maltreatment by supporting children's mothers and/or providing child-management education and skills training. Programs are typically based on the ecological model of maltreatment and, consequently, often involve a mix of in-home and group services for

ameliorating broad risk factors such as life stress, social isolation, and economic disadvantage, with parent education and/or support as a smaller component of the larger program (Webster-Stratton, 1997). On the basis of empirical evidence that ineffective parenting is a key risk factor for the development and maintenance of frustrating and potentially abuse-provoking child behaviors, other programs directly target parenting skills (Wolfe & Wekerle, 1993). Teaching behavior management techniques such as reinforcement, appropriate punishment, and anger management is typically a major component of these programs (e.g., Mathews, Matter, & Montgomery, 1997).

Societal support for providing abusive parents with interventions such as these has not, however, extended to abusive fathers. Perhaps in accordance with the assumption that fathers play a secondary, and relatively unimportant role in their children's lives, men have traditionally been excluded from routine diagnostic and treatment programs (Featherstone, 2001; Martin, 1984; Sternberg, 1997). Father absence has also been increased by policies that limit or eliminate social welfare benefits to low-income women who have male partners. These policies have made men wary of seeking services and have indirectly encouraged women to hide or distort the role played by fathers or male partners for fear of losing financial support (Achatz & MacAllum, 1994, as cited in Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; Edleson, 1998).

Underlying these service biases is a deep-seated ambivalence about whether abusive or neglectful fathers *should* have continued involvement in their children's lives. In a review of the literature on the effects of divorce on children, Hooper (1995) concluded that the benefits of contact with fathers are uncertain, especially when there is continued conflict between the custodial (most often mother) and noncustodial (most often father) parent. Although not unsupportive of fathers involvement with their children, Bancroft and Silverman (2002) have recently argued that custody and visitation plans for men who have been abusive towards their spouses should take into account whether the batterer is likely to undermine the authority of the children's mothers, interfere with the mother-child relationship, or cause tension between siblings. In such cases they suggest that father-child visitations should be shortened, supervised, or discontinued.

Rather than automatically attempting to limit contact in difficult situations, we hold that there are numerous theoretical and practical reasons to intervene with abusive fathers. To begin, intervention has the potential to increase paternal accountability and responsibility. Father absence is an important social policy issue North America (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998). Rather than improving this situation, current child welfare policies may have made it worse. Peled (2000) emphasizes that "to a large extent, current practice and ideology of welfare and mental health services in general, and domestic violence services in particular, let abusive men off the parenting hook" (p. 33). Focusing protective service efforts and interventions on the mother-child relationship has indirectly allowed maltreating fathers to avoid dealing with the consequences of their abusive behavior and its effects on their children. It has also placed a greater burden on children's mothers.

A further incentive to provide intervention for fathers is that children retain emotional connections to them, even in the face of abuse (Boss, 1999; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Many children and teenagers struggle to understand and process the loss (or abandonment) of their father, even years later. In one of the few studies to directly ask children about their perceptions of their abusive fathers and family situations, Peled (1998) found that pre-adolescent children of abused mothers tended to experience a conflict of loyalties between parents. If their parents separated, children reported missing contact with their fathers, and in some cases blamed their mothers for causing family disruption. Although further research is clearly needed in this area, clinical experience suggests that children who have been the direct victims of fathers' abuse also tend to have conflicting views—missing their father's care and attention on one hand, and fearing his anger and abuse on the other.

In addition, abusive fathers who leave their families seldom end their involvement with children in general. Although we know of no systematic research on this issue, clinically we have observed that such men can be involved with as many as 6 to 10 biological and step-children. Given that rates of father-child homicide, abuse and neglect are substantially higher for non-

biologically related children than for biological offspring (Daly & Wilson, 2000; Radhakrishna, Bou-Saada, Hunter, Catellier, & Kotch, 2001), men who have been “kicked out” of one family may be at even higher risk for causing harm to other children.

Another consideration for intervention with abusive fathers relates to the possible ethical obligation to provide services to men who want to improve their relationships with their children. Many of our policies have appropriately focused on helping victims—be they women or children—escape to safety. To date, little attention has been paid to helping abusive fathers change, although their child visitation often hinges upon demonstrated changes. For example, Bancroft and Silverman (2002) suggest that decisions about children’s involvement with abusive fathers should be based on men’s efforts to change and demonstrated durability of changes. Little recognition is given to the fact that even if a man does want to improve his parenting, there are few appropriate opportunities available. Child protective services typically work with women and, as is argued later in this paper, general parenting programs do not meet the needs of abusive fathers. The end result is that we are requiring men to demonstrate positive changes in their parenting as a condition for further involvement with their children but failing to provide services appropriate for helping men make these changes.

Finally, and most importantly, we need to consider whether providing intervention to fathers is in the best interests of their children. Unfortunately, this is also the consideration for which the least empirical evidence is available to guide decision making. There is still little research to direct professionals in predicting when children will and will not benefit from continued involvement with an abusive father. Even less research is available on the implications of either decision. Fathers who do cease their abusive behavior and take accountability for past abuse may send a powerful message to their children, breaking a potential cycle of multigenerational child abuse. Alternatively, even successful change may not redress past traumatic experiences. There is a critical need for research in this area.

In summary, although it is necessary to keep a judicious eye on and be ready to terminate father involvement on an individual case basis, we can no longer

ignore abusive fathers as a group worthy of intervention. Providing treatment to mothers alone will not be sufficient to lower the rates of child abuse; theoretically sound intervention programs for fathers are also critical components of a comprehensive strategy to eliminate child abuse. Based on our beliefs about the potential benefits of intervention and our understanding of abusive men, we have derived the following principles to guide intervention with abusive fathers. Case examples are given in each for the purpose of illustration.

**Principle 1: Overly controlling behavior, a sense of entitlement, and self-centered attitudes are primary problems of abusive fathers; thus, the development of child-management skills should not be an initial focus of intervention**

Tyrone was getting to the end of his rope—if his children did not give him five minutes of peace and quiet, he didn’t know what he was going to do. After telling the kids to “shut up” and threatening to spank them several times, Tyrone was ready to explode. Struggling to remain calm and to remember what he had learned at his parenting group, he tried to give the kids a time-out. His children refused, and he screamed, “I said take a time-out or else!” When the children still did not comply, he jerked them off the couch and dragged them up the stairs to their bedroom, muttering that his children were stupid, noisy animals. He shoved them into the room and held the door closed while they kicked the door and shrieked.

A critical starting point of intervention with maltreating fathers is an accurate characterization of this population and, by extension, the identification of appropriate targets of intervention. We see abusive fathers’ lack of recognition and prioritization of their children’s needs for love, respect, and autonomy as paramount. In particular, we suggest that men who maltreat their children are characterized by abuse-supporting cognitions, attitudes, and a sense of entitlement in the father-child relationship; a self-centered focus that precludes necessary attention to children; and poor recognition of parent-child boundaries. This characterization contrasts with the organizing principles and aims of most group-based parenting programs, which see the primary deficit as one of child-manage-

ment skills (e.g., Group Triple P Program; Turner, Markie-Dadds, & Saunders, 2000). As illustrated by the scenario above, teaching this father to use time-outs more effectively would not address the more fundamental disturbance in the father's attitude towards his children and would likely fail to improve the father-child relationship.

We believe that one primary difficulty with maltreating fathers is their sense of entitlement in interactions with their children. Clinically, we have noted that control is an important aspect of the parent-child relationship for these men. Maltreating fathers often speak of conflicts with their children as power battles and disturbingly often report, with pride, that they only need to tell their children something *once*. Men's attitudes and beliefs support this characterization, with men likely to feel that they deserve unconditional love and respect and that their families have a duty to provide this positive regard. When such treatment is not forthcoming, maltreating men tend to feel victimized or cheated out of the regard that is "rightfully" theirs, and they feel justified in avenging these slights (Francis, Scott, Crooks, & Kelly, 2002). Unfortunately, abusive fathers also tend to have a pervasive, but unacknowledged, sense of insecurity. As a result, they are hypervigilant to any signs that they may be rejected, defied, or disrespected, and their families end up "walking on eggshells" to avoid confrontation. We believe that, as a combined consequence of these attitudes and insecurities, abusive fathers tend to have *too much* control over their children, with abusive child-management strategies representing quick and easy means to ensure that paternal demands are met.

These clinical observations are supported by two lines of empirical work. The first of these is research on men abusive in their intimate-partner relationships, which, given the lack of information on maltreating fathers, provides an informative parallel. Batterers are typically characterized by over-sensitivity to rejection, high need for control, and feelings of entitlement in relationships (Dutton, 1996, 1998; Hamberger & Hastings, 1991). Abuse in this population is conceptualized as a means for men to ensure their partners are available to meet their physical, emotional, and psychological needs (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Among batterers, this pattern of control often translates to fathers' relationships with their children (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002), resulting in high rates of co-occurring spouse and child abuse (Edleson,

1999). Similarly, we expect abusive behavior among fathers who are not violent towards their spouses or who have no current intimate relationship to be rooted in their sense of entitlement, high need for control, and reliance on their children for emotional validation.

The "justified retribution" aspect of abusive parent-child behavior is also supported in research linking parents' perceptions of the controllability of parent-child interaction with risk of child maltreatment. In an informative series of studies, Bugental and colleagues have identified a subset of parents (usually mothers, as fathers have seldom been included as subjects of study) who feel that their children have relatively more power than they do to affect the outcomes of parent-child interactions (Bugental, Brown, & Reiss, 1996). These "low power" parents are more physically aroused by child misbehavior and more likely to attribute negative intent to children for ambiguous and noncompliant behavior. They are also more likely to engage in control-oriented appraisal of child activity (Bugental & Lewis, 1999), to coerce (Bugental, Lewis, Lin, Lyon, & Kopeikin, 1999), and to retaliate to child noncompliance with physical abuse (Bugental, Blue, & Cruzcosa, 1989). The salience of this attribution bias among maltreating parents is further supported by intervention research: Among at-risk parents, the positive effects of home visits are enhanced by the addition of a cognitively based intervention targeting parents' appraisal of power in the parent-child relationship (Bugental, Ellerson, Lin, Rainey, Koktovic, & O'Hara, 2002).

A second key characteristic of maltreating fathers is a tendency for involvement with their children to be based on the men's own needs, rather than on the needs or desires of their children. Bancroft and Silverman (2002) note that abusive men tend to take an interest in their children at their convenience or when an opportunity for public recognition of their fathering is available. As a result, a father may alternate between periods of intense interest in his children and outright neglect, depending on his emotional state. However, even when maltreating fathers show considerable interest in their children, their involvement tends to lack an appropriate child-focus, with the choice of activities clearly that of the father. This adult-focused attention is revealed by men's lack of knowledge about, and responsibility for, their children. In our clinical and preliminary empirical work, we have found that despite their apparent involvement, maltreating fathers are often unable to provide basic information such as the

names of their children's best friends, their children's favorite activities, or their most recent disappointments (Francis et al., 2002).

Finally, sexual abuse may be considered a particular case of a father's sense of entitlement over his children. Research on child sexual abuse has shown important differences between nonfamilial child molesters (pedophiles) and father-child incest perpetrators (Bancroft & Miller, 2002). Pedophiles are typically men with a clear sexual preference for children (often male), low social competence, and elevated rates of psychopathology and antisocial behavior. This profile does not fit most incest perpetrators. Men who sexually abuse children in their own families tend to have normal sexual interests and involvement, are more likely to offend against female victims, and cannot be distinguished from other men on the basis of psychopathology (Barbaree & Marshall, 1989; Prentky, Knight, & Lee, 1997). There are other important differences as well; for example, most incest-only perpetrators choose only one or two victims whereas pedophiles typically offend against many more (review in Meyers, 1997), and incest-only perpetrators are much less likely than molesters to use force (Bresee, Stearns, Bess, & Packer, 1986). Differences in offence characteristics may stem from causal factors specific to each population. In particular, a sense of entitlement may underlie much sexual abuse of incest perpetrators (Bancroft & Miller, 2002; Salter, 1988). Many maltreating men show poor boundaries around their children; they confide in their children, turn to them for relief from emotional distress, and allow their children to take care of them (Johnston & Campbell, 1993). Daughters in particular are vulnerable to the development of a "special" father-child relationship. Although not necessarily abusive in itself, when this relationship occurs without fathers' clear understanding of children's emotional, physical, and sexual autonomy, it can easily shade into sexual interference and abuse. Indeed, men's jealousy is an important risk factor and indicator of incest (Salter, 1988).

In summary, maltreating fathers tend to be characterized by controlling and self-centered attitudes and poor parent-child boundaries. In programs for men who abuse their intimate partners, recognition of a similar pattern of entitlement and control provides the basis for the argument against using anger management or other

skills-based counseling techniques (Adams, 1988; Gondolf & Russell, 1986). This argument posits that unless abusive men's sense of entitlement is addressed, any skills these men develop will simply be used to abuse their partners more effectively (Dankwort, 1988). Similarly, providing an abusive father only with more effective ways to control his child's behavior may serve to exacerbate the oppression and abuse experienced by that child. For these reasons we argue that intervention programs for abusive and neglectful fathers should begin with the assumption that abusive fathers are likely to present with characteristics of entitlement, and they require interventions that can directly address and counter attitudes that support their use of abusive control and that can develop their capacity to appreciate their children's emotional and physical needs. It is only *after* such intervention that men may benefit from broad-based parental support or from learning parenting skills for more effective child management.

As a final note, we wish to acknowledge that this characterization of child maltreatment, although commonly applicable to abusive fathers, is not appropriate to all men who harm their children through abusive and neglectful actions. Specifically, this categorization may not encompass men who lack the cognitive capacity for the tasks of child care, men whose psychopathology is severe enough to preclude sufficient goal-directed behavior to care for their children, and men who are so profoundly socially disadvantaged that they are unable to provide their children with basic necessities. These populations have other intervention needs that again go beyond what may be provided by commonly available psychoeducational support or skills-based group parenting programs, and they do not necessarily overlap with the targets of intervention that we argue are essential.

#### **Principle 2: Abusive fathers are seldom initially ready to make changes in their parenting**

John stomped into the first night of a treatment group for abusive parents 20 minutes late and with a scowl on his face. He sat down, arms crossed over his chest and glared at the group leaders. When the group leaders began to explain policies on meeting with men's children, John became quite agitated. He began

to make critical comments about the aims of the group and the other group members. He explained that this group was not appropriate for him, that he and his boy had a good relationship, at least when his ex-wife wasn't interfering. Group leaders had no business messing with their relationship.

It is critical to acknowledge that maltreating parents typically do not seek intervention voluntarily, nor are they intrinsically motivated to change their parenting style. Furthermore, they are often vehemently distrustful of a treatment system that can limit their contact with their children and may have already done so (Wolfe, 1999). The reluctance of fathers to become involved in intervention is evident to clinicians who perform child welfare and parenting-capacity assessments. Even with considerable pressure from child protection workers, many fathers participate in parenting assessment with thinly veiled hostility. Alternatively, they superficially engage with a parenting program and are subsequently disappointed and vexed when attendance alone does not result in their children being returned to them.

Although recognized in treatment programs, low change motivation and problem denial has seldom been a focus of research on child maltreatment or a direct target of intervention. Instead, resistance has often been considered a client characteristic that is a challenge to group or individual intervention. "Resistant clients" have been expected to show little progress in treatment, with these failures exacting a toll on front-line mental health professionals. Fortunately, in more recent work, there has been a shift towards considering resistance as a specific stage of change that requires particular intervention strategies. The transtheoretical model of change, a model that has recently gained prominence in many areas of social service (Prochaska, 2000; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982; Velicer, Norma, Fava, & Prochaska, 1999), has been particularly influential. Originally developed in an attempt to understand why people did not take advantage of programs to help them change risky health behavior, the transtheoretical model identifies a series of stages through which individuals progress in effecting behavioral change. In the first stage, precontemplation, individuals do not see their behavior as problematic and are not interested in changing their

behavior. Only later are clients expected to move towards contemplating and engaging in change.

The explicit recognition of a "denial" stage has been influential at a theoretical level, but perhaps of greater importance is that it has given rise to the investigation and development of specific counseling strategies most helpful for working with these challenging clients (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). These strategies, which include rolling with resistance and developing discrepancies, can and should be incorporated into the development of programs for maltreating fathers. In addition, change in level of denial and motivation should be recognized as significant, though not sufficient, progress in treatment programs.

In addition to providing guidance for counseling, acknowledgment of the importance of denial has oriented theorists to consider why men deny or minimize their abusive behavior. While the roots of some denial might be simple fear of legal consequences, denial often persists after men have "been caught." In cases of spouse assault, feminist-oriented theorists and researchers have suggested that men's denial represents an unwillingness to give up the power conferred to them by their use of abusive behaviors (Carden, 1994). A convincing argument can be made that the same applies for child abuse—that maltreating fathers deny their abuse to avoid having to use more time-consuming child-centered methods of managing their children.

While a feminist analysis provides a helpful framework, it may not capture the totality of men's denial. Many of the men in our program have been severely abused as children themselves, though they often do not readily admit to being wronged as children and do not identify themselves as having been abused. Far from using their abusive childhood experiences as an excuse for their own behavior ("how did you expect me to turn out with the childhood I had?"), men tend to minimize and deny the impact of their own victimization (Jory, Anderson, & Greer, 1997). Their investment in not seeing themselves as victims may stand in the way of men developing greater compassion for their children's victimization experiences and in engaging in efforts to change. Men's unresolved issues from their own childhood may also be projected into the child, resulting in high levels of anger and reactivity that are quickly minimized, denied, or justified by the child's perceived badness (Bugental & Lewis, 1999).

In summary, intervention programs for maltreating fathers should begin with the assumption that many of the men in intervention have little motivation to change their behavior. Accordingly, there needs to be emphasis on activities that facilitate the shift from precontemplation to contemplation, from denial to acceptance of the need to change. The explicit acknowledgement of denial as a stage of change supports group facilitators in their effort to increase motivation, to encourage men to begin to take responsibility for their behavior, and to consider possible explanations for men's denial.

**Principle 3: Fathers' adherence to gender-role stereotypes also contributes to their maltreatment of children**

When Ben's younger brother innocently mentioned that some bullies at school were teasing Ben, all hell broke loose at the dinner table. "What's the matter with you anyway?" demanded Ben's father. "What are you, some kind of wimp? If you don't learn to stand up for yourself you will be a loser for the rest of your life. Is that what you want?" When Ben's mother tried to intervene, his father lashed out at her too. "Isn't a man allowed to talk to his son without having his wife nag at him? You baby him and make him too soft. I am just trying to teach him to be a man."

Also implicated in the beliefs and attitudes that some men hold in support of harsh treatment of their children are stereotypes about the roles and characteristics of fathers. The definition of men's roles as fathers and as nurturers of their children's development has undergone rapid change in the past two decades. It was not that long ago that popular culture presented a view of family life in which the mother provided all household services and took care of the children and the father stepped in as the occasional disciplinarian. The ideal father was a somewhat distant authority in his children's lives. Fathers who were too involved or too nurturing and who failed to protect children from maternal overprotection would produce children, especially boys, who were "sissy" (see Pleck, 1987 for discussion).

Although traditional gender roles are not necessarily predictive of abuse, abusive fathers tend to be stereotypically rigid and authoritarian and to use power-assertive and coercive parenting techniques (Margolin,

John, Ghosh, & Gordis, 1996). These characteristics are common to both abusive mothers and fathers; however, abusive fathers may be particularly likely to couple these parenting strategies with the belief that children should obey unquestioningly. In addition, because of their adherence to gender stereotypes, fathers may be more intolerant to resistance or arguing from their children and to hold that such "impertinence" must be answered with harsh discipline (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). For these fathers, use of power-based and abusive child-management strategies is viewed as necessary and as justified by their children's behavior.

Abusive fathers also seem to be particularly vulnerable to societal messages that explicitly or implicitly cast children as possessions of their parents. These men tend to construct fatherhood in terms of rights to children and may be more concerned with maintaining control over their children than with nurturing them (Arendell, 1992; McMahon & Pence, 1995). These dynamics may underlie the finding that men who have been abusive towards their spouses are twice as likely to seek custody of their children than men without a history of abuse perpetration, and they are less likely to pay child or spousal support than nonabusive men (Liss & Stahly, 1993).

Finally, we have found that some maltreating fathers are over-invested in being viewed by others as successful in their parenting role. Men with this orientation to their children are vulnerable to interpreting child behavior primarily as a reflection of themselves, thereby restricting their children's independence and growth as autonomous beings. These men also seem to be especially reluctant to admit difficulties in parenting or lack of knowledge, instead preferring the dangerous route of "toughing it out" with their children. Our judgment of this as a dangerous attitude is predicated on our knowledge of mother-perpetrated infanticide. Among the numerous factors that contribute to infanticide is the social imperative that mothers be unwaveringly loving and affectionate towards their children, which prevents some women from seeking help when they have negative feelings towards their infants (Crimmins, Langley, Brownstein, & Spunt, 1997; Meyer & Oberman, 2001; Smithey, 2001). In parallel, preliminary research with fathers suggests that rigid internalization of the stereotypic model of an independent and strong man may make fathers less able

to admit to difficulties and to seek much-needed help and social support in their parenting role (Smithey 2002, personal communication).

In summary, abusive men may justify their behavior on the basis of traditional gender stereotypes. These attitudes need to be explicitly addressed in treatment, as they provide an underlying framework for child maltreatment. Changing men's attitudes about what it means to be a father will lead to cognitive dissonance between these new beliefs and their abusive behavior, helping to provide motivation and direction for change.

**Principle 4: The relationship between abusive fathers and the mothers of their children requires special attention**

Bill has been working hard to stop using physical discipline with his son Robbie since his child protective services worker told him his visits might have to be supervised again. At one access exchange, Robbie's mother is 20 minutes late to drop him off. Bill is furious; he feels that even though they have separated, she is still trying to make things difficult for him. When Robbie and his mother show up, Bill ignores his ex-partner's attempt to explain her car problems and starts yelling at her. She tries to leave and he grabs her arm, pushing her against the car. After she drives away, Bill notices that Robbie is upset. Bill crouches down in front of his son, takes him gently by the arms and says, "Robbie, honey, don't look so worried. You know that Daddy doesn't spank or yell at you anymore. It's just that sometimes your Mommy does things to try to make Daddy mad, and I have to let her know that I am not going to stand for it."

In most group-based parenting programs, there is an implicit assumption that the parents have a nonabusive relationship. In cases where adult relationships seem problematic, the group leader might offer to make a referral to marital counseling. Where the parents' relationship is addressed within the context of parenting interventions, discussion typically focuses on the need for consistency in parenting or the importance of communication. These interventions are not appropriate or sufficient for abusive men. The actions of abusive fathers need to be examined within the contexts they occur: family stress and partner violence (Salzinger et al., 2002).

Child abuse and domestic violence have a startlingly high rate of co-occurrence, with estimates of the overlap in the range of 30–60% (Appel & Holden, 1998; Edleson, 1999; Jouriles & Norwood, 1995; Ross, 1996). That is, in families where either child maltreatment or woman abuse is occurring, one will often find that the other form of violence is also being perpetrated. While in the past it was believed that a man who abused his female partner could be a "lousy husband, but a good father," we now recognize that that distinction is a false one.

Although most of the research on the co-occurrence of child and spouse abuse has focused on physical violence, men use a variety of tactics that are abusive towards their spouses and harmful to their children. Men who are abusive towards their intimate partners almost inevitably undermine the authority of children's mothers in psychological and emotional ways (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). They may overrule her parenting decisions, ridicule her in front of the children, or tell the children she is an incompetent parent. Often, men speak with disdain of the ability of their children's mother to appropriately care for children, which likely underlies the finding that battered women often vary their parenting strategies depending upon whether their partners are present (Holden & Richie, 1991; Riger, Raja, & Camacho, 2002). The combined result is that children display increasing disrespect for their mother's authority, and both children and their mothers increase their dependence upon the father for direction and authority.

In addition, men sometimes use their children directly as weapons against their partners. As discussed in detail by Bancroft and Silverman (2002), abusive men may mistreat children in retaliation against their mother or may deliberately endanger the children to send a similar message. Alternatively, men may require children to monitor and report on their mother's behavior, or they may convince the children that it is their mother's fault that the family is having difficulties. Men's attempts to undermine and punish their children's mothers may also be evident in their use of significant resources to ensure that they are perceived by the child as the best parent. In separated families, this may mean that at "Dad's house" children have a later bedtime, are allowed to eat junk food, and can engage in activities forbidden at home (a common example is playing violent video games). When these permissive parenting

strategies are used deliberately to gain an advantage with children, or when they are pursued against the stated wishes of children's mothers, they may function as a subtle and insidious means of using children against their mothers (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

Given this constellation of abusive and manipulative behaviors present in spouse abuse, it is not surprising that exposure to batterers poses a serious risk to the mental health of children and adolescents (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003). Studies of the impact on children indicate that exposure to battering is a risk factor associated with higher rates of problems in many areas. Compared to nonexposed children, children who witness battering have higher rates of symptoms in the areas of behavioral and emotional functioning, school performance, cognitive skills, and interpersonal relationships, and they have poorer attentional functioning (Holden, Geffner, & Jouriles, 1998; Kolbo, Blakely, & Engelman, 1996; Medina, Margolin, & Wilcox, 2000). Due to these serious consequences, we consider battering a form of abuse perpetrated by the father against both the child and the child's mother. Child protective services in a number of regions are applying the same label. In Ontario, for example, frequent exposure to severe domestic violence is now considered grounds for child protection (Trocme et al., 2001).

Although the focus of the discussion so far has been on the implications of the co-occurrence of child maltreatment and woman battering, it is important to recognize the role of marital conflict more generally. Research over the past two decades has clearly established that children exposed to unresolved and hostile marital conflict experience significant distress (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1999). In fact, witnessing of interparental conflict is one of the most disturbing life stressors reported by elementary school children (Lewis, Siegel, & Lewis, 1984). When conflicts occur over child-related issues, such as appropriate child-management strategies, children's distress is intensified. Children do not habituate to marital conflict but become sensitized over time (Cummings & Zahn-Waxler, 1992). Recognition of the importance of the marital relationship is critical to parenting programs, and poor attention to this issue has likely undermined the success of many interventions

(Eckenrode et al., 2000). It is also a critical flaw in philosophies advocating the promotion of the father-child relationships independent of men's relationship to children's other family members (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999).

Due to the strong impact of marital conflict on child adjustment, and the common co-occurrence of spouse and child abuse, it is critical that a significant part of intervention with maltreating fathers be devoted to men's relationships with, and potentially abusive behaviors towards, their children's mothers. Understanding that children who witness violence can be as traumatized as those who experience it first-hand is an important realization for violent men. In addition, men need to appreciate that their relationship with their children is *not* independent of their relationship with their children's mother. Intervention needs to convey to men that being a good father requires that they avoid or end abuse against their children's mother and that they develop a relationship with her that is respectful.

In summary, many maltreating fathers are also violent and controlling toward the mothers of their children. The deleterious impacts on children of witnessing battering have been well documented. Furthermore, fathers may use their children as pawns in the service of controlling current or former partners. If men cease their abusive behavior towards their children, but persist in their abuse and control of their children's mothers, child adjustment will continue to be seriously compromised. Even if nonviolent, men's contribution to hostile, unresolved marital conflict must be considered in terms of its impact on child adjustment. Thus, men's treatment of their children's mothers is a critical component for any program targeting abusive fathers.

**Principle 5: Because abusive fathers have eroded their children's emotional security, the need to rebuild trust will affect the pace of change and potential impact of relapse on the child**

Since John and his wife separated, he has been making sincere efforts to change his abusive behavior. He has not been physically abusive and has avoided using threats for a period of six months. His relationship with his daughter Amy is improving. Amy, although desperate for a more positive relationship with her father, is still vigilant to signs of his displeasure. One

week Amy, with much trepidation about her father's reaction, wore her new and relatively short skirt to a visit; her clothing choices had been a subject of debate between her parents. When John saw her skirt, he commented, derisively, that she looked better when she wore jeans. For Amy, this comment activated a strong level of shame and anxiety, and she immediately left the room crying, convinced that her father was never going to change.

The final organizing principle of intervention for abusive fathers concerns the fundamental disruption in the father-child relationship and, by extension, the challenges to repairing this relationship. Children who are maltreated by their parents face a plethora of developmental challenges. Child abuse is associated with almost all forms of child psychopathology, including depression, anxiety, and conduct disorder (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Smailes, 1999; Salzinger et al., 2002; Wolfe, 1999). Children who have been maltreated are found to have lower problem-solving self-efficacy and higher rates of aggression than those who have not experienced maltreatment (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997; Rogosch, Cicchetti, & Aber, 1995). In addition, children with maltreatment histories tend to acquire a hostile attribution bias, making them hypervigilant to slights from others, which contributes to a tendency towards aggressive and controlling behavior (Dodge, Pettit, Bates, & Valente, 1995; Downey & Walker, 1989). These findings are consistent with an intergenerational cycle of violence in which maltreated children are at greater risk for perpetration and/or continued victimization in forming close relationships than their nonmaltreated peers (Widom, 1989).

One concept that helps explain this link between maltreatment and compromised development is emotional security. As outlined by Cummings and Davies (1996), emotional security is a "latent construct that can be inferred from the overall organization of children's emotions, behaviors, thoughts, and physiological response and serves as a set goal by which children regulate their own functioning in social contexts, thereby directing social emotional, cognitive and physiological reactions" (Cummings & Davies, 1996, p. 126). Emotional security arises out of individual-environment interactions over time. Children who are emotionally secure are able

to regulate their own emotional arousal and are thereby at lower risk for the development of adjustment problems and psychopathology. They have positive internalized relations of themselves and their family and are better able to externalize responsibility for family conflicts that do not involve them (Cummings & Davies, 1996; Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2002).

At the other end of the spectrum from emotional security is childhood trauma. For many children, incidents of child abuse constitute traumas—events that involve feeling threatened and helpless and that lead to elevations in trauma symptomatology (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995; Silverman, Reinherz, & Giaconia, 1996; Widom, 1999; Wolfe, Scott, Wekerle, & Pittman, 2001). Of particular concern for abused children is the development of traumatic bonding. Traumatic bonding occurs when systematic abuse involves cycles of intermittent fear and kindness, and when victims both fear and identify with their abusers. When this pattern of abuse occurs, children gradually come to confuse and associate love and abuse. Children may come to believe that their fathers are being abusive "for their own good" and that because their fathers love them "so much" the men have no other choice. Children also become increasingly focused on the needs, wants, and emotional state of the abusive adult, which they monitor to maintain their own safety, often at the cost of developing age-appropriate cognitive and emotional abilities (Herman, 1992; Whitten, 1994). Researchers in the area of parent-child attachment label this constellation of behaviors and affects as *disorganized attachment* and note that a majority of maltreated infants display this disturbing relational pattern (Carlson, Cicchetti, Barnett, & Braunwald, 1989; Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999), with considerable continuity at least into the toddler years (Barnett, Ganiban, & Cicchetti, 1999).

The experience of trauma and lack of emotional security have specific implications for successful recovery. A primary need of children who have been maltreated is a sense of physical and emotional safety in their current surroundings and relationships (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). This is an element of all trauma treatments, and it is thought to be necessary for providing a framework in which children can heal (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996). Practically, this means, first and foremost, that abusive fathers need to stop

abusing their children. It is only when fathers are able to provide a consistently nonabusive environment that children's sense of emotional security can be rebuilt.

The task of providing a safe and nonabusive environment for a child who has been abused is a significant challenge for any parent. As a strategy for ensuring their own emotional and physical safety, abused children often develop a hypervigilance to the mood of their abusers and to any indication of parental displeasure (Crittenden & DiLalla, 1988; Pollak, Cicchetti, Klorman, & Brumaghin, 1997). Once a child has developed this sensitivity to abuse, a father no longer has to use physical violence or threaten harm to gain child compliance—an angry glance or a critical word may activate the same insecurity, traumatic anxiety, and fear. In this context, multiple, nonsevere events can be harmful and abusive. Ironically, the abusive parenting dynamic that men set up to ensure that all of their needs were met now works against them in trying to make changes. In addition, because they have not had the positive and consistent parenting they need, abused children are often genuinely more difficult to parent (Wolfe, 1999). Fathers faced with positively parenting these children have a significant task ahead of them, one that will likely require ongoing professional assistance as children reach new developmental stages and trauma resurfaces.

Although creating a sense of safety is of primary importance in repairing the fractured father-child bond, there are a number of additional things that men can do to increase their children's sense of emotional security. As outlined by Bancroft and Silverman (2002), critical elements to helping children who have been traumatized in their families include making the environment structured and predictable and helping children develop and strengthen bonds with others, such as their mothers, grandparents, siblings, counselors, coaches, teachers, and neighbors. They also emphasize the need for men to have better emotional boundaries, so that they do not look to their children for comfort for "adult" problems. Men need support and assistance for facilitating all of these changes.

In summary, abusive fathers are challenged to rebuild a relationship with their children in the context of a parent-child relationship that is complex and fundamentally damaged and with a child who is hypersensitive to any relapse. Being a good parent may not be

sufficient: men who have been abusive in the past may have to be excellent parents. They also need to be patient and to give their children ample time to rebuild the trust that has been violated.

#### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

We believe that intervening with abusive fathers is a difficult but potentially rewarding task. Programs based on theoretically sound principles have the potential to end men's abuse of children. Ideally, these interventions will go further than abuse cessation and will begin to foster healthier father-child and coparenting relationships. They will also create a mechanism for holding men accountable for the children they have fathered.

In this paper we have outlined five critical principles for intervening with abusive fathers, based on a merging of the parenting, abuse, trauma, change, and batterer intervention literatures. First we asserted that attitudes and not skills development should be the initial focus of intervention for maltreating fathers. Next, in recognition that abusive men are often reluctant participants in intervention, we contended that treatment programs need to work directly to increase men's motivation to change. We then examined the intervention needs of these men, arguing that gender stereotypes about fathering and men's treatment of their children's mothers should be primary foci of intervention. Finally, we suggested that disruption in children's underlying emotional security must be considered as a context and challenge to fathers' change. These principles provide the basis for the *Caring Dads: Helping men value their children* program (Scott, Francis, Crooks, & Kelly, 2002) currently being piloted through Changing Ways in London, Ontario, as well as Emerge, in Boston, Massachusetts.

A consideration of the principles outlined in this paper is informative for thinking about the match between the needs of abusive men and the intervention provided in traditional parenting programs. As emphasized throughout this paper, the intervention needs of abusive fathers differ qualitatively from those of nonabusive parents. For abusive men, motivation, accountability for abusive behavior, and entitlement need to be primary treatment goals, as does men's relationships

with the mother of their children. Skills development and parenting support are more distal needs.

Because of the mismatch between traditional parenting programs and the needs of maltreating fathers, existing parenting programs are not likely to be helpful to this population and may actually support some of the attitudes and options we see as problematic. Parenting groups are typically supportive of frustrations encountered in raising children and promote the view that such difficulties are universal parenting experiences. For example, consider a father who shares with a parenting group that he had a tough week and ended up venting his feelings by yelling at his two daughters. Most likely, the group would respond to this man by validating his feelings, normalizing (though not supporting) the transfer of frustration to the children, and then problem-solving other ways to manage his children in similar situations. Although helpful for many families, for a man whose self-reported incident of “yelling” actually involved getting his children out of their beds for a diatribe rife with profane language that lasted over two hours, this intervention is inappropriate and potentially harmful. Support from other participants for minimized incidents of abuse, such as this, may inadvertently endorse men’s sense of entitlement, abuse-supporting cognitions, and abusive behavior. In addition, having abusive fathers learn better child-management strategies may serve to reinforce the notion that parenting is primarily about control. Finally, counselors who are not vigilant to, or have not been trained to recognize, men’s tendency to minimize and deny the severity of their abusive behavior may fail to intervene in ways that will help men become more accountable and less abusive.

Similarly, we believe that it is important to consider when and to whom fathering intervention should be offered. We believe that therapeutic intervention guided by these principles will be helpful to the majority of abusive fathers. However, we acknowledge that some men who harm their children do not fit the profile we have outlined (e.g., men struggling with severe cognitive delays). Moreover, we recognize that even when men do fit this profile, there are some cases where it may be best to help families end contact with fathers instead of offering men intervention. In particular, men who are withdrawing from their family, who have already caused substantial harm to their children, and

who are actively avoiding services that challenge their behavior may be better left out of their children’s lives. In other cases, men may benefit from services but still require that their contacts with their children be supervised. Intervention can never be a substitute for vigilant monitoring of child protective services. We continue to work in collaboration with multiple community agencies to develop appropriate guidelines for offering service to this difficult population.

It is also critical that a parenting intervention program for abusive fathers be only one part of broader family support services. Maltreating fathers, like abusive and neglectful mothers, are often coping with numerous challenges to healthy and adaptive functioning, such as alcohol or drug addiction; under or unemployment; lack of high-quality, affordable childcare; and an absence of reliable social support. Moreover, children who have been victimized by their fathers are likely to require intervention to facilitate the resolution of trauma, emotional distress, and behavioral dysregulation. The problems facing families where maltreatment is occurring are complex, and our intervention systems must acknowledge this complexity with multidimensional and contextual interventions.

Finally, the importance of ongoing, high-quality, in-depth research on the effects of these programs on fathers and their families needs to be emphasized. We need to know whether a group-based fathering program can alter, in any meaningful way, men’s manner of relating to their children. We also need to carefully investigate and evaluate specific change processes by contrasting programs that emphasize theoretically different intervention components (e.g., skills vs. attitudes). Such research is particularly important because men’s participation in a fathering program may have a number of unintended effects on women and children. Men’s involvement may give children false hope that their father is committed to change. Fathers may begin to spend more time with their children, but women and child protection workers may be more complacent and less vigilant to potential harm because a man is involved in a parenting program. Furthermore, having undertaken this treatment may reflect well on men involved in child welfare or custody and access proceedings, despite the fact that the efficacy of such programs are not currently documented. In sum, men’s involvement in a treatment program has the

potential to increase the amount of time that they spend with their children and may decrease others' monitoring of that time. Diligent and critical evaluations of these interventions will help professionals involved with abusive fathers interpret the completion of such a program in the appropriate context.

In conclusion, we believe that intervening with abusive fathers is a worthwhile goal. However, intervention must go beyond providing skills or support. Instead, treatment must challenge deeply held beliefs and foster a new child-centered perspective. Although a formidable challenge, the potential benefits in preventing future abuse and in redressing damage already done justifies the effort. By providing fathers with the opportunity to take responsibility for their past abuse and to engage with their children in a more empathetic and nurturing way, we have an opportunity to teach new lessons about being men and perhaps to open a window to break the cycle of violence.

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