WORKING WITH MEN
AS PARENTS

Becoming Father-Inclusive to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes in Domestic Violence Cases

Intimate Partner Violence Collaborative

SAFE & TOGETHER INSTITUTE
Concrete strategies.
Meaningful tools.
Real change.

The Ohio Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Collaborative is a partnership of the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services, the Supreme Court of Ohio, the Family and Youth Law Center (FYLaw) at Capital University Law School, The Safe and Together Institute, and other key stakeholders dedicated to addressing IPV in Ohio child welfare cases by providing public children services agencies and community partners with Safe and Together trainings and technical assistance.

ABOUT THE SAFE & TOGETHER INSTITUTE

Our Mission

To create, nurture and sustain a global network of domestic violence-informed child welfare professionals, communities and systems.

What we are dedicated to

- Advancing inquiry, knowledge, practice and collaboration related to a perpetrator pattern-based approach within the intersection domestic violence and children
- Developing a network of professionals, organizations and communities that work together to create domestic violence informed-child welfare and related systems

How we do it

- Supporting the implementation of the Safe & Together™ Model through training, certification and systems consultation
- Supporting implementation of the Safe Engagement Model for fathers through training, certification and systems consultation
- Innovative partnerships with individuals, agencies and communities
- Data collection, writing conferences and events to advance learning, dialog and practice
- Development and dissemination of practical tools to promote real-world systems change and practice improvement
- Commitment to examining the role of gender, culture and sexual orientation in all its work

Contributors

David Mandel, MA, LPC, has over 25 years' experience in the domestic violence field. His Safe and Together™ model designed to improve case practice and cross system collaboration in domestic violence cases involving children has trained CPS workers in more than 10 states and in the United Kingdom, Australia, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Singapore. He has done extensive research and consultations on father engagement, survivor strengths, and perpetrator interventions.

Heidi Rankin, Associate Director of the Safe & Together Institute, has over 20 years of experience in the sexual and domestic violence field. She has worked in crisis counseling, program and policy development and advocacy in both the U.S. and Canada. Heidi received a Masters in Public Administration with a concentration in domestic violence from University of Colorado at Denver, the only program of its kind in the country.

"Tell me about the domestic violence perpetrator's impact on child and family functioning."

"WHAT DID HE SAY WHEN YOU ASKED HIM ABOUT HIS BEHAVIOR?"

"Has he stopped his violence and abuse toward his partner and children?"

"Does he understand his violence toward his partner is a parenting choice?"

More and more, across Ohio, county child protection agencies have been asking their workers to engage with domestic violence perpetrators. This is the logical result of the understanding that domestic violence perpetrators' behaviors are one of the biggest child protection concerns, and strongly correlated with child abuse and neglect (see the 2016 ODJFS needs assessment for a local perspective). Achieving meaningful engagement with domestic violence perpetrators requires skills, confidence and knowledge. At the Safe & Together Institute, based on our experience all over the world, we've identified that social workers need targeted, intensive support to effectively engage perpetrators as parents. Social workers need this support, not only because working with the issue of violence and control is complex, but also because we've found that social workers usually receive limited or no training working with fathers in general. Combine this with common low cultural expectations of men as parents and limited community service resources for men, we find that social workers are being asked, more and more, to engage one of the most difficult populations -domestic violence perpetrators- with limited resources and supports.

In order to become truly domestic violence-informed, child protection systems need to not only focus on domestic violence-specific efforts but also commit to becoming father-inclusive in their overall work with families. (Read more about the concept of father-inclusive work, a term originated by Dr. Richard Fletcher) This means we are guided by the very simple idea that father's choices and actions matter to child and family functioning. We approach men with high expectations of their abilities to parent, and a definition of being a good father that explicitly includes respectful treatment of the other parent. Being father-inclusive shapes our assessments, family engagement strategies, case planning and our documentation. It can even be applied when there is no father currently involved with the family because it changes the way we talk to mothers and children about the functioning of the family. For example, father-inclusive practice directs us to ask questions about how a father's absence from a family has affected it.

If we are serious about working with families, we cannot just work with women and children. We need to be able to work with men. This is important for all families but may be even more important for families from poor and historically oppressed communities, where men have often been ignored by service providers and overrepresented in criminal justice systems. In many organizations, "family assessments" are really "mother and child assessments." Forms and assessment tools may be skewed to focus on the "primary caregiver," usually the mother in heterosexual relationships, which can build-in a gender bias and sexual orientation bias to our work. In most communities, child and family agencies usually do not offer a wide range or indeed, any specific services for men as parents. When initiatives or services refer to family engagement strategies, they are often referring to "mother engagement" strategies. This, in turn, makes them "mother and child agencies." Combined with limited training and low expectations of men as parents, this means we often leave out a key individual who impacts the family: the father or father figure.

WHAT DOES THIS GAP LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

What does it mean for assessments and services?

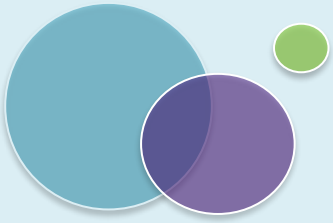
- Our family assessments are incomplete and therefore may not be as accurate as they could be.
- Fathers' contributions to child and family functioning, positive or negative, are often overlooked.
- Mothers get all the credit or all the blame for how the family is functioning.
- Men may not receive the support they need for issues like parenting deficits, violence, substance abuse, trauma or other mental health issues.
- Children are not engaged around their relationship with their fathers.

What can a lack of training in working with fathers mean for our work with families?

- We can unconsciously substitute personal experiences and values for professional training and approaches.
- We are more likely to view men one dimensionally instead of holistically.
- We can feel like working with men is harder or scarier than it really is.
- We lack the experience, knowledge, and confidence to engage men around challenging issues such as domestic violence perpetration.

So why should we invest our time and energy to become better prepared to work with men as parents?

- It means we are working with the entire family as it's understood by the family and their community.
- Children want us to work with their fathers. Fathers loom large in the emotional and physical life of children (whether he lives in the home or not). Helping men be better fathers helps children.
- Men's partners want us to do this. Partners of fathers often want their partner to be a more engaged, positive parent.
- Communities value the entire the family, even what happens to the "family" post separation.
- Many communities and cultures are focused on the health and wellbeing of the extended family, kin network and overall community. Work with men as parents is essential to these families' own definitions of community health and wellbeing. Men as parents cannot be ignored or left behind when we are focused on the health and wellbeing of the whole community.
- Men want help in their parenting. There are men who want to help with parenting but often do not seek out help because they can neither find services designed for fathers nor professionals who know how to engage them.
- Men's trauma histories often go unidentified and untreated. Father-inclusive work can help address this gap.
- The diversity of fathers deserves attention. The growing diversity of family structures means we will be working with gay fathers, trans-fathers, grandfathers and other men who are parenting children. A strong foundation of father-inclusive work will help us support these families.
- It provides a very important foundation for working effectively with domestic violence cases.



FATHER-INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

When we talk about a "father-inclusive" approach to families we need to keep in mind a few things. Father inclusive practice and policy Is more than male engagement. It's about an orientation to the entire family including how we assess family functioning and how we engage partners and children of fathers around his role in the family. It is not "father involvement at any cost." Father inclusive approaches need to focus on the quality of a man's parenting and co-parenting, not just whether he is having contact with his children or not. For example, reconnecting a child with a father who has been absent for years, without an assessment of the reasons for estrangement and separation, can cause harm, e.g. bringing a domestic violence perpetrator back into the child's life.

It intersects with other concerns like substance abuse and mental health. Any assessment of men as parents needs to examine the connection between men's overall functioning and their functioning as a parent, e.g. how does his drinking affect his relationship with his child and the overall strength of the family?

Partners and children should benefit from father-inclusive, domestic violence-informed work. By definition, good work with fathers must consider the relationship of fathers to their partners, children and families. Whether in heterosexual or same sex relationships, one of the questions we must be able to answer is, "Does our work with him benefit other family members?" This is especially important when the father is also a domestic violence perpetrator. If we don't stay aware of the rest of his family, we may engage and strengthen him to the detriment of others, e.g. an abusive father who we help to gain employment who then uses his financial stability to take the children away from his partner, who he has destabilized through his abuse.

FATHER INCLUSIVE APPROACHES FOCUS ON THE QUALITY OF A MAN'S PARENTING, NOT JUST WHETHER HE IS HAVING CONTACT WITH HIS CHILDREN.

A FATHER-INCLUSIVE APPROACH CAN ALSO HELP THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE-INFORMED PRACTICE. WHEN CHILD WELFARE AND OTHER PROFESSIONALS INCREASE THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS RELATED TO WORKING WITH ALL FATHERS, THEIR SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE IN WORKING WITH PERPETRATORS ALSO GROW.

Greater Confidence:

- To engage all fathers from diverse backgrounds, which will make it easier to engage violent men from diverse backgrounds.
- To approach men about their violence and its intersection with child and family functioning.
- To implement the concept that "domestic violence perpetration is a parenting choice."
- To discuss fathers' substance abuse, mental health, and employment issues.
- To better support and confront men who have multiple issues, e.g. supporting fathers around their experience of cultural trauma while holding them accountable for their own violent behavior.

Greater skills:

- Engaging violent men around the impact of their abuse on their children and partner.
- Engaging violent men around the contradictions between their definition of a good father and their abusive behaviors.
- Aligning with marginalized and oppressed communities and families where there is often a strong desire to support men who have used violence in the past to change, and be more successful and effective in the family and in the community.

Domestic violence-informed practice rests squarely on the idea that we need to be able to articulate how the perpetrator's behaviors and choices impact child and family functioning. This is a specific variation on a foundational father-inclusive perspective: that men's choices, good or bad, matter to child and family functioning. This formulation addresses a number of issues all at once, making it a fairly elegant framework for addressing multiple issues simultaneously.

Our engagement and assessment of men should be driven by a focus on their behaviors not to their genetics or legal standing. This means we can be inclusive of the variety of male caregivers, e.g. both boyfriends and biological fathers. It also helps avoid dangerous practices, e.g. attempts to promote father involvement without assessment for safety or the quality of a father's parenting.

It provides an alternative framework to the "men's rights" approach which often is associated with the assertions that fathers have a right to their children regardless of their behaviors and even despite their abuse of a child's mother.

It offers a behaviorally focused, strength-based framework that can work across both violent and non-violent homes. By asking about what strengths a father brings to a family, e.g. what does he do strengthen child and family functioning, we can move away from a focus on role, e.g. "breadwinner" or generic statements like "he loves his children" or "he

wants to see them." This behavioral focus allows us to be more inclusive around the strengths of men who may be denied economic opportunities due to racism and to help avoid privileging men with financial status.

In order to hold men accountable as parents and partners we must recognize that *"Domestic violence perpetration is a parenting choice"*. To do this well and consistently, we need to improve our overall practice related to men as parents. Below are some practice tips, drawn from our online course 'Working with Men as Parents: Fathers' Parenting Choices Matter', related to using a male parental development lens to help with engagement. The following is from the segment of the course on exploring, with men, their own childhood experience of fathering.

Engagement: "Ask a Man"

Conversations with men about their childhood as it relates to learning about fatherhood can be a fertile area of engagement. While it can contain areas that deserve sensitivity, e.g. father absence, or abuse, it can be very helpful in the process of engaging an adult male about his fathering values, skills, hopes and fears. Here are some ideas for strategies around engaging adult males:

- What are your earliest memories of what it means to be a father?
- Don't just ask "Was your father around when you were a child?" instead ask "what did your father do in the family when you were child?" or "How did your father interact with your mother, with you, and your siblings when you were young?"
    - You can explore what felt good about those interactions and what part of his father's behaviors he wants to replicate and the ways he wants to be different than his father.
    - Remember for some men these early memories may be very traumatic, e.g. abuse or grief around absence. When a man shares that his father was not present in his life growing up, you can still explore what males were in his life and what did he learn from them. This can include his mother's partners, a grandfather, an uncle or the father of a friend.
    - Also it is important to acknowledge that boys learn about how to be parents from watching their mothers and other women parent.

From an exploration of his experience of learning to be father as a child, you can pivot to his own parenting:

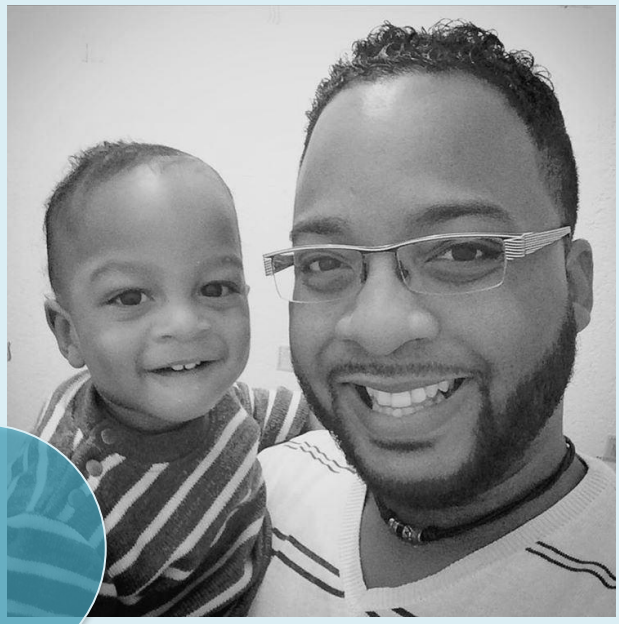
- What do you think your child's earliest memories are of you? What do you want your child's memories of you to be? What do you think your behavior is teaching them about being a man and being a father?
- What do you think your children are learning from watching your behavior as you interact with their mother? Or other women?

Prevention and Early Intervention: "We can do better"

- Programs like health or home visitors could benefit from more engagement of first time and/or young fathers about their experience of learning to be a father.
- Teachers and other early childhood care professionals can receive education and guidance about reducing gender bias related to parenting roles and expectations, e.g. becoming more conscious about whether they are talking to boys about being fathers someday, not just talking to girls about being mothers.
- Doing dating violence prevention by talking to teen boys about how the quality of their treatment of their partner affects their children.
- Set up a program that encourages boys to become babysitters and teaches them the skills they need to do it.

Implications for Domestic Violence-Informed Practice: "I can't truly be a good father if I abuse my children's mother"

- Exploration of abusive fathers' experience of their own fathers' behaviors and lessons learned as a child about masculinity, fatherhood and partnership may offer information that can enhance motivation for change or offer examples of alternative positive co-parenting. For example, while an abusive man may have had a father who was also violent to his mother, he may remember an uncle, a family friend, an elder in the community or another male in his life who was a positive, non-violent example of masculinity.



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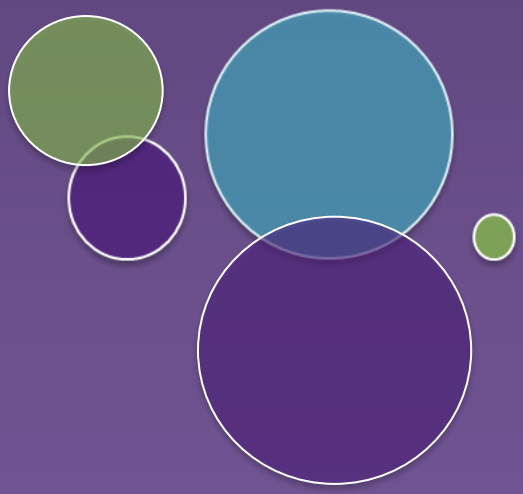

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