

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Motivating perpetrators of domestic and family violence to engage in behaviour change: The role of fatherhood

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Abstract

Policies and practices around domestic and family violence (DFV) increasingly focus on perpetrator accountability. With growing evidence that punitive responses alone have a limited deterrent effect on perpetrators, behaviour change programs play a significant role in creating accountability and improving safety for victims and children. Motivating perpetrators to engage in such programs can, however, be challenging. Few perpetrators seem to recognize the need to change for their intimate (ex)-partner due to victim-blaming attitudes and a sense that relationships are replaceable. Relationships with their children on the other hand seem to hold more value. This article explores the role of fatherhood as a motivating factor for male perpetrators to engage in relevant behaviour change programs. Based on face-to-face interviews with 18 fathers in a court-mandated intervention program, findings alert to the need for education of abusive fathers in 3 key areas: the impact of DFV on children's well-being, the impact of DFV on the parent-child relationship, and the impact of DFV-related repercussions on the parent-child relationship. Fathers' desire to have a relationship with their children suggests fatherhood offers a viable angle to motivate their engagement in interventions that address gendered forms of DFV and subsequently improve victims' and children's safety.

KEYWORDS

behaviour change, domestic violence, fatherhood, perpetrator accountability

1 | INTRODUCTION

Domestic and family violence (DFV) has been subject of international research, policy, and practice enquiries for decades (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1992; Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Although it has been acknowledged that DFV can take various different forms, global investigations of the issue continue to reveal a gendered pattern of male-to-female perpetrated intimate partner violence (Devries et al., 2013; Garcia-Moreno & Watts, 2011). In a substantial number of cases this translates into father-to-mother perpetrated violence as representative surveys reveal that the majority of households affected by DFV have children living in them (Kaukinen, Powers, & Meyer, 2016; McDonald, Jouriles, Remisetty-Mikler, & Caetano, 2006; Mouzos & Makkai, 2004). The significant exposure of children to DFV has received increasing attention over the last two decades with a number of studies highlighting high exposure rates (Kaukinen et al., 2016; McDonald et al., 2006) and diverse and detrimental impacts on children's short- and long-term development and well-being (Edleson, 1999; Kitzman, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003). As a result, parental responsibility in protecting

children from the exposure to DFV has received increasing attention in family welfare-oriented interventions. Much to the detriment of victims of DFV, research reveals that this parental responsibility has primarily been placed on mothers due to persistent gendered perceptions of women as primary carers (Humphreys & Absler, 2011). This is highly problematic in the gendered context of DFV where mothers tend to be the primary victim of the abuse with fathers being the ones accountable for children's exposure to the harmful behaviour (Strega et al., 2008).

Family welfare-centred interventions frequently emphasize that ending the abusive relationship is often the only way of ending the abuse along with its detrimental impact on victims and children (Ewen, 2007; Meyer, 2011). Research and practice evidence on the other hand reveals that women and children's experiences of DFV do not end just because the parental relationship is terminated. In many cases, this form of abuse continues throughout and beyond the process of separation, with children often being used as an extended tool of power and control by the abuser (Bagshaw et al., 2011; Meyer, 2014). In other cases, DFV may not necessarily lead to separation

and many abusive fathers continue to reside with their partner and children (Smith Stover, 2013). As a result, exposure to DFV constitutes an ongoing issue for many children, regardless of whether parents separate or remain together.

Although perpetrator behaviour and accountability is increasingly being addressed from a criminal justice perspective in countries including Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom (Douglas, 2015; Stewart, 2001), there has been limited focus on perpetrator's social accountability in their role as fathers up until recently (Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Smith Stover, 2013; Strega et al., 2008). Parental accountability is primarily being monitored by child protection and family welfare services—services that have historically focused on working with mothers rather than fathers (Humphreys & Absler, 2011; Strega et al., 2008).

1.1 | Invisibility of fathers in policy and practice and its challenge to perpetrator accountability

One of the biggest challenges of using fatherhood as an angle of motivation for perpetrators' behaviour change is that fathers have historically remained invisible in policy and practice centring on family and child welfare matters (Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Humphreys & Absler, 2011). Up until most recently, the focus of child and family welfare interventions has been on mothers as primary caretakers and thus as the ones responsible for their children's safety and well-being. A historical examination of child protection practices in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Ireland by Humphreys and Absler (2011) revealed that in early policy, fathers' responsibility in avoiding children's exposure to DFV was predominantly ignored by encouraging victimized mothers to work harder on the family relationship. This approach later shifted towards encouraging women to separate in order to minimize the impact of DFV on children's safety, well-being, and development. Under either approach, fathers remained invisible. This invisibility of fathers has allowed abusive men to avoid social responsibility for their harmful behaviour towards their (ex)-partner and their children for decades (Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Humphreys & Absler, 2011). More recently, we have been able to observe a shift in child welfare responses which moves away from holding the primary victim accountable for children's exposure to DFV towards placing accountability on those perpetrating the abuse (Mandel, 2013; Smith Stover, 2013; Strega et al., 2008).

This new trend towards greater social and parental accountability of fathers is an important and welcome shift that compliments existing policies and legislations focusing on perpetrator accountability from a civil and criminal justice perspective. Research on masculinity and fatherhood suggests that many fathers have a general desire to have a relationship with their children (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Stanley, Graham-Kevan, & Borthwick, 2012). This desire is frequently met through contact and custody arrangement; even for the most violent of men (Bagshaw et al., 2011; Meyer, 2011). Given this evidence it is crucial to make this contact safe and meaningful through a combination of legislated safeguards and interventions, including perpetrator behaviour change (Smith Stover, 2013; Stanley et al., 2012) and

potentially supervised contact until the latter has been achieved (Harrison, 2008).

1.2 | Bringing social accountability into the equation

Perpetrator accountability is frequently associated with tougher law enforcement responses to DFV and court-mandated intervention programs for those convicted of initial or subsequent acts of DFV (Feder & Wilson, 2005; Sherman, Smith, Schmidt, & Rogan, 1992; Trevena & Poynton, 2016). However, the evidence regarding effectiveness of criminal justice based responses and interventions is mixed. The deterrent mechanism of harsher punishment has been questioned by studies showing that harsher criminal justice responses in form of imprisonment alone have little effect on behaviour change (Trevena & Poynton, 2016), especially where perpetrators have little to lose (e.g., employment, relationship, social status; Sherman et al., 1992). Evidence around effectiveness of perpetrator intervention programs is mixed, with some evaluations identifying no effectiveness whereas others have produced promising results (see for example a systematic review by Eckhardt et al., 2013). Although evidence-based behaviour change programs are deemed crucial in addressing the issue of DFV, an inconsistency in program content, duration, and delivery can make it difficult to identify what works and for whom (Day, Chung, O'Leary & Carson, 2009; Eckhardt et al., 2013).

1.3 | The role of motivation

Another factor influencing the likelihood and longevity of behaviour change is program participants' initial motivation to change and their related willingness to commit to behaviour change programs (Day, 2015; Donovan & Griffiths, 2012). Motivation to change is a particularly complicated issue in the treatment of DFV offenders due to an underlying sense of entitlement to the use of abuse and control among many male perpetrators who often fail to acknowledge the impact of their behaviour on the victimized partner (Heward-Belle, 2016). Although both male entitlement and victim-blaming attitudes are addressed throughout most perpetrator intervention program, the question of how to motivate perpetrators to engage in such programs remains (Zalmanowitz, Babins-Wagner, Rodger, Corbett, & Leschied, 2013).

Research has explored the motivating role of fatherhood and father-child relationship in other areas of behaviour change, such as health-related interventions (Lubans et al., 2012; Roberts, 2004; Stanton, Lowe, Moffatt, & Del Marr, 2004). Although the recent attention to fathers in the context of DFV has led to various examinations of the need for parental accountability when exposing children to abusive behaviour (Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Humphreys & Absler, 2011; Strega et al., 2008), little attention has been paid to the role of fatherhood identity as a motivating factor to create insight into the need for behaviour change (Stanley et al., 2012). Although it is acknowledged that behaviour change needs to occur at the couple level, identifying potential motivating factors beyond the couple level may be useful to facilitate men's effective engagement in behaviour change programs. This paper therefore explores whether other aspects of men's lives, such as their children, may offer a motivator to engage in broader behaviour change.

2 | METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on narrative data from face-to-face interviews with perpetrators of DFV who had been court ordered to attend a perpetrator intervention program at the time of the interview. In Queensland, DFV in itself does not constitute a criminal offence unless the behaviour is covered under criminal law (such as stalking, assault, and sexual assault). DFV-related protection orders fall under civil law as per the Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act, 2012. Once an order is breached, this breach becomes a criminal matter in form of a contravention of the relevant protection order. It is under this criminal law response that participants in this study had been court ordered into a 24-week perpetrator intervention program, following the Duluth principles (for further detail on the Duluth model, see Gondolf, 2007). This program is run in weekly 2-hr sessions by a male and female cofacilitator. Accountability as a father does not form a specific focus of the program content as not all participants necessarily have children. The service provider running the program also offers a voluntary perpetrator intervention program with a specific focus on the impact of DFV on children and the parent-child relationship. None of the men interviewed for the purpose of this study had completed a parenting-focused intervention program.

2.1 | Participant recruitment

The lead researcher and a research assistant attended the beginning of most group sessions over a 4-month timeframe to advertise the study and allow potential participants to ask questions prior to participation. In weeks that were not attended by a researcher, program staff advertised the study and handed out information sheets and consent forms for those potentially interested in participation. This process proved valuable because the 24-week program has a rolling intake, meaning the potential intake of new study participants on a weekly basis. The data presented here formed part of a larger, mixed-method project, bringing together administrative and self-reported data, to examine men's accounts and rationalizations of complying with or breaching their DFV-related protection orders. Findings presented here are solely based on the narrative data derived from face-to-face interviews with a focus on motivation to change.

It is important to note that while men were accessed through a perpetrator intervention program, this study did not intend to assess program effectiveness as men were at different stages of program participation. Accessing men through a probation- and parole- facilitated perpetrator intervention program was identified as a suitable platform during early stakeholder consultation around capturing the views of an otherwise hard to reach population. The project received approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of The University of Queensland and the Queensland Corrective Services Research Committee.

2.2 | Data collection

Participating men were interviewed adjacent to their attendance of weekly program sessions to minimize time and travel constraints. At the time of the interview, men ranged greatly in terms of intervention

progress. Some were as early in as 3 weeks whereas others had recently completed the full 24 weeks. All participants provided written consent for participation in an interview (as well as release of their intake and criminal records for the broader study focus). Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min. They were structured around set themes of nature and situational circumstances of protection order breaches, perceptions of the deterrent mechanism of relevant penalties, and perceptions and awareness of the impact of their behaviour on themselves as well as others. Participants further provided consent for the researcher to access their criminal records held by Queensland Corrective Services, that is, sentenced criminal offences and their perpetrator program intake files, including a risk and needs assessment, for the broader study.

2.3 | Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service. Thematic coding was used, using NVIVO10, to identify differences and commonalities across participants with regards to the situational circumstances under which they breached an existing protection order, their reflections on their abusive behaviour along with its impact on others as well as their own lives, the repercussions they had experienced as a result of their abusive behaviour more generally and their protection order violations in particular and their future outlook with a particular focus on rebuilding or maintaining a relationship with their children. Thematic coding is a commonly used practice in qualitative examinations of social behaviour and interactions that allows researchers to identify higher order codes in the first instance, which can then be further unpacked to identify subthemes as well as possible interconnection between themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Creswell, 2013).

2.4 | Study participants

Twenty-three men participated in face-to-face interviews. Of these, 18 were fathers. Findings are based on the experiences of this subgroup. Fathers ranged in age from 22 to 60 years, with a mean age of 39 years. Fifteen fathers identified as non-Indigenous Australian, two identified as having Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, and one as overseas born. Most fathers revealed some level of relationship instability. Although seven fathers were what they described as permanently separated from the partner whose protection order they had breached, 11 were residing with the victim at the time of the interview. However, two of these 11 fathers had been temporarily separated from their victim and their mutual children. Nine fathers therefore shared experiences of separation from their children, at least temporarily.

The number of biological children fathers shared with a current or ex-partner ranged from one to four. Four out of 18 fathers only had biological children from a previous abusive relationship and no mutual children with the most recent victim. The remaining 14 fathers shared dependent children with the victim whose protection order they had breached, with a substantial number of fathers ($n = 9$) sharing biological children aged 5 or younger. All but two fathers had some form of contact with their children, ranging from informal to formal custody

arrangements for minor children. Of the two fathers without current contact, both had young children with the most recent victim. One was prohibited to see his children under finalized Family Law Court orders whereas the other remained in a relationship with his most recent victim and both parents had temporarily lost custody of their children to child protection services at the time of the interview. Of those who had been separated from the biological mother of their children, only one was subject to supervised contact under a relevant child protection order. The observed arrangements highlight the ongoing contact between abusive men and their biological children, also observed in other studies (Bagshaw et al., 2011; Smith Stover, 2013).

2.5 | Limitations

Given the small, exploratory nature of the study, findings are limited to a small cohort of 18 perpetrators of DFV who were also fathers and are therefore not generalizable to a broader perpetrator population. The specific focus on fatherhood in this paper limits the applicability of findings to those who share biological children with a current or former partner affected by DFV. These findings may not extend to abusive men who temporarily take on a carer role for their partner's children from a previous relationship. Nevertheless, with research evidence suggesting that many households affected by DFV have children residing in them (Mouzos & Makkai, 2004), the latter are likely to play a significant role in many perpetrators' lives (Smith Stover, 2013). Findings generated from this study therefore contribute valuable knowledge on how to use the role of fatherhood identity as a motivating factor when trying to engage abusive fathers in interventions aimed at behaviour change.

3 | FINDINGS

Fourteen of the 18 fathers reported lifestyles marked by at least two of the following criminogenic risk factors: experiences of childhood abuse, a history of substance misuse, an inconsistent employment history, a level of education below grade 10, and criminal convictions in addition to those relating to DFV. In addition to their vulnerable and at times deviant lifestyles, eight of the 18 fathers further described highly volatile relationships, including the patriarchal beliefs around traditional gender roles observed in this sample more broadly along with alleged occurrences of reciprocal violence, drug and alcohol misuse by both victim and perpetrator, and poor conflict resolution and communication skills. Although it is beyond the focus of this paper to unpack the complexities of perpetrator lifestyles in relation to their prior and often ongoing use of abuse, the lifestyles of interview participants suggest that in addition to intervention programs targeting gendered forms of DFV, many of the men in this study would have benefitted from more holistic interventions that address other criminogenic risk factors present in their lives. Other research has highlighted that without addressing the comorbidity of such risk factors observed in many perpetrators of DFV; neither their abusive behaviour nor their parenting skills can be addressed successfully (Smith Stover, 2013).

3.1 | Motivation to change: what role do partners play?

A lack of motivation to change, particularly in court-ordered cohorts, has been raised as a key challenge to engaging abusive men in behaviour change programs (Daniels & Murphy, 1997; Stanley et al., 2012). The same could be observed in this study, with only seven of 18 fathers stating they were actively seeking behaviour change. Most minimized their abusive behaviour, either by blaming the victim for a particular incident or their abusive behaviour more broadly. Many argued that having chosen "the wrong partner" brought out the worst in them and that they would not be abusive if it was not for their partner's character or behaviour. This was illustrated by a 37-year-old father of two children, aged 10 and 14 years who had completed 12 weeks of the 24-week program.

It [the program] won't make me a better person because I wasn't a bad person prior. I was always treating other women with respect. It's just singled out one person in 37 years and, I'm not trying to put myself on a pedestal, but I have dated a lot of women and nothing else has happened in those situations. So it's unfortunate.
(Graham)¹

This statement reflected the views of the majority of fathers ($n = 11$) in the intervention program who believed that by choosing a different partner next time round, their problems would be solved. This may partly explain why the same 11 men stated that behaviour change was not one of their set goals around program participation. It is beyond the focus of this paper to incorporate an analysis of whether and why the intervention program may have worked for some men but not for others. The focus here is on unpacking perpetrators' limited recognition of the need for change for the sake of their intimate relationships; possibly because intimate partners are often quickly replaced. Father-child relationships on the other hand seemed to have a different value in recognizing the need for change, as illustrated in the subsequent section.

3.2 | Motivation to change: what role do children play?

For six of the nine fathers with temporary or permanent separation experiences, at least one of their breaches related to spending time with or handing over children. Common behaviours were verbal altercations at handover, via phone or text message, contacting mothers to talk to the children outside of arranged contact schedules and loitering around the children's school or residential address despite their protection orders stipulating that these places were off limits. In all of these scenarios, fathers described their actions in the context of wanting to see their children or wanting to ensure their children's well-being. Although most fathers had little insight into the impact of their own behaviour on their children's well-being, they were quick to judge mothers' antisocial behaviour. Mothers were often described as neglectful and reckless if using substances around their children, living with someone who exposed the children to substance misuse or driving to a handover under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The

¹Names of study participants have been changed to protect participants' identity.

narratives provided by fathers revealed a strong sense of entitlement to their role as fathers despite their harmful behaviour. However, when others engaged in similar behaviour, fathers described a need to "protect their children," often by breaching their current protection order. Breaches included fathers withholding children at handover, verbally abusing their (ex)-partner for the alleged reckless behaviour, and in some cases, resorting to physical violence when their "concerns" were not met with the desired reactions by the other party.

In addition to justifying their breaches that centred on children and their well-being, fathers further emphasized that they would take the same actions again despite the punitive consequences they faced in some instances. This is illustrated by the narrative of a 38-year-old father who had completed 6 weeks of the intervention program at the time of the interview. During a 15-month separation from his current partner, he breached the protection order multiple times although he acknowledged that not all breaches were detected. For him, breaches primarily arose from loitering around his (ex)-partner's property where his son was residing at the time and from verbally harassing his partner over allegations of substance misuse and withholding his son. On one occasion, those allegations further escalated into physical violence. Despite having been arrested multiple times and incarcerated for 3 months on one occasion, his accounts suggested that the experienced criminal justice responses had little deterrent effect: "I desperately wanted to see my son. I wanted to hear his voice. I wanted to know that he was okay. [...] I'd probably still do it again knowing what I know." (Craig)

Another 39-year-old father who was in his 19th week of the current intervention program described a scenario where his ex-partner allegedly arrived at the handover location while driving unlicensed and under the influence of alcohol with his two-year-old daughter in the car:

On this occasion she turned up drunk, no license driving. I said, "No, you can't take her while you're drunk." She said, "Oh, is that so?" Backed the car out, I had my daughter in my arms, she's driven into me, I've fallen on the bonnet with my daughter in my arms. She held on and screamed. I said, "Here, take my daughter." I regretted that when I did it. At the same time all this other stuff was running through my head that I'd get charged with kidnapping and all that again. (Tim)

Tensions around handover and alleged child welfare concerns formed a recurring theme for this couple. This father had been breached for violating his protection order when withholding his child at a previous handover where his ex-partner allegedly arrived drunk. Although he initially contemplated the repercussions of past behaviour, a third incident turned extremely violent, leaving the victim hospitalized and this father temporarily incarcerated and without contact to his child. Men in this study often saw themselves as protectors in their role as fathers. On the one hand, this may seem distorted given the lack of reflection on their own harmful behaviour when exposing their children to DFV. On the other hand, it may reflect fathers' concern for their children's well-being where risk of harm is more visible and caused by someone else.

The fathers in this study struggled with their fatherhood identity in theory and in practice. Their narratives reveal a strong desire to have a

close relationship with their children along with regrets and a sense of loss where this opportunity had been missed. This is illustrated by Craig's attempts to see his son while being temporarily separated from the mother despite the risk of facing further criminal justice responses:

Legal [support] took nine and half months to finally get us into a mediation room. In that time I missed his birthday, I missed Christmas and it was the second Christmas I didn't get to see him in a row. My son had gone from two to three years old. I did find out where she was living, [...]. So I went in the [neighbours'] backyard and then I could hear my son playing in the backyard. I went down on their pontoon, [...], and I called out [my son's name] and straight away he was like, "Daddy, daddy". It just broke my heart. I just started crying. I left quickly before [my ex-partner] saw me and I got in my car and I was like determined, [...], I'm going to get my son back. I'm going to get to see him no matter what it is, I'm going to get to see him. [...] I wasn't allowed to turn up there to even see my son, because that would be a breach because I was not even allowed to go within 100 meters of her.

Milestones including birthdays and Christmas have a particular meaning in parents' lives and missing out on them was described as particularly upsetting by fathers with separation experiences. This is further illustrated by Adam who had completed 8 weeks of the current program and had limited contact with his three children, aged 3.5, 7, and 10.

I just want equal rights. That's all I want. Birthdays, I want Christmases, because she gets all of them. Last year she met me for a couple of hours down the beach to do presents and stuff with them. I want to share that sort of stuff away from her. Just share it with them. (Adam)

Fathers of older children further realized that having and maintaining a relationship was not just facilitated or hindered by their ex-partner but further by their children making their own choices around whether or not to engage with their fathers. This is illustrated by two fathers who talked about their relationships with their teenage daughters. Mark had just completed the 24-week program, and Steve was in his 16th week at the time of the interview.

With the older one it did [affect our relationship], yeah. The younger one was more clingy to me, but the older one saw through everything [I did] and it really affected her I think. (Mark)

Mainly me eldest one, she's a bit more stand-off since, a bit more hesitant around me. (Steve)

Narratives examined in this study reveal a strong desire of most fathers to be a significant part of their children's lives. For some, this meant reconciling with their estranged partner, for others it meant seeking legal avenues to have court ordered time with their children. Few fathers ($n = 2$) just accepted the fact that current court orders prevented them from spending time with their children. Although this desire suggests that children play a significant role in the lives of

abusive fathers, it can be difficult to untangle whether fathers have a genuine desire to maintain or rebuild the father–child relationship or whether children primarily offer a convenient tool to exercise ongoing power and control over the victim. The purpose here is therefore not to argue for more time spent between abusive men and their biological children but rather to use fathers' desire to have a relationship with their children as an opportunity to unpack how this contact can be made safe and meaningful through relevant interventions.

4 | DISCUSSION

The narratives of fathers around their fatherhood identity on the one hand reveal a lack of insight into their own harmful behaviour, which has also been observed in other research (Perel & Peled, 2008; Stanley et al., 2012). On the other hand, fathers readily raised child welfare concerns when the other parent exposes mutual children to potentially harmful behaviour, reflecting common victim-blaming attitudes among perpetrators of DFV (Henning & Holdford, 2006; Zalmanowitz et al., 2013). Both observations are not uncommon. Despite increasing attention to the impact of children's exposure to DFV on their short- and long-term well-being (Edleson, 1999; Kitzman et al., 2003), other research also reveals that a lack of father's recognition of the impact of their behaviour (Perel & Peled, 2008; Donovan & Griffiths, 2012). This may be due to perceptions that children have been shielded from the exposure if they did not directly observe the abuse and/or have not become a direct target. In addition, parents often lack insight into the various forms of children witnessing DFV even when they are believed to be asleep or playing in another room (Edleson, Mbilinyi, Beeman, & Hagemester, 2003).

Although fathers in this study often underestimated the impact of their abusive behaviour on their children's wellbeing, they had noticed the impact their behaviour had on their parent–child relationships. Those who had been denied spending time with their children for an extended period (e.g., through temporary court orders or incarceration) realized that they missed out on seeing their children grow up. This was particularly obvious to those with little children who grew and changed significantly, even over a few months. Fathers further realized that even where contact was re-established at a later stage, the initial separation and prior exposure to DFV had affected the parent–child relationship, especially with younger children. Fathers of older children on the other hand talked about the impact they discovered in ongoing relationships where children started to be withdrawn and preferred to spend time with the nonabusive parent instead, if given the choice.

The victim-blaming attitudes observed around men's intimate relationships and their (ex)-partner's parenting role are another common observation among perpetrators of DFV (Henning & Holdford, 2006; Heward-Belle, 2016). Although they partly reflect concern for their children's well-being, it also needs to be recognized that such tactics are often employed to distract from their own accountability by highlighting the flaws of others. Both victim-blaming attitudes and the lack of recognition and insight into the impact of their own behaviour towards the other parent therefore needs to be addressed through engagement in evidence-based interventions (Gondolf,

2007; Stanley et al., 2012). The role of the father–child relationship may act as a motivating factor here.

Unpacking fathers' desire to maintain or rebuild a relationship with their children is a crucial element in facilitating safe and meaningful contact between abusive fathers and their children. Fathers need to develop an understanding around the impact of their behaviour towards the other parent on their children's wellbeing and development during early engagement with support services. An initial understanding of the impact on the parent–child relationship may generate the necessary motivation required for engagement in and commitment to behaviour change. Given that children's exposure to DFV is primarily caused by how the abuser interacts with the other parent—whether postseparation or in an ongoing relationship—participation in theoretically informed, gender-focused intervention programs remains an essential component of behaviour change programs for abusive men (Day, 2015; Stanley et al., 2012), regardless of parenting status.

5 | IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Based on the findings presented in this paper, illustrating to fathers that the problematic behaviour they display in their intimate relationships is essentially what prevents them from developing or maintaining not only contact but further meaningful relationships with their children seems essential. This places the spotlight on those engaging with abusive fathers during the early stages of responding to families affected by DFV, including child protection services responding to child welfare concerns and law enforcement professionals responding to initial protection order applications. Professionals in these areas have a unique opportunity to educate abusive men around their father–child relationship in an attempt to motivate them to engage in broader behaviour change around DFV, either alongside or in absence of punitive interventions.

Given the gendered nature of most forms of DFV, broader behaviour change programs require a focus on social accountability, gender, and relationship education (Gondolf, 2007; Smith Stover, 2013). The lack of perpetrator's initial acknowledgement of the impact of their behaviour on the primary victim, observed here as well as in other research (see, e.g., Henning & Holdford, 2006), suggests that motivation for engagement in behaviour change may need to be garnered from a different angle for many men. This is not to say that social accountability should replace criminal justice accountability as it relates to DFV. Instead, it should form a key component in the initial stages of engaging abusive men in relevant interventions.

This study has highlighted the emphasis perpetrators of DFV place on the role of children and their father–child relationship. Although most men in this study had a limited understanding of how to be a good father, the majority voiced a strong desire to see their children grow up and have a meaningful relationship with their offspring. These findings raise important implications for engaging fathers early on in service responses to DFV, especially where the aim is to generate motivation for behaviour change. Three areas of education for fathers emerge as salient from the current findings, namely, education around the impact of DFV on children's development and wellbeing, the impact of DFV on forming and maintaining father–child relationships,

and the impact of repercussions for abusive behaviour (such as incarceration or noncontact orders) on fathers' ability to form and maintain meaningful relationships with their children.

By generating an understanding of their behaviour and its consequences around child welfare concerns, perpetrators are forced to take responsibility in their role as fathers. Further, by illustrating to fathers that their harmful behaviour not only creates safety concerns but essentially disrupts their father-child relationships long term, fathers may develop sufficient motivation to engage in evidence-based behaviour change programs. Given the limited evidence of deterrent effects of punitive responses alone, in this study and elsewhere (see, e.g., Trevena & Poynton, 2016), behaviour change remains the most viable option to create an environment where father-child contact places neither children nor mothers at ongoing risk. Engagement in relevant behaviour change program may take place in form of early interventions as well as alongside punitive measures.

6 | IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Research around the role of fatherhood in motivating DFV perpetrators to change is still in its infancy. In addition, we are yet to generate conclusive evidence around the effectiveness of different behaviour change programs for DFV perpetrators. Future research on interventions for fathers therefore needs to account for perpetrator and program diversity in a larger sample and examine how motivation to change can be garnered more effectively in court mandated programs. Further research is needed to identify motivating factors for men where children do not form part of the abusive relationship. Lastly, regardless of men's status as a parent, future research would benefit from examining the effectiveness of behaviour change programs coupled with other criminal justice responses.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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