

# Snapshot

JULY 2009



## Responsible fatherhood

*Positively engaging fathers who have been involved in domestic abuse*

### MISSING DAD

- The United States is the world's leader in fatherless families.
- Nearly 40 percent of children in father-absent homes have not seen their fathers at all during the past year.
- More than half of all children who live in father-absent homes have never been to their father's house.

Domestic violence victims accounted for over 1 in 4 of all violent crime victims in 2001. Most domestic abuse victims—nearly 9 in 10—are women. Children who live in homes where domestic violence occurs can also suffer. It increases their risk of being victims of abuse and neglect and can lead to a variety of behavioral, social, emotional and cognitive problems, including being at risk of victimization and/or perpetrating as adults.

It is common for law enforcement and advocacy programs to encourage women who are victims of domestic violence to leave their homes to escape the violence. To further ensure safety, some jurisdictions mandate arrest and issue *no contact orders* forbidding the defendant from contacting the victim for a specific length of time.

While intending to protect the safety of victims, these practices also result in children being separated from their fathers, sometimes for long periods of time. However, research documents the important role of a father in a child's life, and there is growing recognition of the potential benefits of positively engaging fathers who have been involved in domestic abuse. This snapshot outlines

some of these benefits and describes common features of promising father-focused intervention programs that ensure accountability for the father and protect the safety of the child.

### Benefits of positive father involvement

Children who have secure and supportive relationships with their fathers benefit in their social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Potential benefits include:

- *Social development*  
Children of involved fathers are more likely to have positive peer relationships, maturity, and the ability to get along with others. They are also more likely to resolve conflicts on their own without aggression.
- *Emotional development*  
Children with a positive relationship with an involved father may have increased overall life satisfaction, reduced risk for depression, and improved stress management skills.
- *Cognitive development*  
School-aged children with an involved father perform better than

## Changing Behavior

### One program that's working

Caring Dads: Helping Fathers Value Their Children is one program that looks to repair relationships between fathers and their children when maltreatment and/or abuse to the mother have occurred. Caring Dads is a group intervention that helps fathers focus on their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors towards their children. It also provides education and strategies about ways to deal with frustration and anger. In an evaluation of the Caring Dads program, significant pre-post intervention differences were found in the father's hostility towards the child and angry responses to the child's behavior and family situations.

those whose fathers are not involved. They are more likely to score higher on standardized tests, enjoy school, and achieve a higher level of educational success.

Fathers who are involved with their children also benefit—they are less likely to die prematurely, have fewer hospital admissions, and may even feel less stress on the job.

While there continues to be a struggle of how to define what it means to be a positively involved father, Michael Lamb, noted author and researcher on this topic, proposed a three-part framework to consider:

**Engagement**—a father's experience of direct contact and shared interactions with his child in the form of caretaking, play or leisure.

**Accessibility**—a father's presence and availability to the child, irrespective of the nature or extent of interactions between father and child.

**Responsibility**—a father's understanding and meeting of his child's needs, including the provision of economic resources to the child, and the planning and organizing of children's lives.

### Father-focused intervention approaches

The experience of family violence can be extremely difficult and disturbing for children because the victim and aggressor are the child's caregivers and often the

people to whom they are most attached. Fathers are often less aware or unaware of the potential impact of family violence on their children. Building awareness of this impact among male perpetrators is an emerging way in which some domestic violence programs work with fathers to increase their empathy and influence behavior change.

In addition to increasing fathers' awareness of the impact of violence, many fatherhood programs attempt to repair relationships between fathers and their children and foster more parental involvement. Some provide education and strategies for dealing with frustration and anger, while others provide fathers with skills and tools they need to support their children, be part of their lives, and comply with child support requirements.

Although the benefits of father involvement on child development have been well documented, there are relatively few evidence-based practice models for guiding corrections, education and public health programs in successfully engaging fathers as active participants in their children's lives.

However, there are promising program intervention models that offer some insight about what works best in promoting involvement. Some programs include interventions focused on problem-solving family disruption, some offer direct services to fathers to get them connected to their communities, while others provide curriculum that empowers and educates fathers.

The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse has identified 10 features of effective fatherhood programs, namely:

- Incorporate teaching methods and materials that are culturally appropriate for fathers and populations being served.
- Select teachers and facilitators who believe in the program being implemented and provide them with relevant training and coaching.
- Have a high staff-participant ratio.
- Target curricula and set clear goals to be achieved by the program.
- Use theory-based approaches that have been effective in influencing parenting behaviors in other contexts.
- Employ a variety of teaching methods designed to focus on fathers as individuals and, in doing so, personalize the information.
- Allow sufficient time to complete important core program activities.
- Have staff who engage in one-on-one relationships with fathers.
- Provide incentives to engage fathers and families.
- Replicate curricula with fidelity.

## Safety first

It cannot be said enough, but the safety of the victim and child is of paramount importance. Intervention programs that strive to keep a father and child together may not be the appropriate approach for some families. Intensive therapy for a perpetrator's anger and parenting skills may need to occur before there is reunification with their child, for example.

Some initiatives promote safety and security for mother and child, while concurrently helping the father learn effective parenting skills. Some fatherhood programs support abusive fathers as they work on changing their behaviors and hold them accountable for their actions, in an effort to end violence in the home and community through outreach, education, and advocacy.

Evaluations of some of these programs demonstrate the benefits to participating fathers, such as increased self-confidence, decreased substance abuse, and improved relations with both their child and their child's mother. Because the research around father involvement is relatively new, evaluations of fatherhood programs are limited. Much more research is needed to determine which approaches work best while keeping in mind the father's behavioral patterns, criminal history, and willingness to change.

## Partnering

Individual community programs may not feel equipped to deal with the full array of issues and services that are needed when families experience violence in the home and resources for fathers are limited. Programs partnering together to provide their specialty services is a growing trend in working to positively engage fathers who have been involved in domestic violence.

Fathering After Violence (FAV) is a national initiative developed in 2002 that promotes safety and security for women and children by helping men to learn new skills to become better fathers and partners and to end their violent behaviors. Its mission is to end violence in the home and community through outreach, education, and advocacy. FAV partners with many different types of programs, such as domestic violence programs, shelters, victim services, supervised visitation centers, and the courts. The working collaborative behind the FAV Initiative (Family Violence Prevention Fund) developed the following guiding principles to inform its work:

- The safety of women and children is always our first priority.
- This initiative must be continually informed and guided by the experiences of battered women and their children.





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- This initiative does not endorse or encourage automatic contact between the offending fathers and their children or parenting partners.
- In any domestic violence intervention, there must be critical awareness of the cultural context in which parenting happens.
- Violence against women and children is a tool of domination and control used primarily by men and rooted in sexism and male entitlement.
- Abuse is a deliberate choice and a learned behavior and therefore can be unlearned.
- Some men choose to change their abusive behavior and heal their relationships, while others continue to choose violence.
- Working with fathers is an essential piece of ending violence against women and children.
- Fathers who have used violence need close observation to mitigate unintended harm.

The diverse needs of the family being served should be considered when determining the most suitable intervention strategies. Programs should promote respect and understanding of all people involved in family violence. Recognizing that strength-based programs for fathers have not been readily available, community organizations should be encouraged to collaborate among each other. Such collaborations may serve as a learning community and assist in the creation of materials and development of messaging that promote non-violent fatherhood. Ultimately, developing models of enhanced collaboration with domestic violence intervention and fatherhood programs and dialoguing with community partners about the benefits of involved fathers, even after violence, will benefit the children profoundly.

## Resources

Listed following resources were used to develop this publication.

American Coalition for Fathers and Children (ACFC) <http://acfc.org>

Lamb, Michael E. (1997). *The role of the father in child development*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons.

Lamb, M.E. (1987). *The father's role: Cross-cultural perspectives*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Prison Fellowship <http://www.prisonfellowship.org>

Promoting Responsible Fatherhood, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/index.shtml>

Author: Julie Atella, Wilder Research  
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