

## **Batterers As Fathers**

*Rethinking and Reconceptualizing Policy and Practice*

By David Mandel

Exploring the role that batterers play as fathers holds important significance for the members of the families who live with the abuse. Many battered women want their children to have a safe and positive relationship with their father even when he has been her abuser. Boyfriends and stepfathers who batter are often influential as a father figure in the lives of children. Driven by love and need, children may struggle to have a meaningful relationship with an abusive father well into adulthood. When a batterer does begin to address his abusive behavior, it is often because he is motivated to change for the sake of his children.

For governments, communities and agencies seeking the safest, most effective and comprehensive response to the impact domestic violence has in the lives of children, this key question remains to be solved: How best to address batterers who are both a caretaker of the children and the person exposing them to violence and abuse? To answer this question, we need to ask a series of other questions to reconsider and reconceptualize our current thinking and practices in social services, particularly child welfare. In our exploration of these questions we must consider both what we do “to” batterers and what we do “with” them.

Are we working towards making batterers more responsible and accountable for the well being and safety of children in their family?

This is one of the most fundamental questions we can ask if we want improve the response of social services to the intersection of children’s well being and domestic violence. In the last few years we have seen an exponential increase in the identification of domestic violence in child welfare cases. In general, this has been an important and long-needed advancement. Unfortunately, this has also led to increased pressure on battered women. Many battered women are told they must protect their children or face the possibility of losing them. Frequently this occurs without any significant and sustained efforts to directly address the behavior of the batterer father, stepfather or boyfriend.

Historic practice of child welfare primarily has held mothers more responsible than fathers for the safety and well being of their children. The systemic aspects of holding mothers more responsible have only begun to change around the country in the last few years. These changes are slow in coming. Cases are still opened in the name of the mother. Social workers meet and work with the mother more frequently. When service agreements are written up, they often place a greater number of expectations and primary responsibility for the safety of the children on the mother. When domestic violence is involved mothers are expected to get orders of protection and enforce them more than perpetrators are expected to abide by them.

These expectations are supported by the wider culture's standards for good parenting. For example, a man who works 60-80 hours a week to support his family has a reasonable chance of being considered a "good" father. Because we hold mothers to a higher expectation of day to day care and emotional involvement in their children's lives, women who work outside the home are still scrutinized about the quality of their parenting. This double standard, and others like it, can have a profound impact on how a social worker approaches issues of responsibility for parenting, child safety and well being.

Without the presence of effective batterer accountability strategies, any effort to increase the ability of child welfare agencies to identify and intervene in domestic violence cases will inevitably increase the revictimization of battered women. Effective batterer accountability strategies should be built upon an accurate data collection system that allows decision-makers to see and begin to understand the presence of batterers in an agency's caseload.

An accurate data profile helps begin to answer questions about how many batterers are involved in child welfare cases, what their relationship status with the mother of the children is, what their legal status with the children is, and what if any judicial involvement do they have? With accurate data, an agency could determine, for instance, if most batterers on a child protection caseload are also involved in criminal court. If there was a heavy overlap then a strong collaboration with the criminal justice system might significantly enhance child safety. Better data on batterers could help determine how many batterers are boyfriends without any legal or biological ties to the children in the home and how many are biological fathers. Without an accurate data profile, policy and programmatic decisions are being based on anecdotal information. Collecting data on batterers will also lead social workers to become more attentive to the presence and characteristics of batterers on their caseload.

Accurate data about batterers would also include research into the thinking and attitudes of batterers about their children. How do batterers think about their children in light of their violence? What do they notice about how their children are impacted by their behavior? What fears do they have about their children's future? How do their children figure into their decision making? How are all these things different for fathers as opposed to boyfriends and stepfathers? Answers to these types of questions would give us information that would be extremely useful in development of policy and treatment interventions.

Are we utilizing existing legal and social work processes to hold batterers accountable for their behavior?

Batterer accountability is essential to the mission of any child protection and welfare agency. It is impossible to claim that you are addressing the safety of children and mothers suffering from domestic violence without developing strategies to deal with the batterer. Instituting these strategies do not necessarily involve major changes in the law or new resources. Old problems need to be approached with fresh eyes. For instance, in

many jurisdictions, it is uncommon that one parent's parental rights are terminated without terminating the rights of the other parent. Perhaps in domestic violence cases, where the batterer remains a serious threat to the children and the mother has demonstrated ample commitment to her children's well being and safety, the batterer's parental rights can be terminated without effecting the mother's rights. This type of differential response could go a long way to removing a major injustice of the child protection system's response to domestic violence.

A sample scenario might look something like this (based on a real case): The state's child protective service agency becomes involved in a family because of domestic violence. The mother, who is also the victim, has no history of substance abuse and is acknowledged to be a good parent. The father has an extensive history of domestic violence, other criminal charges and substance abuse. The mother's concern for herself and her children has been demonstrated on numerous occasions. After father enters an inpatient court-ordered alcohol rehab program, mother becomes more open about the abuse and joins a support group for battered women. If the father upon exiting rehab continues his alcohol abuse and violence, the mother should not be penalized. She has demonstrated a willingness and ability to address the issue of domestic violence, especially when the batterer has been removed from the situation. At this point it should be the role of child protection to do everything in its power to keep the children safely with their mother by taking action against the father. If no other approaches work with the father and he remains a serious risk, then the child protection agency could move to terminate his parental rights.

These next two questions:

Are we teaching child protection and welfare workers how to talk to batterers who are fathers about the damage the violence does to their children?

Are we providing child protection personnel with the support, training and guidance they need to successfully, and safely, work with batterers?

bring us to the doorstep of this third and crucial question:

Do our policies and practices follow the most comfortable, familiar path to child safety: through the mother?

Batterers are a very difficult and scary population to deal with. This is true for battered women, their children and the social workers that are sent out into the field to protect them. Having gone out on a child protection investigation, I have some sense of the challenges and risks that social workers in the field face on a daily basis. At the same time it appears hypocritical to tell a battered woman to keep a batterer away from their children when the social worker is not able or willing to confront and/or work with the batterer directly.

This is not about assigning blame. This is about acknowledging the truth that when child protection agencies do not develop sound batterer accountability strategies, good and well meaning social workers and supervisors focus their attention on the mother. Working with the mother is familiar and comfortable for most social workers. In domestic violence situations this translates into a greater emphasis on the service agreement the mother signs with the child protection agency. When she fails to follow through on her agreement, possibly in large part because of the batterer's behavior, she is the one penalized. If the batterer shows up at the house, the mother is accused of failing to protect the children. This usually occurs even if the safest course of action for herself and the children was to let the batterer in when he showed up at the door.

Social workers should not be blamed for their apprehension about working directly with batterers. Without appropriate training, support and guidance from their agency, how can they be expected to effectively tackle such a difficult and challenging population? Often times they receive none of these things.

Preparing workers to address batterer accountability would include, but not be limited to (1) training workers to talk with batterers about their abusiveness and its impact on the children in the home, (2) instructing social work supervisors to support and guide their workers in addressing batterers and (3) providing social workers and their supervisors with guidance by giving high priority to batterer accountability in child protection protocols.

The physical and emotional safety of the social workers in the field would also need to be given special consideration. For safety sake, supervisors need to support workers going out in pairs when necessary. Engaging domestic violence perpetrators may produce strong emotional reactions from workers because of experiences of domestic violence in their family of origin or current relationship. Supervisors need to be on the look out for extreme negativity or optimism, aggressiveness or passivity in social workers. Any of these reactions may be an indication that a worker may need to address their own personal issues in order to become more effective with this population. Social workers and staff who are victims of domestic violence need to know that they can come forward without adverse risk to their careers. Social workers who are perpetrators of domestic violence need to know that their behavior in the home will have impact on their employment and could lead to being disciplined and/or terminated.

Workers need to be given the appropriate training to be able to talk to batterers about their violence. Over the past twenty years batterer intervention professionals have gained substantial knowledge about working to help batterers see and take responsibility for the consequences of their behaviors. These skills need to be made available to the child protection field. Workers need to learn how to deal with batterer denial and resistance in a direct and straightforward manner.

For instance, consider a circumstance where an abuser acknowledges that he acted abusively towards his girlfriend but claims that the children were not effected because they were not home. A social worker needs to know that they can still pursue a

conversation with the batterer about the impact of his behavior on the children by exploring other circumstances related to the incident. For example, if the girlfriend was bruised during the incident, how does he think the children reacted when they saw the bruise? If he was arrested and removed from the house, what did he tell the children about why he was gone? Child welfare workers need to be trained in these types of interviewing strategies so they feel more comfortable and effective working with batterers.

Are we creating community-based options for primary, secondary and tertiary prevention directed at the perpetration of battering?

Child protection agencies are not alone in their responsibility to display leadership and innovation in addressing the role batterers has in the lives of children. Other agencies and institutions can join in identifying and engaging men whose violence in the home is harming children. Developing successful and comprehensive prevention methodologies holds special importance for people of color and poor people who are inappropriately over-represented in the criminal justice and child protection systems. Creating resources, like batterer intervention programs, that can be accessed without an arrest or substantiation of child abuse or neglect might help with this imbalance and should be a strong priority.

The following is an example of what is possible in this area of prevention. For the last few years, the government in Western Australia has run a social marketing campaign targeted towards current and at-risk male perpetrators of domestic violence. Within two years they had received approximately 7000 calls to a special hot line. Out of these calls, 2800 were from men seeking help for their violence. Approximately 1600 referrals for treatment were made. The message that reached all these men: Your violence to your partner is harming your children.

Other steps can be taken to identify batterers who come into contact with mental health and medical professionals. Mental health workers should be doing universal screening for the perpetration of violence for clients who present with issues like depression, relationship difficulties, and divorce. Medical staff in emergency rooms should develop protocols for interviewing patients who show up with self-inflicted injuries such as ones that might result from punching a wall. General practitioners could become more comfortable with exploring the issue of violence and abuse with their patients. Obstetricians could attempt to meet and screen the father of the child for issues of violence as a regular part of pre-natal care. Substance abuse counselors and programs could make education about and assessment of domestic violence perpetration a regular part of their interventions.

Are we willing to work with batterers to help them become better fathers?

When we talk about responsibility and accountability for batterers who are fathers and male caretakers our primary focus is usually on preventing further violence. This is appropriate and it is not necessarily good enough. The more challenging question from an

emotional and policy point of view is what kind of resources are we willing to devote to helping batterers who are fathers become better dads.

If we want to be responsive to the needs of battered women, at least some of them, want their children to have a safe and positive relationship with the man who was abusive to them. Most of the time, children want to have a relationship with their father. Batterers can be encouraged to send their children to groups for children who have been exposed to domestic violence. Some children gain more from these programs when they have the support of their fathers. By supporting his child or children in this way, a batterer would be taking concrete steps to acknowledge and take responsibility for the harm his behavior has done to his child or children. Data from a pilot survey of batterers involved our treatment program indicate some men would be interested in referring their child to a children's group if it was made available to them.

What kinds of programs and resources do we need to set up to help batterers be better fathers? Options in this area might include supervised visitation programming that focuses on improving the parenting ability of the father, mentoring programs for young fathers and intensive parenting skill development that emphasizes the needs of the children. Father involvement programs need to accept that domestic violence is one of the issues that some of their clients ought to address in order to be more responsible fathers. As the corrections field explores the reentry of domestic violence offenders into the community, it needs to examine his relationship to his children.

At each step in the process of helping batterers become better fathers, we will need to listen intently to the voices of battered women, their children and their advocates. We need to concern ourselves for their safety and make room for their genuinely conflicted feelings. As we explore this area of policy and practice, we need to recognize that we are working outside the realm of black and white solutions. As policy makers and practitioners we can no longer allow ourselves the luxury of imagining that arresting a batterer or physically separating him from the victim will automatically resolve the question of his relationship with his children. For the sake of the children, we need to take on this issue of batterers as fathers in a sophisticated and thoughtful way. (Thanks to Leigh Goodmark and Gretchen Test for their feedback on this article.)

This article can be accessed online:

Non-Violence Alliance

Training, Program Development and Direct Interventions Related to Domestic Violence Perpetrators

[http://www.endingviolence.com/batterers\\_as\\_fathers.htm](http://www.endingviolence.com/batterers_as_fathers.htm)