



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

Domestic Violence and Assessing Risk to Children

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Mothers children and change: Strengthening service support and safety

Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse

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Types of abuse & neglect

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Neglect
- Witnessing domestic violence



Witnessing family violence

"A child being present (hearing or seeing) while a parent or sibling is subjected to physical abuse, sexual abuse or psychological maltreatment, or is visually exposed to the damage caused to persons or property by a family member's violent behaviour" (Higgins, 1998, p. 104)



Mothering effects non-enduring

- Effects of domestic violence on mothering are unlikely to be permanent
 - ◆ Women who had experienced DV in the past had better parenting scores compared to women currently experiencing DV
 - ◆ No difference between women who had experienced DV in the past and women who never experienced DV



Child protection legal responsibility

1. Report/allegation to child protection
2. Initial assessment/Screening
 - ◆ Does the allegation match the definition of a child in need of protection?
 - ◆ Assuming the allegations were true, how urgent a response is required?
3. Assessment/Investigation
 - ◆ Did abusive or neglectful behaviour occur?
 - ◆ Did it, or is it likely to, cause significant harm?
 - ◆ Whose responsible for the harm?
4. Protective intervention/Case management
 - ◆ What's needed from CP to protect the child?



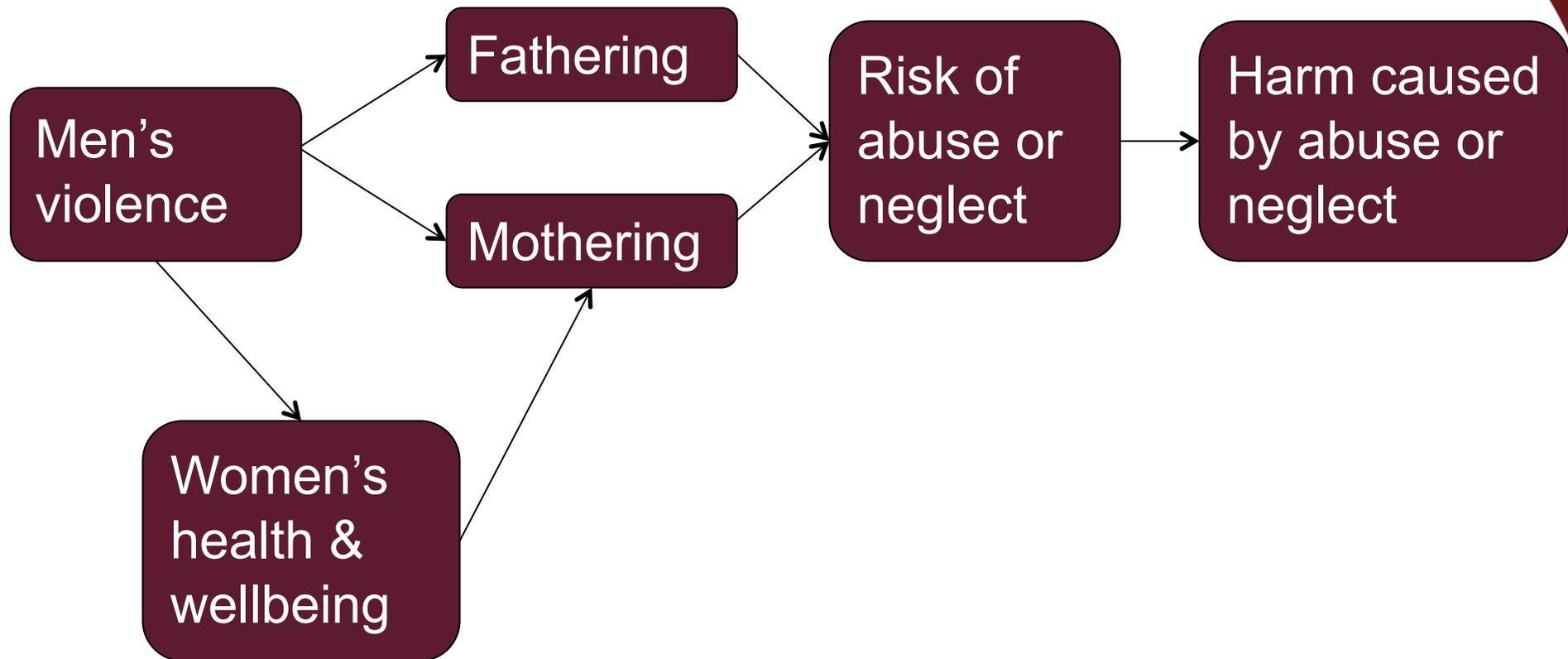
Continuous assessment

- Risks and needs need to be re-assessed routinely throughout life of case
- For children and their mothers who have experienced family violence

risks and the needs will be very different when violent men are residing with women and children compared to the risks and needs post-separation



Assessing risk to children exposed to domestic violence



The research

- Limited research on fathering by men who perpetrate DV
- Drawing on available evidence regarding
 - ◆ Women's and children's experiences of living with DV perpetrator
 - ◆ Continuation of violence post-separation



Domestic violence

- Domestic violence
 - ◆ When a family member, partner or ex-partner attempts to physically or psychologically dominate or harm the other.
- Includes:
 - ◆ Physical violence, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, intimidation, economic deprivation or threats of violence



Characteristics of DV perpetrators

- Violent
- Controlling
- Possessive
- Confuse love & abuse
- Sense of entitlement & superiority
- Selfish, self-centred
- Manipulative
- Deny, minimise effects on victim
- Externalise responsibility, blame victim



Fathering by men who perpetrate DV

- Developmentally inappropriate expectations of child
- Authoritarian, rigid, likely to use physical discipline
- Put own wants and needs first
- Want to be centre of attention & jealous if not
- Physically & verbally undermine mother
- Manipulate perception of situation to shift blame
- Inconsistent: under-involved, low physical affection + episodes of strong presence in child's life
- Disconnect between professed emotions & actual behaviour



Fathering: Examples from research

- **Developmentally inappropriate:**
 - ◆ DV fathers more likely than non-violent fathers to describe 3-4 year olds as disobedient, impulsive, stubborn, sullen, strong temper, cheat, liar, cruel
- **Authoritarian, rigid, likely to use physical discipline**
 - ◆ DV fathers less likely to praise or let children help set rules; more likely to spank or yell at children; significantly more harsh in their parenting style
- **Own wants and needs first**
 - ◆ DV fathers more likely to attach high value to child's achieving career and financial success



Fathering: Examples from research

- Developmentally inappropriate + own needs first
 - ◆ Any noise or playing should stop if man feeling tired, irritable (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002, clinical observation)
 - ◆ “They were never allowed to talk, they were never allowed to play, they had to be quiet. My son did not talk until a year after we left the refuge, because that’s what they had to do at home ... They knew what he was like, I never had to say anything.” (White mother in Mullender et al., 2002)



Fathering: Examples from research

- Inconsistent: under-involved, low physical affection + episodes of strong presence in child's life
 - ◆ Mother's reported DV fathers less likely to be involved or to have used positive child-rearing practices; more likely to use negative child-rearing practices (Edleson & Williams, 2004)
 - ◆ DV fathers are more likely to offer privileges and to yell in order to influence the child to do something (Fox & Benson, 2004)



Fathering: Examples from research

- Disconnect between professed & actual
 - ◆ No difference between DV fathers and non-violent fathers on self-reported
 - Time spent with their children and families
 - Quality of the father's relationship with the child (Fox & Benson, 2004)
 - ◆ Fathers' statements of concern may be poor indicators of their intentions to refrain from abusive behavior (Rothman, Mandel & Silverman, 2007)



Fathering: Examples from research

- Manipulate perception of situation to shift blame
 - ... Then he gets up in the morning, he's saying to L, 'Look what you made me do to your mother. If you had cut the cheese properly on the cracker she wouldn't have got a hiding.' ... And then it was me, 'You made me give my son an extra hiding' (Madeline in Radford & Hester, p. 47)



Direct effects on mothering: Examples from research

- Own wants and needs first

“I was so hooked into placating him that I emotionally neglected the kids”. (White mother in Mullender et al., 2002)

- Want to be centre of attention & jealous if not

“He made me give up breast feeding after four weeks ... He was jealous because I was breast feeding her and she was taking all my attention” (Susan in Radford & Hester, 2006, p. 31)



Direct effects on mothering: Examples from research

- Physically & verbally undermine mother
 - ◆ He very often hit me in front of children as well and used to say 'Mummy's a waste of space. She has shit for brains' (Belinda in Radford & Hester, 2006, p. 33)
 - ◆ Belittling, undermining, insulting, and hitting women in front of their children may effect children's respect for their mother's authority (Humphreys, 2007)
 - ◆ Research has shown domestic violence impacts adversely on women's ability to exercise authority and control over her children (Holt et al, 2008).



Risk of abuse and neglect

- Involve child in DV - mothers reported:
 - ◆ 37% children accidentally hurt during DV
 - ◆ 26% children intentionally hurt during DV
 - ◆ 49% mothers hurt protecting children
 - ◆ 47% perpetrators used child as pawn to hurt mothers
 - ◆ 39% perpetrators hurt mothers as punishment for children's acts
 - ◆ 23% perpetrators blamed mothers for perpetrator's own excessive punishment of children



Risk of abuse and neglect

- Exposure to domestic violence is abuse
 - ◆ Psychological effects of witnessing violence towards mother
 - ◆ Psychological effects of father who is frightening, inconsistent, intolerant, unable to put your needs first
- = toxic stress and complex trauma
- ◆ damages developing brain
 - ◆ long-term psychological effects



Risk of abuse and neglect

- High risk of children with DV fathers also experiencing physical abuse
 - ◆ Rates ranging from 45-70% of overlap between physical abuse and DV
 - ◆ The presence of domestic abuse is a risk factor for child physical abuse, regardless of the methodology employed or the sample sourced



Risk of abuse and neglect

- More likely to be sexually abused
 - ◆ There is evidence of a raised incidence of co-occurrence of DV and child sexual abuse
 - ◆ Rates vary, appear higher in samples of sexual abuse survivors asked about history of DV to mothers and studies that ask YP directly. Lowest in samples of DV mothers asked if children experienced CSA
- If sexually abused, may be less likely to disclose
 - ◆ Perpetrator manipulation, threats & intimidation; damage to mother-child relationship; and belief that mother cannot protect may decrease likelihood of, or delay, disclosure



Protective intervention/case planning

- Exposure to DV is child abuse
 - ◆ Child protection have a responsibility to protect child from abuse
 - ◆ But **process matters**
 - ◆ The perpetrator of the domestic violence is also the perpetrator responsible for exposing the child to DV
 - ◆ This needs to be made clear to mothers and fathers in DV cases



Engage men

- Talk to dads about the effects of their violence towards their partner on their children
 - ◆ In study of men in court-ordered assessment for DV, majority confirmed their children had been exposed to inter-parental conflicts, but few perceived that their children had been affected (Salisbury, Henning, Holdford, & Child, 2009)
- Men need to be accountable for their actions
 - ◆ Need to know that it is their responsibility to stop violence *and* to parent appropriately (absence of violence alone \neq good parenting)



Supporting mothers to protect children

- Due to the effects of violence, mothers may be unable to protect their children **without support**
- Directing mothers to leave, or to stop the violence, is unlikely to be effective
- Women's assessments of the risks posed by their partners post-separation must be treated seriously
- Build on women's strengths and existing survival strategies



Post-separation risk to children

- Leaving a violent partner is not a solution to stopping violence
- There is strong evidence to show that
 - ◆ Physical and psychological violence - towards women and children - continues post-separation
 - ◆ The severity and lethality of violence may increase post-separation (Holt et al, 2006)
- Re-assessment of risks necessary



Assessing best interests of children in relation to contact

- In studies with children, children have talked about the damage or disintegration of the father-child relationship as a result of domestic violence
- They describe betrayal of trust, loss of respect, father as source of fear and terror, loss of love, and hatred for their father
 - ◆ “We do not see my dad now and don’t want to see him. I am happy about not seeing him.” (8-yr old Sth-Asian girl in Mullender et al, 2002)



Child Protection Services

- Child protection
 - ◆ Helping professionals
 - ◆ Continuous review, reflection & reform



National Frameworks

- Current policy frameworks encourage inter-sectoral collaboration
 - ◆ Everyone's Responsibility: National Framework for Protection Australia's Children
 - ◆ Time for Action: National Plan for Violence Against Women and Children



Bringing the planets together

A time for hope



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