

# Descriptions of fathers' care by children exposed to intimate partner violence (IPV) – relative neglect and children's needs

Åsa Cater\* and Anna M. Forssell†

\*Senior Lecturer, †Doctoral Student, School of Law, Psychology and Social work, Örebro University, Örebro, Sweden

## Correspondence:

Åsa Cater,  
School of Law, Psychology and  
Social work,  
Örebro University,  
701 82 Örebro,  
Sweden  
E-mail: asa.cater@oru.se

**Keywords:** children, fathering,  
neglect, violence

**Accepted for publication:** June 2012

## ABSTRACT

The situation of children exposed to intimate partner violence (IPV) raises certain issues related to child neglect. Little is known about how children exposed to IPV perceive and describe their living conditions. This paper addresses this lack by analysing aspects of fathers' care in descriptions given by children whose fathers have subjected the mothers to IPV. The analysis is based on qualitative interviews with 10 children aged 8–12 years. Three themes constitute the results. First, the fathers are not described by the children as engaged and responsible care providers. Second, in their general descriptions of how mothers and fathers fill complementary roles for the child, parenthood seems to mean in practice that the mother is the provider of (almost) everything the child may need. Third, the mere absence of violence seems to be judged 'good-enough' fathering in the children's descriptions. Altogether, this leads to the conclusion that being exposed to IPV and believing that mothers are responsible for their welfare precludes children from viewing their fathers as responsible for their well-being. The limited utility for child welfare practice of a 'child-based' definition of neglect in cases of IPV is discussed, and alternatives are suggested.

## INTRODUCTION

Some researchers claim that widespread conceptions about children's need for their fathers overshadow the negative consequences that some fathers' violence against mothers might have for children (cf. Eriksson & Hester 2001). Generally, fathers perpetrating intimate partner violence (IPV) have been found to show comparatively little interest in and involvement with their children (Hester & Radford 1996; Lapierre 2010; Bancroft *et al.* 2012). Bancroft *et al.* (2012) found that fathers perpetrating IPV often view their children as part of their domain of authority, yet nevertheless consider their care to be the mother's responsibility. They are also often authoritarian, neglectful and verbally abusive towards their children (a.a.), use their children for their own needs, lack empathy (Guille 2004) and construct their parenthood in terms of being 'entitled to the child' (Harne

2011). This seems like an extension of the general characteristics of male perpetrators of IPV, common features of which are coerciveness, as in control of the mother's parenting, a sense of being entitled to special status or attention within the family and feeling justified to use violence whenever he deems it necessary (Bancroft 2002). Sometimes fathers perpetrating IPV also use their children to gain or maintain control over or frighten the mother (Beeble *et al.* 2007), by threatening the child or turning it against its mother. Thus, a child's need for its father must be weighed against the possible negative impact of such factors. Although a positive relationship with their mother may serve as a protective factor for children exposed to IPV (Toth *et al.* 2002); this paper focuses on the fathers.

Despite all these risks, Guille (2004) stresses that IPV does not preclude the possibility of father-child interaction that is experienced as positive by the child (see also Sternberg *et al.* 1994; Cater 2004). In a

similar vein, research has shown that children's perceptions of a father who has abused their mother can include hate, fear, disappointment, anger and confusion, but also attachment, love and care for him (Peled 1998; Mullender *et al.* 2002; Cater 2007). Furthermore, it has been claimed that children can find 'ways to contain, excuse, and reframe the fathers' abusive behaviours' (Peled 1998, p. 418). Hence, one must not assume there to be any simple correlation between a father's violence against a mother and how the child perceives him and his actions.

The *aim* of this paper is to analyse aspects of fathers' care as described by children whose fathers have subjected the mothers to IPV. In general, contemporary discourses promote *involved*, hands-on fathers, who play a central role in the raising of children (Brown *et al.* 2009). This paper addresses how these discourses relate to children's descriptions of fathers perpetrating IPV. In doing so, it provides a basis for social workers to reflect upon current ideas and assumptions about fathering in order not to put children's well-being at risk (cf. Peled 2000; Brown *et al.* 2009).

Saracho & Spodek (2008) divided the study of fathering into three categories: engagement, accessibility and responsibility. Pleck (2010) later revised this into a first domain of positive engagement, such as participating in intense activity with the child, a second including warmth and responsiveness, e.g. hugging the child, and a third of monitoring and decision-making. An auxiliary domain is indirect care, comprising both *material* care, such as providing goods and services for the child, and *social* care, e.g. supporting the child's social network. Noteworthy is that breadwinning per se is not included in this category. A second auxiliary domain is process responsibility, which refers to activities like planning, processing information and 'parental consciousness', such as taking initiative and keeping an eye on what needs to be done. Pleck emphasizes that 'process responsibility [refers] to a father's monitoring that *his child's needs* for the first four components of involvement are being met, as distinct from the extent to which the father meets those needs himself' (Pleck 2010 p. 67, our emphasis). Three aspects of these general discourses of fathering are crucial when studying fathers who perpetrate IPV. First, fathers' care is defined as something that goes beyond being the child's playmate-teacher, being a disciplinarian or even being disengaged (Jain *et al.* 1996). Second, the idea that fathers are different from mothers seems to be well rooted (Hobson 2002), even in countries such

as Sweden with general and well-established discourses about active, engaged and sensitive fatherhood (Plantin *et al.* 2000; Johansson 2009). This difference – in reality and in rhetoric – often makes fathers 'co-parents' (Pleck & Pleck 1997; Eriksson & Hester 2001). Furthermore, public policy that promotes a fathering ideal characterized by high expectations (as has been found in Sweden by Klinth & Johansson 2010) does not preclude people having low parenting expectations when it comes to fathers perpetrating IPV (as has been found among Swedish family law secretaries by Eriksson 2007). Finally, research to this end has mostly focused on fathers' absence and lack of engagement (Saracho & Spodek 2008). Fathers affect children through their absence, but this absence need not in itself mean that the child is neglected (see Dubowitz *et al.* 2000). Whether any particular father, present or absent, is engaged, caring and responsible, or is neglectful, is therefore an empirical question.

Neglect can have severe short- and long-term harmful effects on children's well-being and development (Hildyard & Wolfe 2002; Holt *et al.* 2008). However, neglect is difficult to define, as there are no clear-cut, cross-cultural standards for desirable or minimally adequate child-rearing practices (Gaudin 1999). One of several ongoing debates about neglect concerns the relative benefits of a parent focus and a child focus (Dubowitz *et al.* 2005), or as Tang (2008 p. 356) describes it, 'whether to frame child neglect as a child's unmet needs or as omissions in parental behaviour'. This debate is discussed later in this paper.

In conclusion, research about fathers perpetrating IPV has mainly focused on what these fathers do and do not do for their children, the risk factors, and the characteristics and behaviour of the fathers, as well as on their constructions of their own parenthood. Research about care and neglect from the point of view of children living in these types of families is quite limited; however, it is of vital importance for understanding the relations between IPV, care and neglect. Furthermore, there is a need to treat IPV and neglect not as separate phenomena, but as possibly co-existing in a family and both afflicting the same child (Hamby *et al.* 2010), and thus demanding joint handling by the social services.

## METHOD

Data were obtained by means of qualitative interviews. The qualitative approach aimed to identify

fatherly parenting practices as perceived and described by children exposed to IPV.

### Purposive criterion sampling strategy

The respondents were recruited from four women's shelters (*kvinnohus*) in Sweden. The children were selected using purposive criterion sampling (cf. Marlow 2000). The criteria were that the child: (i) had been exposed to the father's violence against the mother; (ii) was 8–12 years of age; (iii) had been evaluated by the staff as not being in such an immediate state of crisis that an interview may be harmful' and, finally, (iv) could speak Swedish well enough to be interviewed.

The shelter staff briefly informed mothers of children meeting the criteria about the study and asked if they would like more information. If so, the researcher informed the mother about the study at greater length. After considering the advisability of her child participating, she declined or consented on behalf of the child. For those who consented, the place and time for the interview were set based on the mother's judgement of what would be safe and minimally stressful for the child. On the day of the interview, the mother signed a written consent form. With the mother present, the child was informed about the study and invited to participate. The children were told that interviews were being held with children who had lived at a shelter and they were informed of their right to terminate their participation in the study at any time. All the children who were asked volunteered to participate. They received no financial or other compensation.

The sample size was decided during the course of the series of interviews based on data saturation and the effort it would involve to take contact with new families and organize safe and ethical circumstances for the interviews. The data collection resulted in a sample of three girls and seven boys.

### Interviews

A low-standardization, low-structure interview guide with open-ended questions was used (cf. Andersson 1998). It consisted of an introduction and invitations to talk about three main themes: 'Please, tell me about your father', 'Please, tell me about fathers', 'Please, tell me about violence' and a conclusion. To help the children focus, the themes were also concretized by word-cards (labelled 'my father', 'fathers' and 'violence', respectively). The children's accounts were fol-

lowed up by open-ended questions based on the child's account and manner of expression. As the asymmetry of informer-researcher encounters is especially great in child interviews, special attention was given to adapting to the situation and minimizing researcher bias (cf. Andersson 1998). In particular, to minimize the risk of the interview influencing the child to express connections between 'fathers and violence', care was taken to invite the children to describe first each theme separately. Thereafter, the nature of possible connections was investigated through further questions. The researcher did not use the word 'violence' before each interview; however, the children's mothers may have done so. The interviewer was a trained social worker with experience of clinical youth work. The interviews took place in a quiet and separate room at the shelter, in the child's home or at the university. They lasted between 20 and 57 minutes (average 42) and were audio recorded. To help the children feel safe, the mothers were asked to stay in an adjacent room during the interviews. At the time of the interviews, most of the children had regular contact with their fathers.

### Process of analysis

To obtain an overview of the transcribed interview material as a whole, both authors read the interviews several times. The first step of analysis was to identify key concepts in prior research to be used as initial categories for coding the children's descriptions. The concepts identified were fatherly care (including engagement and responsibility, as stated previously) and neglect, respectively. Second, in line with the process of directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon 2005), the interview material was divided into meaning units, which were condensed to abstract their underlying meaning. Both the existing theoretical concepts and each interview as a whole were taken into account in the abstracting process. Third, these condensed meaning units were coded into one of the two key categories. Fourth, the categorized meaning units were formulated in terms of three empirically based themes: (i) fathers' direct and indirect contributions to the child's well-being; (ii) fathers' presence/absence; and (iii) fathers' and mothers' contributions to the child's well-being. The content of each of these themes was then theoretically related to the initial categories of care and neglect, which provided a more subtle understanding of the theoretical content of the concept of neglect. The validity of the process and the outcome of the interpretation were strengthened by

explicitly, constantly and actively seeking out and addressing contradictions within each child's account and between the interviews. Accounts contradicting the suggested interpretations and conclusions were used to stimulate alternative and more comprehensive interpretations (cf. Silverman 2000). In the final phase of analysis, we returned to the concept of neglect to seek to understand the inherent meaning of the possible relationships among what we had found within the themes. In the results section of this paper, the findings of the analysis of the material as a whole are presented and illustrated with excerpts from the child interviews. The themes identified in the interviews are not mutually exclusive, and any given child may have described several of these aspects. In order to preserve their anonymity, the respondents have been given fictive names.

## RESULTS

Three main themes constitute the results of this study. First, in the children's descriptions of their fathers' presence in their home, he is not an engaged provider of care. Second, in the children's general descriptions of how mothers and fathers fill complementary roles or functions for the child, parenthood seems in practice to mean that the mother is the caregiver and provider of (almost) everything the child may need. Third, in the children's descriptions, a mere absence of violence seems to be judged 'good enough' fathering.

### Father's presence does not guarantee his providing care

With one exception, all of the children in the study define some of their fathers' actions as violent. Although using violence does not preclude the possibility of a father providing care for the child (cf. Sternberg *et al.* 1994), the interviews in this study reveal a rather strong tendency among the children to describe their father in terms of a lack of care. In the interviews, this lack of care does not, however, appear to be a result of his absence from the children's home or everyday life. On the contrary, these fathers seem quite accessible – in a physical sense – to their children. However, these depictions reveal very little about the quality of the presence – or rather, many describe the presence of a father in the home, but one who interacts or participates very little in family life:

Tom: He doesn't eat with us, he just sits at the computer and eats.

Thus in the children's descriptions, their fathers seem to spend quite a lot of time in the home, and are hence physically present in their children's lives in the sense that so-called 'absent fathers' are not.

Some children in the study described what is good about their father:

Tom: The best thing? That's when he's usually nice. [. . .] Then he usually eats with us, is with us, talks to us, plays, jokes around. Things like that.

Describing a man who has used violence against his spouse as 'usually nice' is quite common among child witnesses. However, activities such as eating with the family, talking to the children or even playing with them, do not in themselves qualify as providing care, and the children do not perceive them as such either. Rather, eating and talking with his family would seem like a minimum of courtesy. Apart from this child's mention of 'play', which could be an expression of the 'intense activity with the child' mentioned by Saracho & Spodek (2008), positive paternal contributions to their children's well-being are absent in the children's descriptions – at least in relation to what the children wish for.

Being physically present could entail a readiness to respond to a child's needs *when necessary*. For example, it is possible to monitor children and be available to answer questions or address problems they may face even while not directly interacting with them. Thus, what may at first sight seem like distance may include either monitoring or guiding children at a distance or being prepared for needs that may emerge. As described by the children; however, the distance seems instead to be related to a second common theme in the interviews, namely that the fathers do not seem to do very much at all – apart from watching TV. On the contrary, the predominant picture is of a father who is lazy and/or shirks responsibility from the children's point of views. This is primarily exemplified by the children having to do 'adult chores', while their father does not:

Belinda: You know, my father gets very angry rather easily. He doesn't do very much himself, although he asks us to do a lot of things. Like, we do the dishes, while he's sitting watching TV and such. [. . .] And then he's not at home very often because he works all the time. [. . .] He gets angry easily and demands a lot of things, but he doesn't do anything himself. [. . .] There are a lot of fathers that don't do very much, but what's unusual about him is that he gets angry very easily and doesn't want to do anything himself almost all the time. [. . .] Father [. . .] doesn't want to do anything, always watches TV by himself, and you have to take care of your sibling yourself, and you aren't allowed to do anything almost.

Such depictions illustrate that, from the children's perspectives, the problems with their fathers may not only concern what they do – such as using violence – but also what they do not do, things that the children imply are adult responsibilities that they expect their parents to deal with. Teaching, guiding and monitoring may be acts of parental care, but in this study, the children instead describe being required to do chores while father watches TV. This might instead be a way of displaying power rather than of teaching, a way of restricting them without explaining why, which – especially when combined with irritability – is an act of control rather than of guiding and monitoring. Saracho & Spodek (2008) do not even consider 'working all the time' to be fatherly care for the child. This may be controversial, but it makes sense, as there is no guarantee that money earned is spent to contribute to the child's well-being.

Another general trend in the children's descriptions is how they can not trust their fathers, even in situations not described as involving violence or the exertion of direct power over the child:

Belinda: As soon as they get divorced they don't talk at all, then they do more things with the children, to keep them with the fathers. They make the children want to stay. For example, they take them for rides and do many things.

Interviewer: Do they both do that?

Belinda: Yes. But the mothers talk to them more. They don't just do it to make the children live with them. It's more that they think it's better for the children to decide for themselves. Rather than making them live there.

Tomi: [My father] lies to people. That is, he says, 'Well, it's like this, I tried to hold her, but she . . . She tries to break things, that's why I hold her'. He abuses . . . He abuses her and lies.

Here, children describe their father as dishonest and/or as trying to manipulate them rather than trying to guide them in accordance with the child's own wishes or understanding of a situation. This implies that the children must evaluate and adapt to their father rather than having a father who attends to their needs.

### **Complementary parenting becomes 'mother provides all'**

As mentioned earlier, care can be exhibited in a parent's responsiveness to the child. In this material, however, the children describe how they can not rely on their fathers. While the previous descriptions of fathers' laziness and lack of responsibility refer to

more hands-on aspects of parental care, this is more of a relational aspect of fatherhood.

During the interviews, the children were asked to describe what fathers *in general* are like, and the descriptions – mainly sitting and watching TV when at home – have a lot in common with their own fathers:

Interviewer: What is the most common thing for fathers to do?

Petri: Watch TV. [. . .] They mostly sit at home. Or go to friends a lot.

Rasmus: (Fathers don't participate in play because) They don't have the time. That is, when they come home, they have to sit in front of the TV and watch the news or something like that.

Thus, the children's descriptions of fathers in general seem rather similar to their descriptions of their own fathers. What, then, can fathers contribute, according to the children? If the children have picked up something of the cultural norms and expectations of involved fathers, one may expect that even if they have little experience of their own father's care, they may have ideas about how fathers in general could or should contribute. The finding in this material is that the children describe fathers as possible back-ups to mothers:

Interviewer: In what ways are fathers good (to have)?

Daniel: Well, there are many things . . . An extra person if, how do you say, mother goes away, so that you don't end up alone or something like that.

Such descriptions imply, however, that as long as mothers provide for the child, the role of the father is of little importance. Also, just because the children view fathers as back-ups in this way does not always mean they think this back-up can be relied on:

Belinda: Fathers are good because sometimes perhaps the mothers can't help. Then the fathers can help with different things. Sometimes the mothers, like, aren't able to help with sums in the maths book and then you can go to the fathers. They aren't equally good at different things. And they behave differently. You can see the differences between the fathers and mothers [. . .] the mothers help more. They help even though they can't sometimes. The fathers say, 'No, I can't help and so I won't'. Or like, 'No, I'm not up to it. I'm not up to driving the children to school' or something like that. They almost think more about themselves.

Thus, Belinda describes fathers as putting themselves before their children. This can sometimes be necessary for parents and does not in itself exclude the possibility of providing care. Nevertheless, in the context of an overall description of the role of fathers as back-ups to mothers, it is problematic. The whole

point of a back-up is to be someone to trust if the first option fails. Here, the backup does not seem very trustworthy from the child's point of view.

Hence, in the interview material, mothers appear not as only primary parents or caregivers but almost as the *only parent* in practice. Some children's descriptions are quite clear about 'parent' equalling 'mother':

Daniel: [Compared to fathers] mothers, I think, have the most to do with the children, since they're the ones who usually bring them up. Since it's almost like . . . it's just their children. When they're growing up and so on, it's often like that.

Thus, the children's expressed expectations of what fathers may contribute to their children's well-being are rather low. In theory, mothers and fathers can take on complementary parenting responsibilities and focus on different needs of the child. In the children's descriptions in this material; however, such a division of responsibility for the child's well-being seems instead to lead to the mother taking all the responsibility and the father not having to take any.

### An absence of violence becomes 'good-enough fathering'

Considering the sample in this study, it is no surprise that the children attribute violence primarily to men and fathers. Some of the children are quite clear about men being more violent than women, and about fathers being responsible for most of the violence at home:

Petri: Fathers use violence the most. More than mothers. They're always the ones who start the divorce and such. They might hit people. And then they divorce because they can't live together, or they have different opinions and maybe quarrel every day.

This, however, does not lead them to the conclusion that all – or even necessarily most – men or fathers do use violence. Rather, many children describe two quite distinct groups of fathers:

Tomi: Some [people] don't use violence. Some do. And sometimes they don't dare to say.

Interviewer: What is the difference between those who use violence and those who do not?

Tomi: Those who don't use violence, they are good fathers, and those who use it, you can tell that they are no good.

Considering the importance of such categories of fathers, one may then expect the children to reveal rather high expectations of the care provided by the 'good' or even the 'regular' fathers. However, when asked, some children instead equate 'nice' with non-violent:

Interviewer: What do you know about regular dads, then?

Melvin: That they are kind, they don't hit people and such. That they do nice things. They never hit, do they.

However, for many children, getting them to concretize such features or actions requires asking them many questions. As an illustration, after having been asked seven times to exemplify what he means by fathers 'being nice', Melvin comes up with:

Interviewer: Mm. . . What is the best thing about fathers do you think?

Melvin: That they are nice. [ . . . ]  
[ . . . ]

Interviewer: What do they do when they help out? Help out in what way?

Melvin: Help out with anything.

Interviewer: Like. . . ?

Melvin: Help to write something that you can't.

Thus, if (i) it is important for the children to distinguish the good fathers from the bad ones and (ii) they have vague ideas about what constitutes a good father, then the absence of violence may be interpreted as 'good enough'.

## DISCUSSION

The results show that the children describe their fathers as hardly contributing to their care and that instead of caring, some of the fathers exert (negative) control, are violent and display ignorance of the child's needs. The results show that according to the children's descriptions, their fathers' mere presence in their everyday life does not seem to guarantee them his care. On the contrary, in the interviews, the fathers are described as lazy, demanding and manipulative. Thus, the described absence of their father's care is compensated neither by the children describing their father as monitoring or guiding them, nor by the children describing their father as a reliable *potential* advisor, guide or caregiver. Instead, experiences of fathers' efforts and responsibility for making sure that their children feel good about themselves, feel confident and important, and are looked after (fed, clothed, etc.) are absent in most of the interviews. Moreover, it is not only care in the form of direct engagement, accessibility, or responsiveness that is absent in the children's depictions, but also the father's responsibility for the child's general well-being. Thus, the results of this analysis of aspects of fathers' care in descriptions among children whose

fathers have subjected the mothers to IPV generate an understanding that raises questions about the expectations of care from fathers.

This study has some limitations. Obviously, the sample is small and, like in any interview, the answers are an effect of the questions posed. The study is limited to children who – in addition to the IPV – have experienced living at a women's shelter, which may have legitimized their talking more about their fathers' violence than their care. Further, it is limited to the children's descriptions. In interpreting those descriptions, great caution must be taken not to draw conclusions based on features in the material that may only be because of their limited verbal and cognitive abilities. If observed by an outsider, more caring activities might have been recognized. Finally, we want to stress that this study says nothing about how the children may have described their mothers' care. It is possible that the children would perceive themselves as neglected by their mother or as taken care of by her. However, more importantly, the children's perceived relationships with both their fathers and their mothers – as well as their mothers' care – may have affected their perception of the care of their fathers. In addition, the violence they have experienced may have influenced their interpretation of their fathers' care. Bearing these limitations in mind, we believe that recognizing how children exposed to IPV perceive and present their situation can contribute to the discussion about neglect.

How, then, are the results to be interpreted in relation to the research previously done on children exposed to IPV and child neglect? In connecting these results to previous research, we aim to stress the child's perspective.

First, neglect is often defined as failure to provide for the child's needs (Dubowitz *et al.* 1993). While not always explicitly stated, we believe this includes both the needs of children in general and the *individual* child's needs. Exposure to IPV has been found to be a significant risk factor for children developing posttraumatic stress disorder (Lang & Smith Stover 2008) and various other kinds of psychological problems (Jaffe *et al.* 2002; Wolfe *et al.* 2003; Davies & Cummings 2006), as well as insecure attachment to their parents (Levendosky *et al.* 2003). Furthermore, many child witnesses to IPV report feeling sad and afraid (Mullender *et al.* 2002). This, along with the interview excerpts reported previously, means that a child exposed to IPV might have exceptional experiences of distrustful and aversive parental behaviour, including unmet needs for consistency and trustworthiness, and for help in forming a positive self-image.

Thus, one can assume that a child exposed to IPV may have needs that *exceed* those of children in general when it comes to sensitive and non-manipulative parenting.

Second, Dubowitz (2007) refers to 'the grey area of neglect'. We propose the term 'relative neglect', as an analogy to the concept of 'relative poverty'. The latter suggests that an individual who has a home and food to eat may not be considered poor from a global perspective, but can be considered poor if he or she is unable to participate in the local community on the same premises as others because of financial shortcomings, as this may have negative implications for self-esteem, cause feelings of shame, etc. In Sweden, there is broad political and popular support for engaged and caring fathering, promoting fathers taking parental leave and engaging equally with the mothers in raising and fostering their children (Klinth & Johansson 2010), and there are policies to stimulate fathers to contribute to childcare. Hence, we argue that a child who is physically, medically, materially and emotionally provided for by its mother, may, because of cultural expectations of engaged and sensitive fathers still feel neglected by its father. An absent and/or disengaged father might be less of a problem for a child in a society where it is the norm that the mother is the sole caretaker. From this point of view, the laziness and dishonesty of the fathers described by the children in this study could be defined as such 'relative neglect'. However, the interviews do not make clear whether the children do expect such engagement and sensitivity from their fathers. Rather, the prior presence of violence seems to prevent their expecting more than its mere absence. Thus, although having been exposed to IPV can be used as an argument for the child needing more care (as suggested previously), such exposure instead seems to diminish the child's own expectations concerning the perpetrator's caring behaviour.

Third, Dubowitz (2007) argues for a *child-based* definition of neglect, focusing on whether or not the child's needs are met in total (regardless of who is the provider of care). According to such a definition, despite evidence about severe deficits in their fathers' provision of care, the children in this study might not be neglected, as their mothers may provide for them. We claim that when it comes to children exposed to IPV in practice, such a definition of neglect sustains the idea of fatherhood as negotiable (Bekkengen 2002), meaning that fathers have the possibility to choose the level and kind of responsibilities they will have for their children, while the parenthood of mothers is 'unconditional'. Many researchers have

noted these double standards in men's and women's parenting practices (for an overview see Elizabeth *et al.* 2010). We argue that the protection or care offered by mothers should not be used in ways that exempt fathers from liability. For helping children exposed to IPV, defining neglect on the basis of child outcomes, according to what they are given in sum, is insufficient. For a child exposed to IPV, the caregivers' trustworthiness and child-centred (as opposed to self-centred) behaviour are *more* important than for an average child, and thus a different definition of neglect must be considered.

To sum up, being exposed to IPV and to ideas about children's welfare being the responsibility of their mothers makes children unable to view their fathers as responsible for their well-being. In such situations, the responsibility of the child welfare services becomes very significant. By failing to hold fathers responsible for their children's wellbeing, child welfare services ignore the potential risks and assets for both mothers and children (Peled 2000; Brown *et al.* 2009; cf. Lapierre 2008; Humphreys & Absler 2011). A violent father may be different from other fathers not only because of his use of violence, but also through his possible lack of interest in his children. If he then stops using violence, this may not be enough to categorize him as 'a good parent', because there is a risk of both absolute and relative neglect from the child's point of view. This places extra demands on social services personnel and others to ensure that he not only stops his violence and takes responsibility for the damage it may have caused, but also help to improve his overall parenting practices. Therefore, we argue that, although a child-based conceptualization of neglect may be *generally* beneficial for children, it is not always the most *child-friendly* one. For children exposed to IPV, we argue that a child-friendly definition of neglect is one based on an assessment of the care provided by each parent in relation to the individual child's needs. We believe that defining neglect in terms of what each parent does or does not do could help professionals to demand involved, engaged and sensitive care from both parents when children can not or will not make such demands themselves.

## REFERENCES

Andersson, G. (1998) Barnintervju som forskningsmetod [Child interview as research method]. *Nordisk Psykologi*, **50** (1), 18–41.

- Bancroft, L. (2002). The batterer as a parent. *Synergy*, **6** (1), 6–8. (Newsletter of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges).
- Bancroft, L., Silverman, J.G. & Ritchie, D. (2012) *The Batterer as Parent. Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Family Dynamics*, 2nd edn. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Beeble, M.L., Bybee, D. & Sullivan, C.M. (2007) Abusive men's use of children to control their partners and ex-partners. *European Psychologist*, **12**, 54–61. doi:10.1027/1016-9040.12.1.54.
- Bekkengen, L. (2002) *Man får välja: om föräldraskap och föräldraledighet i arbetsliv och familjeliv* [Men can choose: about parenthood and parental leave in work and family life]. Dissertation, Karlstad University, Karlstad.
- Brown, L., Callahan, M., Strega, S., Walmsley, C. & Dominelli, L. (2009) Manufacturing ghost fathers: the paradox of father presence and absence in child welfare. *Child & Family Social Work*, **14**, 25–34. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2008.00578.x.
- Cater, Å. (2004) *Negotiating normality and deviation – father's violence against mother from children's perspectives*. Örebro Studies in Social Work 5. Dissertation, Örebro University, Örebro.
- Cater, Å. (2007) Children's meaning-conciliation of their fathers' violence related to fathers and violence in general. *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, **8**, 41–55. doi:10.1080/14043850701289538.
- Davies, P.T. & Cummings, E.M. (2006) Interparental discord, family process, and developmental psychopathology. In: *Developmental Psychopathology, Vol. 3: Risk, Disorder, and Adaptation*, 2nd edn (eds D. Cicchetti & D.J. Cohen), pp. 86–128. Wiley & Sons, New York.
- Dubowitz, H. (2007) Understanding and addressing the 'neglect of neglect': digging into the molehill. Invited commentary. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, **31**, 603–606. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2007.04.002.
- Dubowitz, H., Black, M., Starr, R. & Zuravin, S. (1993) A conceptual definition of child neglect. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, **20**, 8–26.
- Dubowitz, H., Black, M.M., Kerr, M.A., Starr, R.H. & Harrington, D. (2000) Fathers and child neglect. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, **154**, 135–141.
- Dubowitz, H., Newton, R.R., Litrownik, A.J., Lewis, T., Briggs, E.C., Thompson, R. *et al.* (2005) Examination of a conceptual model of child neglect. *Child Maltreatment*, **10**, 173–189. doi:10.1177/1077559505275014.
- Elizabeth, V., Gavey, N. & Tolmie, J. (2010) Between a rock and a hard place: resident mothers and the moral dilemmas they face during custody disputes. *Feminist Legal Studies*, **18**, 253–274. doi:10.1007/s10691-010-9159-9.
- Eriksson, M. (2007) Fäders våld mot kvinnor och barns situation: interventioner på olika planeter? In: *Barn som upplever våld. Nordisk forskning och praktik* [Children experiencing violence. Nordic research and practice] (ed. M. Eriksson), pp. 210–235. Gothia Förlag, Stockholm.
- Eriksson, M. & Hester, M. (2001) Violent men as good-enough fathers?: a look at England and Sweden. *Violence Against Women*, **7**, 779–798. doi:10.1177/10778010122182730.

- Gaudin, J.M. (1999) Child neglect. Short-term and long-term outcomes. In: *Neglected Children. Research, Practice and Policy* (ed. H. Dubowitz), pp. 89–108. SAGE, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Guille, L. (2004) Men who batter and their children: an integrated review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, **9**, 129–163. doi:10.1016/S1359-1789(02)00119-2.
- Hamby, S., Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. & Ormrod, R. (2010) The overlap of witnessing partner violence with child maltreatment and other victimizations in a nationally representative survey of youth. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, **34**, 734–741. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2010.03.001.
- Harne, L. (2011) *Violent Fathering and the Risks to Children. The Need for Change*. Policy Press, Bristol.
- Hester, M. & Radford, L. (1996) *Domestic Violence and Child Contact in England and Denmark*. Policy Press, Bristol.
- Hildyard, K.L. & Wolfe, D.A. (2002) Child neglect: developmental issues and outcomes. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, **26**, 679–695. doi:10.1016/S0145-2134(02)00341-1.
- Hobson, B. (ed.) (2002) *Making Men into Fathers: Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Holt, S., Buckley, H. & Whelan, S. (2008) The impact of exposure to domestic violence on children and young people: a review of the literature. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, **32**, 797–810. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2008.02.004.
- Hsieh, H.-F. & Shannon, S.E. (2005) Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, **15**, 1277–1288. doi:10.1177/1049732305276687.
- Humphreys, C. & Absler, D. (2011) History repeating: child protection responses to domestic violence. *Child & Family Social Work*, **16**, 464–473. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2011.00761.x.
- Jaffe, S., Moffitt, T., Caspi, A., Taylor, A. & Arseneault, L. (2002) Influence of adult domestic violence on children's internalizing and externalizing problems: an environmentally informative twin study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, **41** (9), 1095–1103. doi:10.1097/00004583-200209000-00010.
- Jain, A., Belsky, J. & Crnic, K. (1996) Beyond fathering behaviors: types of dads. *Journal of Family Psychology*, **10**, 431–442. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.10.4.431.
- Johansson, T. (2009) *Familjeliv* [Family life]. Liber, Malmö.
- Klinth, R. & Johansson, T. (2010) *Nya svenska fäder* [New Swedish fathers]. Boréa, Umeå.
- Lang, J.M. & Smith Stover, C. (2008) Symptom patterns among youth exposed to intimate partner violence. *Journal of Family Violence*, **23**, 619–629. doi:10.1007/s10896-008-9184-5.
- Lapierre, S. (2008) Mothering in the context of domestic violence: the pervasiveness of a deficit model of mothering. *Child & Family Social Work*, **13**, 454–463. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2008.00563.x.
- Lapierre, S. (2010) More responsibilities, less control: understanding the challenges and difficulties involved in mothering in the context of domestic violence. *British Journal of Social Work*, **40**, 1434–1451. doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcp080.
- Levendosky, A., Huth-Bocks, A., Shapiro, D. & Semel, M. (2003) The impact of domestic violence on the maternal-child relationship and pre-school-age children's functioning. *Journal of Family Psychology*, **17**, 275–288. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.17.3.275.
- Marlow, C. (2000) *Research Methods for Generalist Social Work*, 3rd edn. Brooks/Cole Thomson Learning, Cambria.
- Mullender, A., Hague, G., Imam, U., Kelly, L., Malos, E. & Regan, L. (2002) *Children's Perspectives on Domestic Violence*. SAGE, London; Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Peled, E. (1998) The experience of living with violence for pre-adolescent children of battered women. *Youth & Society*, **29**, 395–430.
- Peled, E. (2000) Parenting by men who abuse women: issues and dilemmas. *British Journal of Social Work*, **30**, 25–36.
- Plantin, L., Månsson, S.-A. & Kearney, J. (2000) Mäns föräldraskap: om faderskap och manlighet i Sverige och England [The parenting of men: about fatherhood and manliness in Sweden and England]. *Sociologisk tidskrift*, **7**, 24–42.
- Pleck, E.H. & Pleck, J.H. (1997) Fatherhood ideals in the United States: historical dimensions. In: *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, 3rd edn (ed. M.E. Lamb), pp. 33–48. Wiley, New York.
- Pleck, J.H. (2010) Paternal involvement. Revised conceptualization and theoretical linkages with child outcomes. In: *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, 5th edn (ed. M.E. Lamb), pp. 58–94. Wiley, Hoboken, NJ.
- Saracho, O.N. & Spodek, B. (2008) Fathers: the 'invisible' parents. *Early Child Development and Care*, **178**, 821–836. doi:10.1080/03004430802352244.
- Silverman, D. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research – A Practical Handbook*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Sternberg, K.J., Lamb, M.E., Greenbaum, C., Dawud, S.C., Rosa, M. & Lorey, F. (1994) The effects of domestic violence on children's perceptions of their perpetrating and nonperpetrating parents. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, **17**, 779–795. doi:10.1177/016502549401700412.
- Tang, C.M. (2008) Working toward a conceptual definition of child neglect. *Journal of Health and Human Services Administration*, **31**, 356–384.
- Toth, S.L., Cicchetti, D. & Jungmeen, K. (2002) Relations among children's perceptions of maternal behavior, attributional styles, and behavioral symptomatology in maltreated children. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, **30**, 487–500.
- Wolfe, D.A., Crooks, C.V., Lee, V., McIntyre-Smith, A. & Jaffe, P.G. (2003) The effects of children's exposure to domestic violence: a meta-analysis and critique. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, **6**, 171–186. doi:10.1023/A:1024910416164.