

Summary of Online Discussion Three Fatherhood Programs and Domestic Violence Prevention

In the opening piece for this discussion, Jacquelyn Boggess, Jerry Tello, and Oliver Williams discuss the opportunities and challenges of working with fatherhood groups to engage men in ending violence against women. They distinguish three different types of fatherhood organizations: 1) fathers' rights, 2) responsible fatherhood, and 3) father involvement, and identify the father involvement groups as a good starting point for collaboration around domestic violence issues. Father involvement groups begin in local communities and are typically started by men who want to help other men look at issues related to fathering. Through these groups, men who have not been abusive, as well as those who have, can be reached. Because families do not experience violence as separate from other struggles they may be facing, it is vital that programs are able to address a range of needs. Fatherhood programs need to include violence-related issues, as well as support to address unemployment, substance abuse, etc. The same is true for domestic violence programs. Yet we must be realistic about what we can expect these organizations to address. Creating opportunities for men to heal and build healthy relationships is also critical to this work, while always emphasizing safety for the adult survivor and children.

Thirty-seven participants contributed to this discussion in 45 postings. One participant described the work being done in Washington, DC to create dialogue among domestic violence services organizations and fatherhood groups. People in the domestic violence agencies were mistrustful at first because their experience with fatherhood groups was through contact with fathers' rights groups. However, most of the fatherhood groups participating in the dialogues are either father involvement or responsible fatherhood groups. To keep the dialogues moving in a positive direction, the organizers emphasize the common goal across all the organizations of healthier, safer relationships that benefit women and children, as well as men. The groups have also come to realize that working together they can provide more comprehensive services than they can working separately. These shared values help them resolve the tensions that inevitably arise. They have also established ground rules for discussion and encourage participants to avoid using trigger words that may provoke mistrust and concern in other participants. Even the term "responsible fatherhood" can be seen as implying that men are not typically responsible regarding their parenting, and may be especially stigmatizing of poor men.

Similar collaboration work is beginning in Virginia. The State Department of Health provided trainings for people who work in fatherhood organizations to learn more about sexual assault so that they are not inadvertently passing along messages that reinforce gender stereotypes that further male violence. In addition to these receptive fatherhood groups, there are also the more antagonistic fathers' rights groups in Virginia. They have had a big impact on local judges making child custody decisions, and have succeeded in getting judges appointed who are strong fathers' rights proponents. This participant pointed out that people who do not understand the dynamics of abuse may not see what is wrong with this. Statistics show that the men who are most likely to seek custody of their children after a divorce are batterers. Their aim is not to provide their children with stable homes (as they usually say in court), but to continue to control their ex-wives, through

their children, after the divorce. Many of these men also abuse their children directly. These fathers' rights groups are well organized and funded, with strong lobbying skills. It is no wonder, given this dynamic, that domestic and sexual violence services providers are mistrustful of fathers' groups.

Other discussion participants emphasized the need for better tools for addressing fatherhood in the context of batterer intervention programs. One facilitator for a batterer intervention program stated that a large portion of class time is spent on parenting issues. Regardless of the circumstances of the violence, most fathers in the program are interested in learning more about how the violence has affected their children and what they can do to improve that relationship. Another participant pointed out that organizations such as the Men's Resource Center (MRC) of Western Massachusetts, the MRC of Northern New Mexico, and CORIAC in Mexico City do not see fatherhood work and batterers intervention as two different tracks, but basically as two sides of the same coin. At the center of the MRC philosophy is the idea that stereotypical, traditional masculinity is toxic not only for men's families, but also for the men themselves. Unhealthy definitions of masculinity encourage men to be controlling and violent with women, children and other men, while ignoring their own feelings and those of others. This analysis can help bridge seemingly divergent goals of different programs for men, such as stopping violence against women and children, making men better fathers, and supporting men in their process of growth and change.

It is important, however, to recognize that fatherhood programs and domestic violence and sexual assault services have typically worked without their paths crossing. And society has reinforced each side seeing the other as a part of the problem. This causes tension. Part of collaborating is acknowledging that when some fatherhood programs frame responsibility, they condone men's control of other family members. It will be important to the future of collaborative efforts to address directly these tensions. It is also critical to identify why these collaborations can move the collective work forward. For example, collaborations can lead to a united front against funding requirements that disregard the importance of violence prevention. Other social welfare policy notions that can bring these groups together include: 1) safety from family violence is of paramount importance, as is child wellbeing; 2) fatherhood programs are not batterer's intervention programs; 3) there is value for low-income fathers, their families, and for society to provide these men with employment and other services; and 4) the great majority of men and women affected by government fatherhood policy decisions are poor, as are their children.

One participant who works with young fathers pointed out the importance of providing this population with information about the effects of violence against women, and with strategies for forming nurturing interactions with their families. Training on domestic violence and sexual assault prevention is crucial for practitioners working with this population and other groups of men. Socialization has resulted in low expectations of fathers generally. As one participant highlighted, fathers can do so much more than simply not batter their wives or partners. They can pass on to their children healthy messages about sexuality, protect their children from sexual abuse, model egalitarian relationships and shared power, and demonstrate respect for the women and girls in their

lives. Given that, another participant stated that fatherhood programs should: focus on the safety and wellbeing of children; encourage fathers to be financially and emotionally responsible for their children; improve familial, parental, and community partnerships; provide opportunities for fathers to learn from positive role models and peer support; educate on the importance and effectiveness of good co-parenting; work to secure jobs with wage growth potential and career development; provide assistance with education, employment, economic barriers and community systems; measure program outcomes; provide opportunities for staff development and training; and have a policy for addressing domestic violence and sexual assault issues.

Other contributions included ways to tell when a man who has been violent is now willing to take responsibility and be held accountable for his behavior; further discussion of the definition of manhood and what that means for fatherhood; thoughts about the role of spirituality in ending violence and healing wounds; and comments on intergenerational cycles of violence.

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