

Intervention Strategies with Child Maltreating Men

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While men and women have many similar needs and characteristics, their differences are often obvious in daily interactions, and in how they think and feel. Most who work in the field of child protection recognize that child maltreatment by boyfriends, stepfathers or biological fathers presents the child welfare system with a number of unique challenges, ranging from ambivalence regarding the role of the man in the family unit to engagement difficulties and intervention resistance.

Public child welfare has two fundamental responses. The first requires no therapeutic intervention per se, as it relies almost solely on a law enforcement, judicial and incarceration, or enforced separation response. The second option is fundamentally different. If long-term incarceration is not the intervention, the father or boyfriend may continue to have a relationship with the child (and often his female partner). For abusive males who express a desire to maintain their familial position, provision of suitable interventions to address the maltreatment and resolve the safety threat may be in the child's best interests.

To promote healthy parenting following child maltreatment, what intervention strategies with men are likely to be most successful? In their article titled "*Effecting Change in Maltreating Fathers: Critical Principles for Intervention Planning*," researchers, Katreena Scott and Claire Crooks (2004) add to our understanding of adult male maltreatment intervention by offering some important insights and actionable recommendations.

The authors suggest that the intervention approach with maltreating males is adversely affected by a deeply entrenched bias regarding the amenability of men to change their attitudes and behavior on behalf of their children. In comparison, expectations for mothers are usually significantly higher. Secondly, the authors identify a poorly kept secret in child welfare: the male intimidation factor. Its impact cannot be discounted, especially when child welfare staff is predominantly female and women may be viewed as threatening a man's self-attributes of self-respect, power and autonomy. Thirdly, they acknowledge that there is a dearth of research on when children will, and will not, benefit from continued involvement with an abusive father, although there are numerous theoretical and practical reasons to intervene. Not the least of which is the importance associated with paternal responsibility and accountability and the knowledge that children often retain emotional connections to fathers, even when they are abuse victims. Additionally, many abusive fathers who leave their families still maintain some level of involvement with their children.

Scott and Crooks examined the literature on effective parenting, the known effects of abuse on children, and the behavior change process, including knowledge associated with batterer interventions. Their analysis produced five principles to help guide intervention services with maltreating fathers.

1. *Maltreating fathers tend to exhibit overly controlling behavior, a sense of entitlement, and self-centered attitudes.*

In most instances the most common interventions focus on child management skill deficits. Such a response fails to address the father's sense of self, attitudes and beliefs towards his children (sometimes spouse as well) and his sense of "justified retribution." This dynamic suggests the need for more cognitively based interventions that target the appraisal of power, boundaries in the parent-child

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relationship and the development of a father's capacity to recognize and respect his children's emotional and physical safety and security needs.

2. *Abusive fathers are seldom initially ready to make parenting changes.*

Many abusive fathers start with a thinly veiled hostility toward all outsiders, proceed to superficial participation in the assessment and intervention process, and hold fast to a pervasive distrust that their self-perceived rights and control will not be recognized and preserved. One analysis suggests that some men tend to minimize their own history of victimization, and thereby project this denial onto their own children's' victimization. Scott and Crooks recommend that interventions can incorporate principles from the transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska, 2000) which views resistance as a specific stage of change readiness. This particular stage can be addressed with counseling strategies that respond to resistance and denial and purposefully help the father transition from the precontemplation to contemplation stage.

3. *Adherence to gender-role stereotypes contribute to the maltreatment.*

Many abusive parents tend to be rigid and authoritarian and use coercive parenting strategies. Fathers in particular may be intolerant of a child's resistance behaviors and feel readily provoked. Some fathers even rationalize their behavior as necessary to prepare their children for a harsh world. It is not uncommon for maltreating fathers to maintain an intractable belief that maintaining complete familial control is a direct reflection on their own competence. Intervention specialists need to recognize that the bravado may be masking feelings of powerlessness and thereby leading to "power contests" with their children. When power is threatened, these fathers often respond with exaggerated efforts that may harm their children and the overall family system. Intervention strategies should explicitly address these attitudes to change this powerful maltreatment dynamic.

4. *The relationship between abusive fathers and the mothers of their children requires special attention.*

Abusive men are frequently not readily amenable to interventions based on improving communication or parenting consistency, especially when addressed outside

the context of family stress, marital conflict and domestic violence. In other words, interventions aimed at promoting the father-child relationship should not be independent of the man's relationship to other family members, particularly the man's partner or spouse.

5. *The need to rebuild trust will affect the pace of change and potential impact of relapse on the child.*

In the face of maltreatment, especially by a power controlling family member, children lose their sense of emotional security, experience trauma and sometimes even resort to "traumatic bonding" (confusing and associating love and abuse). Children may also become hypervigilant to the mood of the abuser and his expressions of displeasure. Ironically, this can work against the abuser once he is prepared and willing to make changes. The goal of intervention must not overlook the need to create a sense of safety through therapy, structuring the child's environment by making it more predictable, and helping fathers create new emotional boundaries so children are not viewed as a source of need gratification or problem resolution.

Working with maltreating males in a family system can be very problematic, but this should not be an excuse for lack of effort. It does require an understanding of unique dynamics and their intervention implications. Scott and Crooks emphasize vigilant monitoring to insure a child's protection from further serious harm, the importance of engagement, joining and trust, followed by the building of a child-centered perspective as elements of an effective intervention. When this successfully occurs, it increases the likelihood that interventions directed towards parenting skills development and support will be productive. An increased understanding of the male maltreatment dynamic, and what it suggests for effective intervention, is long overdue.

Scott, K.L. & Crooks, C.V. (2004). "Effecting Change in Maltreating Fathers: Critical Principles for Intervention Planning." *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*. V11, N1, pp.95-111.

Prochaska, J. (2000). *Changing at different stages*. In R. Ingram (Ed.), *Handbook of psychological change: Psychotherapy process & practices for the 21st century* (pp.109-127). New York: Wiley.