

Position Statement: Fathering programs for men who use family violence

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No to Violence (NTV) believes that fathering programs for men who use family violence have a key role to play in supporting men to fulfil their role as a non-abusive father and parent, to increase women and children's safety and to support men to have respectful relationships with their partner/ex-partner.

Fathering programs, along with other interventions for men who use family violence, form part of a growing suite of interventions available to men to end their violence and abuse. NTV supports well developed, evidence-based programs that are integrated into a broader system response aimed at improving the lives of women and children while keeping men who perpetrate family violence visible and engaged.

As new perpetrator interventions emerge we must ensure these interventions meet standards, have been developed from an evidence base and complement existing responses. As the Peak body for Men's Behaviour Change Programs in Victoria and NSW and with members across Australia, it is our role to ensure that interventions targeted at men meet the principles of safety, accountability and change.

NTV welcomes all perpetrator interventions that connect to other parts of the family violence system, makes the work more integrated, increases the safety of women and children and holds men accountable.

Introduction

Men's use of family violence has widespread and lasting impacts on women and children, in particular on the mother-child bond and family functioning, and continues long after families have separated (Pennell, Rikard and Sanders-Rice 2014). Research indicates children can feel unsafe to express their feelings, perceive their fathers as controlling, absent or irresponsible, and often hold a sense of responsibility for managing their father's behaviour (Broady et. al. 2017: 329). In considering the impact of family violence on children, the Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria highlighted the issue of fathers using the family law system to continue abusive behaviours, by 'making repeated parenting applications in order to punish the child's mother or as a means of controlling her...[which] can also be highly stressful for children' (State of Victoria 2016a: 108).

Community narratives have historically attributed responsibility for the safety, wellbeing and overall development of children with the mother, resulting in a gender bias in parenting interventions, which have focussed on working with mothers to be 'better' parents, while overlooking the behaviours and responsibilities of the perpetrating parent. By ignoring fathers in interventions, opportunities to hold perpetrators to account have been missed and their role as a responsible and safe parent remains invisible. In response to this issue, significant work has progressed to develop parenting interventions

for men who use family violence, including targeted group work as well as practice frameworks to support workers within child protection and family services to engage with fathers who use family violence.

Engaging with perpetrators as fathers

Engaging and intervening with men who use family violence who are birth parents or have an ongoing parenting role is an important component of promoting the safety, wellbeing and development of the child and supporting the non-offending parent to keep the child safe. Research has found that the perpetrator's role as a parent can be a significant motivator for behavioural change (Broady et. al. 2017; State of Victoria 2016a: 269). The Royal Commission into Family Violence noted that 'for men new parenthood is a time that they may be more open to receiving information and skills development, as well as to considering alternative models of masculinity as they move into a new parental role' (State of Victoria 2016a: 123).

While Men's Behaviour Change Programs address the topics of the impact of violence on women and children, developing safe and respectful relationships with current and former partners and children, and developing co-parenting skills, these form only part of the overarching focus for the group intervention. Most commonly, Men's Behaviour Change Programs will use the role of fathers as an engagement and motivational tool for change. In the Victorian context, fathering programs have been developed both within the specialist men's family violence sector and within child protection, family services, relationship counselling services and broader community groups. These groups have varying approaches for working with fathers who have used family violence. Within the current Victorian context, the Caring Dads program is a well-known example of a specialist fathering program being piloted across several sites in Victoria.

Caring Dads is a stand-alone 17-week program for fathers who have abused or neglected their children or exposed them to family violence (Scott et. al. 2014; State of Victoria 2016b: 270). It does not require that men have first attended a Men's Behaviour Change Program, and focusses on child-centred fathering, recognising and changing unhealthy and abusive fathering behaviours, co-parenting relationships and rebuilding trust (Scott et. al. 2014). Some specialist men's family violence services have also developed fathering programs designed for men who have attended a Men's Behaviour Change Program, focussing on parent-child relationships, co-parenting, cumulative harm, identifying and supporting resilience in children and understanding fathering (State of Victoria 2016b: 270).

Though limited, research on fathering in the context of family violence highlights a number of significant issues for consideration in designing and implementing interventions, particularly in terms of safety, understanding and accepting the impacts of family violence, motivation and readiness to change. Broady et. al.'s (2017) research highlights the range of self-disclosed parenting experiences amongst men who attended Men's Behaviour Change Programs, with responses ranging from denying any problems in their relationships with their children, considering themselves to be good fathers and that their use of family violence had little impact on their children, to acknowledging 'mistakes' in their parenting, often explaining this as a one-off (Broady et. al. 2017: 332). Peled and Perel (2006) draw attention to the potential of fathering interventions to be misused in a way to continue to the controlling and abusive behaviour, in particular when a man attempts to use his attendance at a program as 'proof of his competence as a father' (Peled and Perel 2006: 86). Furthermore, where men felt they were 'coming to a place where they could be trusted to develop meaningful relationships', they 'expressed an almost immeasurable frustration at not being given the opportunity to prove themselves' (Broady et. al. 2017: 334). Broady et. al. (2017) also found Men's Behaviour Change

Program participants held varied attitudes towards their current or former partner, ranging from wanting to restore their relationships to verbalising significant anger and resentment (Broady et. al. 2017: 335).

A specialised approach is required for addressing parenting with men who use family violence. Recommendation 87 of the Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria underpins some next steps in this work – to research, trial and evaluate interventions that focus on helping perpetrators understand the effects of violence on their children and to become better fathers.

Key practice considerations

As we continue to develop nuanced and specialised responses to men who use family violence, fathering interventions, including individual-based and group programs, represent one part of a wider suite of interventions that work to build upon each other over time and are mutually reinforcing.

As fathering can be a powerful component of men’s identities and relationships, interventions must be designed with the safety and wellbeing of women and children in mind and underpinned by a gendered understanding of family violence and the acknowledgement that family violence is a parenting choice. Underpinned by the key principles for perpetrator interventions, creating opportunities for accountability means that fathering programs with men who use family violence must be explicitly named as such and focus on abusive parenting and the impact of violence on children. This must be discussed and accepted by potential participants before entering a program.

Fathering programs, either mainstream or specialised, are not a replacement for Men's Behaviour Change Programs. While specialised programs such as Caring Dads also work to support men to engage in respectful, non-abusive interactions with partners, the content and focus of the interventions are different. Offering fathering interventions to men who use family violence prior to their attendance at a Men's Behaviour Change Program may have the unintended consequence of 'strengthen[ing men's] denial of the violence by seeming to reframe their problem as that of deficient parenting' (Peled and Perel 2006: 92). Therefore consideration should be given to when and how fathering programs “fit” as an intervention in the systems response to ending family violence.

In ensuring that fathering interventions are non-collusive and informed by the needs of mothers and children, programs should consider how the fathering intervention might engage with mothers and children. As fathering programs necessarily work within strengths-based approaches, it is critical to balance the risk of unintentional collusion.

Members’ Information

NTV welcomes hearing from its members. What do you think makes good fathering practice and programs in the context of ending men’s family violence?

For a list of programs we are aware of, see our website.

References

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