Working With Batterers as Parents

What would a curriculum look like?

by David Mandel

In a recent Issues article entitled “Thinking about batterers as fathers: Reconceptualizing and rethinking policy and practice”, we raised the question “Are we (individuals, community agencies, policy makers, etc.) willing to work with batterers to help them become better fathers?” In this article we consider some of the programming and curriculum issues related to working with batterers as parents.

As various national efforts take a closer look at the direct and indirect risks batterers present to children, programming interventions with batterers will need to be modified and enhanced to address emerging concerns. These concerns are being identified through the literature, policy initiatives and community programming. Recent writings (Baker, Perilla, & Norris, 2001; Donovan & Patterson, 1999; Peled, 2000; Sliverman & Bancroft, 2002; Williams, Boggess, & Carter, 2001.) have highlighted issues of batterers in relationship to their children. Federally funded “Greenbook” demonstration sites and pending federal funding for supervised visitation through the Department of Justice’s Safe Havens grants both include strong batterer accountability components. Through our own research (see article this Issues) into how batterers think about their children’s exposure to violence we are collecting data that will help design more effective interventions. For instance, more than half the men identified that their physical violence (52%) and their verbal abuse (56%) made their children feel “scared.”

As a standard component of a coordinated community response to domestic violence, batterer intervention programs need to offer programming that mirrors the needs of the community. In the near future a growing need will clearly be addressing batterers in their parental role. Child protection agencies and juvenile court judges will want to know how batterer intervention programs are addressing batterers’ interactions with their children. Civil and family court judges will want to have targeted programs to which they can refer batterers as part of divorce, custody and visitation proceedings.

Furthermore, programming for batterers in relationship to their role as fathers dovetails with national initiatives on fatherhood. For instance, in one state, almost half the men involved with fatherhood programming self-reported behavior associated with domestic violence.

For poor men and men of color, there is a critical role for batterers’ programming that can be accessed on a voluntary basis outside the scope of the criminal justice and child protection systems. Batterer programming that centers on the well being of children may be the way to increase the voluntary involvement of batterers from all backgrounds. A social marketing campaign in Western Australia with the message “your violence towards your partner is harming your children” led to a significant number of abusers and males at risk to abuse being voluntarily referred for treatment (Donovan & Patterson, 1999).

Batterers as Parents Programming

What would a curriculum for batterers as parents look like? How would it be different from “standard” batterer intervention programs? What topics would it address and what role would it play in the coordinated community response?

Beginning with the last question, an intervention program for batterers as parents might be associated with an existing batterers intervention program or stand on its own. A batterers as parents program might be designed as a second stage program after an initial “standard” batterers intervention program was completed. Referrals would
most likely come from juvenile or civil court or directly from child protective services. Criminal courts could access these programs on as needed basis. Successful completion of a batterers as parents program might be one of a range of preconditions a batterer would need to fulfill prior to (a) having increased contact with his child, (b) having increased contact with the mother of a child, (c) having any kind of visitation, supervised or unsupervised or (d) reunification with a child that has been removed.

For instance, a civil court judge presiding in a divorce proceeding where domestic violence was a factor could utilize a batterer’s participation in a batterers as parents program as a way to enhance the safety and well being of the adult and child victims. So instead of just ordering the batterer to have supervised visits, the judge could also include the completion of specialized treatment as a precondition of increased or unsupervised contact between the batterer and his children.

The batterers as parents program could take responsibility for making collateral contacts with the other parent, mental health professionals and any other professional who might have information relevant to the batterer’s dangerousness and his treatment of the children. As a condition of participation in the program, the batterer could be required to sign releases that give the program access to any custody studies or other evaluative information. Access to this information would increase batterer accountability and minimize his ability to manipulate the program.

Similar to partner/victim contact in “standard” batterer intervention programs, victims would be given information about the nature and content of the program so that they can utilize that information to help evaluate the behavior of the batterer and assess the safety of themselves and their children. Similar to criminal court the civil court judge or other interested parties might receive regular updates on the batterer’s progress in the program. Collateral contacts and progress reports might reduce the potential that the batterer could manipulate the program to his benefit. Information from the program might help the custody and visitation deliberations.

Because of the varying level of risk to adult and child victims and the varying types of relationships victims have with batterers, programming for batterers as parents will need to be very responsive and sensitive to the needs and circumstances of individual victims. Like all batterers intervention programs, batterers as parents programming may increase risk by lulling the court, child protection or the victim into a false sense of security. In some cases, no level of programming or intervention will be adequate to allow some batterers to have any contact with their children.

A curriculum for batterers as fathers would need to have specific themes and educational objectives. Two basic themes could provide the framework for the curriculum. First, being exposed to violence and abuse in the home harms children. Violence in the home would be defined to include direct physical harm from child abuse, observed domestic violence and the ways abuse in the home undermines the parents’ capacity to parent. Second, if a batterer makes positive changes in his behavior towards the other parent his children can benefit. This message would emphasize how children can do well even if their parents are divorced or separated. It would also emphasize that children benefit from the positive emotional support of their fathers.

A curriculum based on these themes would educate batterers about the damaging effects of domestic violence on children and the adult victim’s parenting. The program would work with batterers to make changes in the following areas: (a) not engaging in abuse during and after a separation and divorce process, (b) healing the damage to children done by prior abuse and (c) positive co-parenting. The curriculum might also include other parenting topics that would be of special importance to batterers.

Curriculum Design

A curriculum for batterers as parents might follow the following design. To adequately cover a significant portion of the material below the program would need to run a minimum of sixteen sessions. Longer groups would have the advantage of allowing more time to cover the material and to support the group participants as they deal with various issues related to contact with their children. Intake and assessment sessions would precede entrance into the group. Group size should remain small (8-10 participants) to enhance participation and accountability.

A. Module One—Examining direct and indirect effects of violence in the home on children.

Defining how children are exposed to domestic violence. Batterers will probably come into a program with a very limited definition of children’s exposure to domestic violence. Batterers will need education on how children not only see and hear domestic violence but how they also experience it through the aftermath. Even if children are not home when the abuse occurs, they can see the bruises or a hole in the wall, may be separated from their father due to a restraining order or arrest, or feel the tension in the home before and after an incident of violence.

Defining how children are used as weapons during domestic violence. Batterers need to have certain behaviors involving the children clearly labeled as abusive and controlling. The ways batterers can use children as weapons may change as the children grow older and as relationship status changes. This segment of the curriculum would need to address physical and emotional threats, manipulation, and use of the legal system. In this section and throughout the entire curriculum, a strong emphasis would be placed on not using the children as weapons against their mother during a relationship or after a separation or a divorce.

Understanding the impact domestic violence has on the parenting ability of the victim. Battered women often do incredible jobs parenting their children in spite of the abuse that they face. The tactics of the batterer often directly or indirectly undermine the parenting of the victim. For instance, when a batterer controls a victim’s access to work and/or education, he may be depriving his and her children of the role model of an educated, self-sufficient woman. Other things he does may change her natural parenting style, undercut her authority with the children and increase tension between her and the children. A good curriculum for batterers would identify the damage their abuse does to the victim in her role as parent.

Understanding the short and long-term impact of exposure to domestic violence has on children. A central component of this module would help batterers identify the different ways children may be harmed by being exposed to their abuse. These effects may include interruption of routine, fear about physical harm to mother, father, self and siblings, developmental delays, school problems, aggression, withdrawal and depression, increased risk for suicidality, substance abuse, gang involvement, repetition of the cycle of family violence, and criminal behavior.

Understanding effects of multiple exposures to violence: e.g. child abuse, community violence and domestic violence. Many children are exposed to multiple forms of abuse. In this section batterers would be educated as to the cumulative impact of multiple forms of exposure to violence. This segment would create room for discussions of drug and gang related violence, racial and ethnic violence, bullying, socially sanctioned forms of violence, e.g. sports and television, war and violence in the home.

B. Module Two: No abuse after divorce/separation

Letting go of the relationship with the victim. Many batterers need to let go of their previous relationship. Obsession with revenge or control can continue to threaten the physical and emotional well being of the entire
family. Children can be used as weapons or pawns. Challenging obsession and resentment should be a high priority for any program.

**Accepting another father figure in the child's life.** Afraid of being marginalized and believing themselves to be entitled, batterers will frequently directly and indirectly threaten, challenge, harass and even assault their ex-partner’s new boyfriend or husband. These abusive and controlling actions are frequently framed as concern for their children’s well-being. These justifications for continuing abuse need to be challenged. An ex-partner’s right to have another relationship should be stressed. Batterers need help in understanding how children feel about a new father figure, how to support children in making that transition and how to co-parent when their ex-partner has a new relationship.

**Not using legal and court processes to get revenge against victim.** During divorce and separation batterers may shift their tactics to the court. Withholding, or threatening to withhold child support, and greater financial resources often provides batterers with potent weapons. Batterers need to be confronted on these tactics as part of any program that addresses their role as parent.

**Dealing with child support and visitation.** Any program that works with batterers as fathers needs to stress the importance of following court ordered child support and not manipulating or violating visitation orders.

**Damage to children by talking negatively to family and friends of the victim.** During and after a relationship, a batterer often attempts to attack and malign his partner by talking negatively about her to friends, family and co-workers. This may be a key tactic for an abuser who continues to abuse after a divorce. The direct and indirect negative impact of this type of behavior on children needs to be identified. Batterers need to be challenged to stop all types of verbal slander of former partners.

**C. Module Three: Healing damage done by prior violence**

**Accepting the role the violence has played in separation from partner and children and in divorce.** Batterers frequently blame their partner for separation and divorce. This blame and denial of the impact violence has played in the family’s life often justifies continuing abuse of the estranged partner and the children. Discussion and activities should help batterers see the role their behavior played in their current family circumstances, whether it be an open child protection case, separation or divorce.

**How batterers can talk responsibly to children about their violence.** No matter the age of the child, a batterer can always let them know that they were wrong and solely responsible for their abuse. Batterers also need to be open to listening to what children say and do directly or indirectly to express their feelings about the abuse.

**Healing the damage done by prior violence and abuse.** No new abuse and accepting the needs of others are requirements if batterers are interested in supporting others heal from their prior violence. A curriculum for batterers as parents should encourage them to identify and support counseling or other healing activities for their children. This might include supporting counseling to repair a broken relationship between the victim and her children.

**Taking responsibility for how prior abuse has effected the children's extended family members, friends***
and neighbors. Violence, abuse and control can damage or destroy extended family relationships. Children are impacted by these wounds. Any activities focused on healing the damage of abuse should include healing relationships outside the family.

**Consistent emotionally involved parenting.** If a batterer continues to be in a parenting role with children, the program should help identify what it means to be a consistently emotionally involved parent versus a parent who gets involved when it is convenient.

**D. Module Four: Positive parenting/co-parenting**

**Child maltreatment laws and the definition of child abuse and neglect.** Education in this area is an important part of the coordinated community response. Batterers involved in the child protection system will hopefully be hearing the same message in their group as they will from juvenile court and child protective services. Batterers who are referred to a batterers as parents group by a civil court judge will be exposed to information about what constitutes child abuse and neglect.

**Positive discipline and the difference between discipline and guidance.** Men attending the group will be educated to positive, non-violent, non-abusive parenting techniques. Special attention will be paid to making the distinction between punishment/discipline and guidance. A focus on how much parents teach their children through role modeling and guidance versus authoritarian discipline will be consistent with the program’s overall message about the batterers behavior and its impact on his children.

**Importance of close emotional support to children.** Research indicates that children benefit from an emotionally supportive relationship with their father. Program participants can be educated to skills related to being supportive of their male and female children.

**Importance of positive relationship between parents no matter what the relationship status.** This topic is crucial. Research into relationship status and children’s well being indicates that one of the most crucial variables for positive outcomes is the ability of the parents to work together for the child’s best interest. This seems to be beneficial regardless of the relationship status between the parents. Batterers need to know that even if a divorce has occurred, the quality of their relationship with their children’s mother may have a profound impact on their children’s short and long-term well-being.

**Importance of father's to children.** Discussing the importance of fathers with a group of batterers can be very tricky. Many, if not most batterers, have an over inflated, narcissistic sense of their importance to their partner and their children. When we speak of educating batterers about the importance of fathers to children we are talking about both how much damage fathers can do when they act destructively and the how much positive influence they can have when they act in a loving, supportive and responsible way.

**Child developmental needs and how to support them.** Batterers, frequently expect more of their children than is appropriate for their age. Batterers would benefit from information about the developmental stages and needs of children as they grow up.

**Dealing with being afraid, feeling helpless as a parent.** Raising children can confront parents with tremendous feelings of helplessness and fear. Batterers deal with these feelings through controlling and hurting others. Special attention needs to be directed towards helping abusers handle the natural fears and worries of being a parent without becoming controlling or abusive.

In addition to these four modules and their associated topics, any curriculum for batterers as parents might choose to also address other topics such as how to support and relate to female children, how to care for young children,
understanding the challenges children face at school, in the community and in our society, identifying and working with emotions, and dealing with step children.

**Conclusion**

There are multiple methodologies for turning this outline into an actual curriculum. Any individual, agency or community that attempts to tackle the task of safely helping batterers become better fathers needs to embrace the following concept: Powerful women and mothers are central to healthy children. This idea underlies the question we pose to men in our fatherhood curriculum. To get them to think about women and power we ask them: “How powerful do you want your partner to be?” We help them see the connection between their children’s mother doing well and their children’s well being. This is bedrock foundation for any programming that attempts to tackle this sensitive, important and emerging area of concern.

**References**


