

Making the most of fathers to... Reduce violence in children's lives

'MAKING MEN INTO FATHERS' WORKS BEST IF YOU GIVE THEM SUBSTANTIAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR CARETAKING RIGHT FROM THE START.

The more infant care fathers do, the more satisfied and sensitive they tend to be. Caretaking causes brain and hormonal changes in men (as in women) that facilitate nurturing and bonding. Within 15 minutes of holding a baby, men experience raised levels of hormones associated with tolerance/trust (oxytocin), sensitivity to infants (cortisol) and brooding/lactation/bonding (prolactin). And fathers who nurture and take significant responsibility for early basic childcare (e.g., feeding, changing diapers) are significantly less likely to sexually abuse their children.

HOW THEY DO IT :

Primary prevention of Shaken Baby Syndrome, Buffalo, NY, USA: Primary prevention involves addressing a broad section of the population – here new parents – as opposed to focusing on 'at risk' populations. New mothers and fathers were informed about the risks of shaking babies and given strategies (for example, to deal safely with persistent crying) through written information, educational posters and a video. Staff training included encouraging fathers to participate. Before hospital-discharge, parents (96% of mothers, 76% of fathers) signed a 'commitment statement' acknowledging receipt and understanding of the information. Rates of abusive head injuries in the first three years of children's lives almost halved over the five-year-study-period. Signing the commitment statement seems to have been particularly effective in instilling knowledge: 92% recalled it 7 months later; 98% remembered the leaflets. Only 23% remembered the video, which may not have been shown to all participants.

REMOVING AN ABUSIVE FATHER FROM THE FAMILY PROVIDES ONLY A PARTIAL SOLUTION:

abusers continue their abuse with new partners and continue to father and stepfather other children. When an abusive man leaves a family, he normally continues to interact with between 6-10 children or step-children. There is evidence that, for some men, *receiving consequences* for their abusive behaviours and focusing on their role as fathers can act as powerful motivators to change their behaviour. **HOLDING MEN WHO USE VIOLENCE FULLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR BEHAVIOUR AND ITS EFFECT ON THEIR CHILDREN** will produce better outcomes for the whole family.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF A FATHER IN THE LIFE OF A FAMILY

is associated with lower levels of child neglect, even in families that face other serious challenges, such as unemployment and poverty. This is especially important in disadvantaged families, where children suffer more from a poor relationship with their father, and benefit more from a positive one.

BETTER ENGAGEMENT WITH FATHERS AND FATHER-FIGURES IN FAMILIES WHERE CHILDREN ARE AT RISK

is likely to result in better risk assessment, reduced burden on mothers, enhanced resources for the care of children and better risk management - leading to reduction of harm. It is both unfair and impractical to focus attention on the mother and make her solely responsible for keeping her children safe.

TO MAKE THE MOST OF FATHERS PROFESSIONALS NEED TO REMEMBER . . .

Fathers often feel that family and children's services are not for them, so . . .

- > **Keep pursuing them if at first they don't engage. Your persistence helps affirm their value and shows you mean business**

Fathers who do not fulfil masculine 'norms' such as having a job can feel like 'bad dads' – and are often stereotyped that way too, so . . .

- > **Recognise these men as vulnerable, as you would women, and approach them from a strengths-based perspective**

Even fathers who behave very negatively may hold vital information about their children, so . . .

- > **Assess each man who is of significance to a child as a resource as well as a risk – and listen carefully to what they have to say.**

To download other 'Bringing fathers in' resources and access relevant links and references, go to:
www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2014/bringing-fathers-in-resources-for-advocates-practitioners-and-researchers/