

## **THE FATHERING AFTER VIOLENCE PROJECT: DEALING WITH A COMPLEX AND UNAVOIDABLE ISSUE**

**BY JUAN CARLOS AREAN**

*“I want him to support his daughter, no matter what.”*

*“I want him to spend quality time with my son.”*

*“It takes love to raise a man. You don’t necessarily need a father.”*

These are actual comments from mothers of color, survivors of domestic violence, about their abusive partners or ex-partners. They were made during a series of focus groups conducted by the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPPF) in November 2002 in Boston and San Francisco.<sup>i</sup> Among the many valuable and courageous things that these women had to say was a strong message about their desire for fathers to be involved with their children, even if they had used violence in the past. On the other hand, they clearly articulated that men have to change and take responsibility for their abuse and that a man cannot be a good father if he is abusive or disrespectful to his partner or ex-partner.

The research was undertaken as part of the development of the FVPPF’s national violence prevention campaign and has been central to informing organizational initiatives such as the Fathering After Violence Project (FAVP), launched in 2002 with generous support of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.<sup>ii</sup>

### **OVERVIEW OF THE FATHERING AFTER VIOLENCE PROJECT**

The goal of the FAVP is to help men who have renounced their violence become better fathers and co-parents. In partnership with a consortium of Boston based providers, we are developing strategies and interventions to help fathers start repairing and healing the relationships with their children when possible and appropriate.

Our partners are the Dorchester Community Roundtable, the Child Witness to Violence Project at Boston Medical Center, and three batterers’ intervention programs (BIPs)—Common Purpose, EMERGE, and Roxbury Comprehensive Community Health Services. We are working with BIPs, because their services target men who have used violence, and with a child witness to violence program, because its primary clients are the children who have been hurt by that violence. Our intention is to support and complement other innovative work happening around the country in the fatherhood, child abuse, and domestic violence fields.

As with any intervention involving abusive men, their partners and children, we are aware that there are risks in implementing this project. Since the onset of the project, we have repeatedly invited individuals to communicate their safety concerns. Predictably, the number one consideration has involved safeguarding the physical and emotional integrity of the mother and the children. Other concerns have included the risks of encouraging men to have more contact with their children or seek custody when it is not appropriate, and pushing fathers to make promises they cannot fulfill.

The FVPPF's top priority will always be the safety of victims of family violence. We recognize that mothers must be the gatekeepers for abusive men to have any access to their children. Courts and DV experts need to responsibly assess if contact is appropriate and under which circumstances. We also know that many men who use violence continue to live with their families and have uninterrupted contact with their children. We are committed to finding new ways to keep men accountable and invite them to change and repair the damage they have done.

The first stage of this project has consisted of gathering information from focus groups and interviews with mothers who have experienced IPV, fathers who have been abusive, and domestic violence experts and service providers. Based on this information, we have developed a model for understanding the complex process of reparation between fathers and their children. This has led to the creation of a series of exercises and policy and practice recommendations for BIPs. The exercises and programmatic changes will be tested and evaluated in the spring of 2003 by our partner programs in Boston. If the evaluation yields positive results, these will be made available to BIPs across the country in the fall of 2003, both in English and Spanish.

FVPPF is also partnering with the Child Witness to Violence Project to develop guidelines and test the implementation of new practices for working with fathers of children affected by family violence.

This case study will concentrate on the foundation and development stages of our work with batterers intervention programs.

### **FOCUS GROUPS FINDINGS**

In addition to the focus groups with mothers of color mentioned above, FVPPF organized two focus groups with men of color currently attending a BIP in Boston. We also conducted more than 20 individual and group interviews with staff from BIPs, fathering programs, a child witness to violence program, a visitation center, and with a district judge. Critical information came from six fathers who had stopped their violence and had embarked on the process of repairing and healing their relationships with their children.<sup>iii</sup>

Program participants were asked questions about their personal experiences, including the usefulness of batterers' intervention and fathering programs, their process of change and, if applicable, the process of reparation with their children. Providers were asked for their professional opinions about the objectives of the project, the reparation process and any safety concerns.

After analyzing the data, the following information emerged clearly: if men want to start healing their relationships with their children, they must stop their violence by practicing self-care and self-awareness, examining their own past and learning the effects of violence on children. They need to start modeling good behaviors and employing consistent and non-abusive discipline. They must understand the reparation process and follow its steps with commitment and patience.

In November 2002, the FVPPF convened a National Advisory Committee, comprised of recognized experts in the fields of family violence, batterers' intervention, child witnessing violence and program evaluation. The committee provided invaluable insight to guide the development of practice and policy and also helped to articulate important safety and cultural considerations

## **PROCESS OF REPARATION**

After conducting this research, we came to the realization that fathers who are committed to ending their violence and establishing a healthy relationship with their children and their co-parents often feel lost, confused, and isolated on their journey. This might also be the case with their co-parents and children. It became obvious that understanding the process of reparation was an essential step in the project's development as well as a key support that we could provide to the fathers.

We understand that this a very complex and painful process for everyone involved and that, in most cases, it cannot be completed during a whole cycle at a BIP, no matter how long the program is. Every single one of the interviewees who had embarked on the process of reparation had sought additional support after completing a BIP. In some cases, they engaged in individual therapy and, in others, in follow-up groups run by a batterers program. One father pursued mediation with his adult daughter. This information gives more urgency to the idea that all BIPs should be considering offering ongoing, after-care interventions for their participants or, at the very least, build a solid referral base for referrals.

Since we were not able to find a roadmap for the process of reparation in the standard literature, we had to develop our own. This is a working model that is continually evolving. Based on the research described above, we came up with the following stages for change and healing:

1. **CHANGING ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR** – Fathers must stop all kinds of abuse immediately. This is one of the fundamental goals of BIPs and, of course, a prerequisite to starting any reparation. This change, however, will not automatically rebuild trust and caring in the family. Men need to understand that this is a slow and difficult process. Some programs have found that explaining the effects of violence on children can be a powerful motivator for men to start changing.
2. **MODELING CONSTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR** – It is well known that children learn by example. Fathers need to know that as they stop modeling destructive behaviors, they have to make a concerted effort to model positive ones. A key teaching concept in this project is that a father cannot be a good model for their children if he is abusive, disrespectful or hateful to their mother.
3. **STOPPING DENIAL, BLAMING AND JUSTIFICATION** – Most BIPs work towards having men take full responsibility for their abusive behavior. In the context of this process, programs need to teach fathers about the negative effects that denial,

blaming and justification can have on children. Men have to take the additional step of acknowledging to their children that the abuse happened, that it was wrong and that they are fully responsible for it.

4. **BEING FULLY ACCOUNTABLE** – IPV activists often think of accountability primarily from the criminal justice system perspective. Fathers involved in a reparation process need to understand that facing the consequences of their behavior may also include accepting rejection and the loss of trust, love and even contact with their children.
5. **ACKNOWLEDGING DAMAGE** – Fathers must realize the amount of damage they have inflicted and let their children know that they understand specifically how they have hurt them.
6. **NOT FORCING THE PROCESS** – Except for the steps that involve personal change work, every stage in this process has to take place on the children’s own terms and timing. Fathers have to learn how to be patient and not try to push healing or contact with their children.
7. **NOT TRYING TO TURN THE PAGE** – Fathers must be open to talking about the past as many times as the children need to do it.
8. **LISTENING AND VALIDATING** – Fathers need to prepare and be willing to receive anger, hurt, sadness, fear and rejection from their children. They must understand that this is part of the healing process and not a way for the children to manipulate the situation

### **POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS**

The FVPPF is presently researching and developing a series of exercises for BIPs. These lessons will help programs to educate participants about the reparation process and the necessary conditions to embark on it. We are also working on policy and practice recommendations for BIPs designed to help programs think more systematically about children. These will include considerations around safety, cultural competence and supplemental services and planning.<sup>iv</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

Many men who are or have been abusive have regular contact with their children. Some care deeply about their relationships with their sons and daughters. BIPs can and should use this bond as a motivator for stopping violence. Once the abuse has stopped, programs can help fathers start healing their relationships with their children by educating them about and preparing them for the reparation process. Even though some men might be able to take the initial steps of this process during their participation at a BIP, most will need continued support to go through this long and difficult journey in the pursuit of healing and wholeness.

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<sup>i</sup>G. Atchison, A. Autry, L. Davis, and K Mitchell-Clark, Conversations With Women of Color Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence Regarding Working With Men To End Violence (San Francisco, CA: Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2002).

<sup>ii</sup>For more information on these and other initiatives, please visit the FVPF website: [www.endabuse.org](http://www.endabuse.org)

<sup>iii</sup>Fathering After Violence Project: Summary of Focus Group Findings and Program Policy/Practice Considerations (San Francisco, CA: Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2002).

<sup>iv</sup> For more information about these tools and recommendations, please contact the FVPF after November 2003.