

# Fathers who abuse or neglect

As previously noted, fathers and father-figures are often not engaged with by services yet risk from these men features strongly in child protection cases. There is an increasing body of research and knowledge regarding fathers (and other men) in respect of abuse and neglect:

- **Physical abuse**

There are clear links between fathers'/father figures' substance misuse and heightened risk to children of physical abuse and neglect (Ammerman et al, 1999).

Children living with both their biological parents are more likely to be physically abused by fathers than mothers - and more severely - and boys are more likely to be victims (Jouriles & Norwood, 1995). Particularly high levels of abuse are thought to be perpetrated by unrelated males (stepfathers and others) in a household (Stiffman et al, 2002), although awareness of this should not allow practitioners to be less vigilant towards birth fathers.

Like maltreating mothers, maltreating fathers are typically 'troubled' individuals, with a history of victimisation in their families-of-origin (Pittman et al, 2006) and tend to be isolated individuals, with few emotional and instrumental supports and weaker ties to social networks (Coohey, 2006).

Economic insecurity and job loss are associated with heightened risk of physical abuse and neglect by fathers in a variety of ways, including paternal irritability, tension and explosiveness (Guterman & Lee, 2005). A particular feature of maltreating fathers is the prevalence of more rigid attitudes about appropriate child behaviour and parenting practices (Pittman et al, 2006).

There are correlations between men's abuse of their partner and their abuse of their children: men who are moderately violent towards their partners are twice as likely as non-violent men to abuse their children (Straus & Gelles, 1990); men who are severely violent towards their partners are five times more likely to abuse their children (Straus et al, 1980).

- **Sexual abuse**

A study of 3,000 young people indicated that out of the 11% who had been sexually abused, this had occurred within the biological family in only 1% of cases - and the most common perpetrator was a brother. Father-figures are far more likely to abuse sexually than biological fathers. However, 1-2% of biological fathers sexually abuse their daughters (Cawson et al, 2000).

In most cases where sexual abuse has taken place both the biological father and any social fathers should be assessed, not only in terms of risk but also as a potential resource to the child.

If they are abusers they need to be identified as a potential future risk to these and other children and to make reparation (if appropriate and possible) for abuse they have perpetrated. If they are not abusers, they need to be assisted to provide support to a child in their care who has been sexually abused. Good paternal care/support in adolescence is one of two main factors found to protect against the serious problems found in 80% of the young adults who have been sexually abused (Lynskey & Fergusson, 1997).

- **Psychological abuse**

Although less is known about fathers' psychological abuse of children, it seems likely that biological fathers and mothers are about equally responsible (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996); and father-figures more responsible (for review see Radhakrishna et al, 2001). Physical abuse may co-occur with psychological abuse: in one study, both maltreating mothers and fathers were found to direct more hostile and negative behaviours (and fewer positive verbal behaviours) towards their children.

However, socio-economic status accounted for a greater proportion of the variance in these other negative parental behaviours than did child abuse (Herrenkohl et al, 1984). One study found that men who were abusive towards their partners directed significantly more verbal aggression towards daughters than towards sons (Cummings et al, 1999). It is now recognised that children whose fathers or father figures regularly abuse their mothers, are being psychologically abused.

- **Neglect**

Recent research suggests that fathers' absence, by itself, does not predict risk of child-neglect (Dubowitz et al, 2000). But fathers' absence is associated with family poverty - which is correlated with physical child neglect (and abuse) (Guterman & Lee, 2005). Mothers identified as neglectful are usually assumed to be coping alone. In fact, most have partners. However, these tend to be men they have known for relatively little time, are not married to or living with, are less likely to be the biological fathers of their offspring (for review, see Radhakrishna et al, 2001) and are not perceived by the mothers as supportive (Coohey, 1995).

### Fathers who abuse or neglect (continued)

Some direct empirical evidence suggests that low father support is associated with mothers' risk for both child physical abuse and neglect (for review, see Radhakrishna et al, 1990). Where a mother's partner is not the father of all the children in the home, has a drug, alcohol or mental health challenge and does not seem to understand that there is a supervision issue for the children (or take responsibility for it) supervisory neglect is likely to be persistent or chronic - and the investigator's level of concern should be raised (Coohey & Zhang, 2006). However, while in some circumstances father-figures may present a greater risk, practitioners should not (as already pointed out) under-estimate risk in biological fathers.

#### • Domestic violence

Work around domestic violence must ensure that the safety of victims is paramount. Failure to investigate the impact of fathers' roles in family violence can result in mother-blaming; and inhibit a full understanding of the causes, nature and consequences of family violence. (Holden & Barker, 2004)

Featherstone & Peckover (2007) argue that the construction of domestically violent fathers solely as 'perpetrators' or 'offenders' can render invisible their identities as parents, and that this has seriously compromised the development of effective policies and practices to support women and children, while at the same time failing to offer men opportunities to develop non-violent parenting and partnering relationship patterns.

There is currently little research to indicate which children will benefit, and which will not, from continuing contact with fathers who have been abusive towards them or their mothers; and whether, and under what circumstances, reparative initiatives can ease children's distress and/or help to break a potential cycle of multigenerational child abuse (Scott & Crooks, 2004). However, few would fail to support reparative behaviour by mothers; and there is no reason to believe that reparation by fathers would be without value to most children. However, any work in this area needs also to place risk to the mother and child's welfare as paramount.

Mothers, fathers and children are parts of complex social systems in which each person influences the others reciprocally, directly and indirectly. Considering the father's involvement and behaviour in a holistic way is likely to be helpful, looking out for the impact of child factors, mother-factors, couple-factors and the influence of the wider family. Nevertheless, as practitioners we should firmly place the responsibility for a man's behaviour with him.

Where the parents are separated, the experience of this may be worth exploring, to examine the legacy of this and its continuing impact. Indeed, there is a consensus that children in separated families do best when they retain a strong positive relationship with both parents and that losing contact with fathers matters to children.

In the context of working with risky men or men who do not present to services, Ashley et al (2010) found that 70%-80% of these fathers live separately from their children, many with limited contact and often strained relationships. Non-resident fathers are particularly likely not to be engaged with services. Yet their impact can be substantial.

It is also crucial for services to take seriously concerns raised by fathers including non-resident fathers, about their child's safety - and not easily dismiss their fears as ill-informed or motivated by a desire to cause trouble for the mother.

In addition, the failure of agencies to understand, accept and assess the impact of domestic violence on children is a frequent finding of SCRs (for more information please see FURTHER READING, below).

In the vast majority of case files examined during this project, domestic violence was recorded. Out of a belief that couple work should not be undertaken where there is or has been domestic violence and, that for men who have used violence, only long-term intensive work is suitable, workers had made a series of decisions, where perpetrator programmes were not locally available, to rule out engagement with every man who had been involved in domestic violence. In fact, as is now widely recognised, not all 'domestic violence' follows the same pattern. Engagement with a couple or via non-specialist or briefer interventions is not advised where the violence is ongoing and is part of a pattern of coercive behaviour.

Challenging the impact of a father's behaviour (particularly his use of violence or threats) may be a fruitful area for exploration. In particular it may be beneficial to explore this in relation to his view of himself as a father and his perception of the impact of such behaviour on his children. Dissonance between these perspectives opens up possibility for change. Whilst it is paramount that we don't collude with violence, thinking beyond the label 'perpetrator' can help him to explore the impact of his behaviour. However, no parenting programme should attempt to improve the parenting skills of fathers who are still using violence: ending the violence has to be the first step, and should be separately addressed.

#### Further Reading

- Picking up the Pieces after Domestic Violence: a practical resource for supporting parenting skills.  
[www.jkp.com/catalogue/book/9781849050210](http://www.jkp.com/catalogue/book/9781849050210)
- Information on impact of domestic violence on children:  
[www.unicef.org/protection/files/BehindClosedDoors.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/protection/files/BehindClosedDoors.pdf)
- Proposed procedures for safeguarding children affected by domestic violence (AVA 2009)  
[www.avaproject.org.uk/media/15627/lscpprocedures.pdf](http://www.avaproject.org.uk/media/15627/lscpprocedures.pdf)

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