

ASSESSING RISK TO CHILDREN FROM BATTERERS

Lundy Bancroft and Jay G. Silverman (2002)

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This article examines the risk to children from men who batter, as well as offers ways to assess the risk that children face.

This article begins by clarifying that the risk to children from men who batter does not decrease once there has been a separation. In fact, the risk to children may actually increase (citing Bancroft and Silverman, 2002, and Langford, Isaac and Kabat, 1999). The authors of his current article suggest that while men who batter and their abused partners are together, battered women may act in ways to mediate and protect children from the violence and abuse of men who batter.

From here, the authors list the sources of possible physical and psychological injury to children as a result of their contact with men who batter:

- Risk of exposure to threats or acts of violence towards their mother
Children witness a large percentage of physical and sexual violence as well as threats; and may be physically injured during such assaults.
- Risk of undermining mother-child relationships
One battering tactic is to use the children and undermine the relationship between the child and the mother. The relationship between the child and the non-abusive parent can also prove to be a mediating factor to the degree of trauma experienced by children who are exposed to violence.
- Risk of physical or sexual abuse by the batterer
Numerous studies indicate that men who batter pose a greater threat to physically or sexually abuse their children than non battering fathers.
- Risk to the children of the batterer as a role model
Sons of men who batter are at increase risk to perpetrate domestic violence, and daughters who are exposed to domestic violence have a harder time seeking assistance.
- Risk of rigid/authoritarian parenting
Men who batter typically are severely controlling towards their children and uses harsh, rigid and disciplinary style of parenting which can intimidate children and restimulate traumatic memories of the violence.
- Risk of neglectful or irresponsible parenting
Men who batter tend to be selfish and self-centered making it difficult for them to focus on the needs of their children.
- Risk of psychological abuse and manipulation
Men who batter tend to have verbally abusive parenting styles, and are known to use children as a tactic of their abuse. Their use of children can increase post separation.
- Risk of abduction
Most parental abductions take place in the context of domestic violence (Grief and Hegar, 1993).

- Risk of exposure to violence in their father's new relationship
Men who batter don't stop their abusive behaviors when starting new relationships. Children who continue to have a relationship with their father are at increased risk for witnessing his abusiveness towards new dating partners.

Next, these authors explore what children need to recover from exposure to domestic violence

- A sense of physical and emotional safety in their current surroundings
- Structure, limits and predictability
- A strong bond with the non-battering parent
- Not feel responsible to take care of adults
- A strong bond to their siblings
- Contact with the battering parent in the context of protection for the child's physical and emotional safety

The authors offer the following 13 points to assess the risk to children from contact with men who batter:

1. Level of physical danger to the mother
2. History of physical abuse towards the children
3. History of sexual abuse or boundary violations towards the children
4. Level of psychological cruelty to the mother or the children
5. Level of coercive or manipulative control towards their partner exercised during the relationship
6. Level of entitlement and self-centeredness
7. History of using the children as weapons or undermining mother's parenting
8. History of placing children at physical or emotional risk while abusing the mother
9. History of neglectful or severely under-involved parenting
10. Refusal to accept the end of the relationship, or to accept the mother's decision to begin a new relationship
11. Level of risk to abduct the children
12. Substance abuse history
13. Mental Health History

Finally, recognizing that men who batter can change (though they rarely do), the authors offer several suggestions to assess the change in men who batter. This begins with recognizing that the perpetration of domestic violence has its roots in a definable set of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, including:

- His belief in his right to use violence against a partner to impose his will (Silverman and Williamson, 1997)
- His sense of entitlement within the family (Edleson and Tolman, 1992)
- His patterns of controlling and manipulative behaviors (Lloyd and Emery, 2000)
- Disrespect for his partner and lack of empathy for her feelings (Russell and Frohberg, 1995, Pence and Paymar, 1993)
- Externalizing of responsibility for his action (Dutton, 1995)

Assessment of change in men, who batter, therefore must draw on multiple sources and include attention to the following issues:

- ✓ Has he made a **full** disclosure of his history of physical and psychological abuse?
- ✓ Has he recognized that abusive behavior is unacceptable?
- ✓ Has he recognized and accepted his abusive behavior was a choice?
- ✓ Does he show empathy for the effects of his action on his partner and children?
- ✓ Can he identify what his pattern of controlling behaviors and entitlements?
- ✓ Has he replaced abuse with respectful behaviors and attitudes?
- ✓ Is he willing to make amends in a meaningful way?
- ✓ Does he accept the consequences of his actions?

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