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**‘Very few organisations provided a direct support service to the children of men on programmes’**

**‘Should be actively encouraged and supported to tell their children about their attendance’**

# The Need for Accountability to, and Support for, Children of Men on Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programmes

Many domestic violence perpetrator programmes have incorporated the issue of children’s safety and the harmful parenting of domestically violent fathers within their programme content. However, little attention has been paid to the services offered to, and possible outcomes for, the children of men on such programmes. This paper draws on a survey of 44 domestic violence services and 73 interviews with men who were on, or had completed, a programme, ex/partners, programme workers and programme funders/commissioners, to explore how a positive outcome for children might be conceptualised.

Despite a desire to improve the situation of children, very few organisations provided a direct support service to the children of men on programmes. Work with men and support for their ex/partners operated as some form of proxy service to children. Many men had not told their children they were attending a perpetrator programme, and we suggest that more encouragement to do so would improve perpetrator accountability and respect for children. A positive outcome for children from their father’s involvement on the programme is identified as having three dimensions: changes in the father that would benefit children; changes in the father-child relationship; and changes in the child’s functioning. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGES:

- A positive outcome for children whose father has participated on a domestic violence perpetrator programme has a range of dimensions.
- Men on domestic violence perpetrator programmes should be actively encouraged and supported to tell their children about their attendance.
- There is a need for more direct support services for the children of men on domestic violence perpetrator programmes.

KEY WORDS: fathers; domestic violence; perpetrator programmes; children

**A**t a time when further reforms of the family justice system are in motion to ensure children have contact with their fathers, it seems particularly

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important to remember that some fathers are also perpetrators of domestic violence. The last two decades have seen a body of research develop on the issue of children and domestic violence (e.g. Harne, 2011; Hooper and Humphreys, 1997; Mullender, 1996; Mullender, Kelly, Malos and Irman 2001; Mullender and Morley, 1994). Evidence relating to the adverse effects of children's exposure to domestic violence led to an extension in section 120 of The Adoption and Children Act 2002 to the legal definition of 'significant harm': harm now includes 'any impairment of the child's health or development as a result of witnessing the ill-treatment of another person, such as domestic violence'. Yet, despite domestic violence being acknowledged as a child welfare issue, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that the legal and policy landscape recognises that perpetrators of such violence are often central in the lives of children as fathers/father figures. Likewise, research shows that violent men often fail to recognise the impact that their partner abuse has on their children (Harne, 2005, 2011). Despite some initial (and ongoing) resistance, there now appears to be an increased recognition that working with male perpetrators can result in positive outcomes for both women and children where such work is included as part of a holistic, coordinated community response to domestic violence (HM Government, 2009). Work with domestic violence perpetrators in England and Wales is provided through two routes. Convicted offenders can be sentenced or referred to 'criminal justice based' programmes in prison or in probation-led community settings. 'Community based' programmes (what used to be referred to as 'voluntary') take self-referrals, partner-mandated referrals and statutory referrals such as social services, Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) and health.

This paper considers the potential outcomes for children whose fathers/father figures attend community-based domestic violence perpetrator programmes, drawing on data from an online survey of Respect members (a UK membership association for domestic violence perpetrator programmes and integrated support services) and analysis of sections of 73 in-depth interviews with men on programmes, partners/ex-partners, programme workers (including women's support workers) and funders/commissioners which dealt explicitly with what a positive outcome might look like for children. As yet, we lack data on the views of children themselves; a remaining lacuna which is being addressed in our ongoing programme of research on this topic (Susan Alderson is in the final year of her PhD research which uses a task-based interview with children and young people). The term 'father' is used to describe men who are present in children's lives and have been identified as fathers by participants in this research, regardless of whether they are biological, adoptive or non-biological parents.

### Current Knowledge and Policy Framework

Despite evaluations of domestic violence perpetrator programmes both in the UK and the US, there are no research studies that investigate what the outcomes of these are for children and young people. This is in part the outcome of two disconnects in UK policies: perpetrators of domestic violence are rarely referred to as fathers; and simultaneously the rhetoric of 'engaging men as fathers' in child welfare policy fails to take into account that they may also be perpetrators of domestic violence (Collier and Sheldon, 2008; Eriksson and Hester, 2001).

**'Some fathers are also perpetrators of domestic violence'**

**'Violent men often fail to recognise the impact that their partner abuse has on their children'**

**'We lack data on the views of children themselves'**

**'Around 750 000 children per year in the UK who witness violence in the home'**

**'Child welfare professionals within statutory services often fail to engage with perpetrators;**

**'Lack of engagement was due in part to concerns about staff safety'**

There are around 750 000 children per year in the UK who witness violence in the home (Department of Health, 2002), and the negative effects of this have been well documented (Kelly, 1994; McGee, 2000; Mullender and Morley, 1994; Mullender *et al.*, 2002; World Health Organisation, 2009). The issue has thus moved from the periphery of social policy to recognition as a central child protection issue. This mainstreaming of domestic violence as a safeguarding issue has resulted in significant increases in referrals to perpetrator programmes from child welfare agencies (Featherstone and Peckover, 2007), made possible by the already existing network of community-based programmes. The social work response to domestic violence, however, continues to be deemed problematic, with a growing body of evidence highlighting professional ignorance and avoidance of perpetrators (Devaney, 2009; Munro, 2011). There has previously been a paucity of statutory guidance on what constitutes an appropriate safeguarding and protective system (Rivett and Kelly, 2006). Although some guidance now exists, it remains the case that child welfare professionals within statutory services often fail to engage with perpetrators of domestic violence and instead make abused women responsible for their children's safety (Farmer, 2006; Radford and Hester, 2006).

Since 2004, the Parenting Fund has commissioned a range of research projects to explore the issues faced by fathers whose children have involvement from social care services. The findings of these studies have been written up in three *Fathers Matter* reports. In *Fathers Matters 3* (Roskill *et al.*, 2011), two key themes relevant to this paper emerged:

- social workers' failure to assess fathers and other male figures in the child's life; and
- fathers being marginal to planning, professional involvement, and rarely challenged about their behaviour (p. 113).

These themes are further explored by Stanley *et al.* (2011), who found the lack of engagement was due in part to concerns about staff safety. Practitioners also noted that the lack of community-based perpetrator services in some areas contributed to the pressure they placed on mothers to protect their children from witnessing domestic violence. The gap in services is a significant issue; Coy *et al.* (2009) found that less than one in ten local authorities in the UK had a community-based domestic violence perpetrator programme. Roskill *et al.* (2011) also note ongoing debates about such interventions:

'... we suggest that some of the tensions reflect concerns about the balance of programmes and what their primary focus should be. Is it to change behaviour towards women or children or both?' (p. 12)

They comment further that while enhancing the safety of women/mothers is a basic principle of all programmes, how the issue of abusive and neglectful fathering is addressed remains opaque in some. Equally concerning is the emergence of child-centred fathering programmes being offered as an alternative to perpetrator programmes, rather than as a complementary intervention to run alongside them. In conclusion, Roskill *et al.* (2011) suggest that perpetrator programmes in the UK need to make domestically violent fathers' harmful parenting an integral component of their work. Some innovative approaches

are emerging, for example, the Jacana project which was part of the Domestic Violence Intervention Project (DVIP) programme in London (Coy *et al.*, 2011).

We are only aware of one other study that focuses directly on children and domestic violence perpetrator programmes. Rayns (2010) surveyed 18 children and young people aged eight to 18 about their father's participation on an integrated domestic abuse programme (or related programme). Findings revealed that although children had limited knowledge of perpetrator work, they saw it as a helpful and an appropriate response. Revealingly, they considered their mother to be 'safer' when their domestically violent father was on, or had attended, a perpetrator programme, but did not necessarily feel safer themselves. The study also found little consistency with regard to safety planning work for the children.

Respect works on the principle of 'promoting best practice in working with perpetrators, to ensure that they prioritise the safety of those affected by domestic violence – namely women and children'. A core feature of their accreditation standard is that increasing children's safety requires addressing the harmful parenting of domestically violent fathers (Respect, 2008, p. 77). It is research with Respect member organisations that underpins this paper.

## Methodology

Two sets of data were collected and analysed. The first, a quantitative survey, was conducted to provide a general scoping of the nature and extent of direct work that is undertaken with children of men on domestic violence perpetrator programmes. The survey was conducted using an online research tool (Bristol Online Survey) and invitations to participate were distributed via email to all Respect members. A filter question asked whether or not the programme was doing direct work with children and/or young people: this led to sections on either the nature, extent and funding of this work or their reasons for not doing such work. A total of 44 organisations responded.

The second dataset consisted of 73 semi-structured interviews. This self-selecting sample came from five community-based Respect member organisations and consisted of: men who were currently, or had previously been, on programmes (n = 22, 8 had completed and 14 were still on the programme); female partners/ex-partners (n = 18, 4 were separated and thus designated ex-partners); programme staff (managers, group work facilitators and women's support workers, n = 27); and funders and commissioners (n = 6). Interviews lasted for around 30–60 minutes and were transcribed and thematically analysed using a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis programme (QSR NVivo). The qualitative interviews asked about what success meant generally to the participant (reported in Westmarland and Kelly, 2012), with a specific set of further questions exploring what success might mean for children. Here, we present selected findings from the online survey and analysis of the sections of the qualitative interviews related to children. Ethical approval for both parts of the study was granted by the School of Applied Social Sciences Ethics Committee at Durham University.

**'One other study that focuses directly on children and domestic violence perpetrator programmes'**

**'Research with Respect member organisations that underpins this paper'**

**'A total of 44 organisations responded'**

**‘Half reported not providing any direct service for children and young people’**

**‘We found very little synergy between organisations’ work with men and direct work with their children’**

**‘Half had not told their children anything’**

## Results

In this section, we present the key findings from the survey of perpetrator programmes followed by discussion of the qualitative interview material.

### *Survey of Respect Members*

Of the 44 domestic violence services which responded to the online survey, half (n=22) reported not providing any direct service for children and young people. The most frequent explanation (n=8) was that this was due to a lack of funding capacity; a further four stated that working with children and young people was not in their objectives and one referred to existing local provision by another organisation. None chose the options that not providing services for children was due to a lack of knowledge and skills or the legal implications

Organisations providing a direct service varied considerably in what this comprised, ranging from awareness-raising in schools through to providing direct support. Unexpectedly, we found very little synergy between organisations’ work with men and direct work with their children: only three organisations worked with the children and young people whose fathers were on the programme. This is probably, in part, due to the requirements of funders and commissioners, with money for work with children often focused on wider, generic prevention approaches. Thus, despite section 17 of the Children Act 1989 placing a duty on local authorities to provide a range and level of services to meet the needs of children, there is currently a distinct lack of direct support for the children of men attending perpetrator programmes. Even where such services exist, previous research has highlighted their lack of continuity due to insecure funding (Roskill *et al.*, 2011).

### *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell – Children’s Awareness of the Programme*

In the qualitative interviews, ex/partners and men on programmes were asked what their children were told about their father’s participation perpetrator programme: half had not told their children anything, and this proportion was the same where the father was and was not living with the children. The main reasons offered for not telling children were: the children were too young to understand; parents did not want children to feel uncomfortable; or that shame and stigma prevented them from being honest.

‘Obviously our two little ones, we don’t want to put too much pressure on them’ (Man on programme)

‘...when I’ve come home the children have been in bed and me and me partner’s discussed what’s happened at the perpetrator programme. I don’t know if I was ashamed to tell me children, I’m not sure, it’s just something I have never done’ (Man on programme)

‘[My partner] doesn’t want to tell his daughters due to the stigma attached to being involved in a domestic violence programme. Maybe in the future.’ (Partner of man on programme)

‘Well we tell them the truth. . . we wanted to be open with them. . . we didn’t want to lie. *I don’t tell them everything that goes on there* [our emphasis], cos I mean, it shocked me when I went there’ (Man on programme)

‘[Son] is fine with it. I’ve explained that he’s doing the course to help him stop shouting and swearing at mam. . . and he’s fine with that’ (Partner of man on programme)

*Central but Invisible – Direct Support Services for Children*

The lack of resources for children was a key theme in the qualitative interviews with programme workers. One argued for the importance of including children's work as part of an integrated response.

'It's hard. . . kids are focal to our work but we never see them!' (Programme worker)

Providing integrated support services for partners is a core requirement of Respect membership. Change work with men and support for women can be argued to be an indirect service to children, to the extent that they intend to decrease violence and abuse. However, the absence of contact or direct work with children means that this operates as a proxy service to increase children's safety.

Even the few services which had a dedicated children's worker thought this did not constitute adequate provision.

' . . . we definitely need another children's worker to pick up on the cases we are getting through. . . it's absolutely ridiculous the amount of referrals that are waiting. So that actually isn't about the structure of the programme, its more about not having the capacity. I think the more services there is, for the whole family, not just for men the more successful the whole thing will be' (Programme worker)

Some programme workers were disappointed and frustrated that they were not able to offer more to children.

'I feel terrible that we don't do enough directly for the children. There's almost nothing in this country for children where he [perpetrator] is still in the home. Is that moral? . . . We are one of the agents of change amongst other agencies and there really isn't a place for children to have a voice talk about it. I feel that we don't do enough' (Programme worker)

*Thinking About Outcomes of Perpetrator Programmes for Children*

Westmarland and Kelly (2012) found that 'success' in domestic violence perpetrator programmes meant far more than just 'ending the violence'. Rather, there was recognition that while physical violence may stop, women and children could continue to live in unhealthy atmospheres laden with tension and threat. A set of more nuanced indicators of success were developed out of the interview data. This is not to suggest that the ending of violence and abuse was not identified as important, rather that it was not the only (or for some even the primary) measure of success.

This section presents data on what all four groups of interviewees thought positive outcomes for children might include. We recognise the absence of children's own views here, but a further study is piloting an appropriate method to ask children about the changes they wanted to see/have seen following their father's attendance on a programme.

*Dimension 1: Changes in the Father That Would Benefit the Children*

The reduction or cessation of domestic violence as a positive outcome for children was commonly cited, especially by the men on programmes and programme workers. Some of the men appeared to recognise the adverse effects that their violence had had on their children. For example, one man thought his children wanted a 'normal' family and the absence of all forms of abuse was central to this.

**'It's hard. . . kids are focal to our work but we never see them'**

**'While physical violence may stop, women and children could continue to live in unhealthy atmospheres'**

**‘Increased safety was also important for programme workers’**

**‘A level of potential change that is more than just stopping using violence’**

**‘The level of alcohol consumption is also directly related to the severity of violence’**

‘Well number one, for mum and dad to be normal, whatever you want to call normal. Not to be arguing all the time, me not to be flipping my lid, not to be verbally, physically and emotionally violent to my wife and my son. That’s the main point. That damaged the kids the most.’ (Man on programme)

Increased safety was also important for programme workers. One revealed how encouraged she felt when the child of a man on the programme told her that ‘mammy and daddy don’t fight anymore’.

Some ex/partners identified changes to the children’s behaviour following the reduction of the violence, explicitly linking changes in the man’s behaviour to their children’s improved wellbeing.

‘You can see, now that he’s not violent anymore, you can see how much they were on eggshells beforehand, you can see changes in the kids’ (Partner of man on programme)

For women, enhancing the awareness of their partners about the impact of their behaviour on the children was very important; an implicit endorsement of the aim of programmes to enable men to reflect on their violence and the impacts it has had on others. If men develop a deeper sense of what it is like for children to live under their regime of control, alongside taking responsibility for change, this represents a level of potential change that is more than just stopping using violence; it requires changing how they interact and engage with their children.

Reducing drug and alcohol use is not a key objective of most domestic violence perpetrator programmes. However, a number of men recognised that their children wanted them to change in this way too.

‘They would like us to do more with them. . . I always do things with them now like board games but when I was drinking and I was waking up in the morning and feeling groggy, I wasn’t in the best of moods. So I think they [children] would like. . . to not see us drink anymore. . . They just want us [me – regional use of ‘us’] there, rather than being in and out of their lives all the time’ (Man on programme)

Although the causal link between domestic violence and drug and alcohol misuse is contested, there appears to be a relatively high incidence of misuse among domestic violence perpetrators (Humphreys *et al.*, 2005; Roskill *et al.*, 2011). Evaluations of US perpetrator programmes show that a man committing violence whilst drunk is one of the most influential risk markers for future violence (Gondolf, 2002). The level of alcohol consumption is also directly related to the severity of violence (Finney, 2004). The implications for children was a common theme in the in-depth interviews.

‘No drink or drugs. [This programme] works alongside AA for me, so sobriety is one thing they [children] would like. A more caring father. They don’t actually tell me they’ve noticed, I’m just surmising. Calmer, more caring. Hopefully they’d say that [this is what they want]. It’d be very interesting for you to interview them. I don’t know how much damage was done’ (Man on programme)

**Dimension 2: Changes in the Father-Child Relationship**

For women, men’s enhanced communication skills and emotional awareness fed into improved relationships with their children. This, they believed improved children’s wellbeing and was, for many, of paramount importance.

'I think he [partner] has a bit more patience now, whereas before he couldn't handle him [son]. I think now I would say he has got more patience and wants to do things with him [son]... takes him places' (Partner of man on programme)

'I've always had a brilliant relationship with my kids, but my partner was always quite distant with them. They were there and that was about it. But since he's been on the programme he's become aware of how passively he used to listen to them. Now he does try to actively listen to what they say and make comment – probably not the right comment, but it doesn't matter because he's actually acknowledged what they've been saying. With the kids, he actually realises now that they're people and not 'things' that are in the house causing an annoyance' (Partner of man on programme)

For children to have the possibility of expressing their feelings and thoughts, to have a voice and not to be ignored or silenced were all deemed 'success' by mothers. In the quote above, the woman notes that despite her partner's clumsiness in his responses, his willingness to listen meant the children felt heard and she attributed this change to participation on a perpetrator programme. Women assumed, and in some cases observed, that increased wellbeing in their children also improved their sense of safety, with both creating more stability in their lives.

### Dimension 3: Changes in the Child's Functioning

There was a marked consistency in interviews with ex/partners: they were more likely to focus on subtle everyday illustrations of the changes that they wanted to see/had seen for their children than the reduction/cessation of violence. A recurrent theme was the challenge to men to regain the trust of their children.

'When I took him back after the last incident, they were a little bit wary, but now they're fine and see a lot of him. They can see he's quite calm and there have been no incidents since he joined the group at the beginning of the year' (Partner of man on programme)

Children and young people's school performance also featured strongly in the interview data. It has been well documented that children living with domestic violence can develop cognitive and attitudinal difficulties that adversely affect their performance at school (Hughes, 1992; NSPCC, undated a, undated b; Wolfe *et al.*, 1986). One woman reflected on how the effects of domestic violence on children can often be overlooked until behavioural problems occur in school: '... they don't say a lot and you don't realise the damage until they're misbehaving at school' (Partner of man on programme)

A shared hope was that men's participation on the programme would lead to a child's greater sense of stability, and that this would thread through into their school life in terms of better relationships with peers, social competences, improved attendance and academic attainment.

'She sometimes finds it hard that Daddy's not at home, but there's another part of her that's relieved that there's no arguing, so she's doing very well at school' (Partner of man on programme)

The disruption that domestic violence creates for children and how this can affect school performance is recognised in the Local Government Association (2006) commissioning guidance for children's services. Addressing this can also be linked to two of the five outcomes for children in the policy document *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003): 'Enjoy and achieve' incorporates the issue of improved school attendance and positive

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**'She sometimes finds it hard that Daddy's not at home, but there's another part of her that's relieved'**

**‘They prefer honest and open communication’**

**‘Such conversations . . . provide a space for children’s hurt and distress to be heard’**

**‘Everyday practices within statutory services collude with this disconnection by failing to hold violent men to account’**

social development, and ‘make a positive contribution’ includes engaging in law-abiding behaviour, positive relationships and developing self-confidence. All hopes expressed by interviewees as potential positive outcomes from completing a perpetrator programme.

### **Discussion**

Research with children who have lived with domestic violence has consistently shown that they prefer honest and open communication, whilst recognising that mothers often tried to protect them through silence (McGee, 2002; Mullender *et al.*, 2002). We would add to this that honesty with children who are old enough to understand about their father’s participation on a perpetrator programme: men telling their children should be understood as part of holding them accountable for their behaviour. Programmes should expect, and enable, men to communicate with their children about the steps they are taking to end their abusive behaviour.

Our data show that men who did tell their children were emphatic that they wanted to be honest, but even here some tempering of information was evident. While it is undoubtedly inappropriate for a child to be given detailed information about the content of programme sessions, there appears to be some minimising of why men are attending, and thus what changes children might expect in his behaviour. Such conversations also offer opportunities for fathers to show that they are aware of the costs of their actions for children and provide a space for children’s hurt and distress to be heard.

In 2006, the Local Government Association guidance for commissioners of children’s services stated that appropriate domestic violence group work programmes for children and young people need to be developed that link into domestic violence perpetrator programmes meeting Respect minimum standards. This study echoes previous findings, that there remains a distinct lack of services particularly for children who remain living at home with both the non-abusing parent and domestic violence perpetrator (Humphreys *et al.*, 2001; Mullender, 2004). The reality is that children are most likely to access services if their mother leaves (Devaney, 2009) and especially if she finds a place in a refuge; however, even here provision may decrease as austerity measures bite (Towers and Walby, 2012). UK family and child welfare policy has under-emphasised the fact that some fathers are also perpetrators of domestic violence, and everyday practices within statutory services collude with this disconnection by failing to hold violent men to account for either the violence to their partner or the failure to protect their children (Devaney, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

Research to date has had little to say about whether perpetrator programmes change violent men’s fathering (Harne, 2011). The issue of safe fatherhood has become a central focus of Respect perpetrator programmes, and the data presented in this paper suggest that a positive outcome for children has several dimensions (see also Westmarland and Kelly, 2012). The three broad dimensions identified show that domestic violence perpetrator programmes

have the potential to enhance children and young people's lives. We argue that honest and open dialogue about their participation with children is fundamental if the principle of accountability for violence is to be extended to children. To this end, perpetrator programmes must integrate this into their work, including content which enables men to feel knowledgeable and confident in talking with children about their participation and what they are working to change.

Changes that research participants placed considerable significance on in terms of increasing positive outcomes for children were: the reduction or cessation of violence; healthier and more engaged father-child relationships; improved school performance; and the reduction of drug and alcohol abuse. We further contend that if perpetrator programmes are successful in changing men's ways of engaging with their children, and men can safely be involved in their children's lives, then they are integral to an overall social work response to the safeguarding and protecting of children who live with domestic violence. They offer a response that does not rely on women to protect children from violent fathers.

The lack of domestic violence support services for children whose fathers are on perpetrator programmes, highlighted in both the quantitative and qualitative elements of the research, gives cause for concern. UK legal and policy initiatives have neglected the large numbers of children and young people who remain living at home with both the non-abusing parent and the perpetrator. Inclusion of direct support would ensure that this group of children and young people does not slip through the net of fragmented services and they are able to give their views about how the programmes have (or have not) made a difference to their lives.

As community-based perpetrator programmes take an increased proportion of referrals from children's services, outcomes for children require more specific attention. This paper has explored the views of adult stakeholders in programmes on what success might look like for children and young people. Children themselves, however, often have a unique perspective of domestic violence (Scottish Government, 2008) and it is imperative that children's views are added to this framework. We are currently undertaking research to elicit the views directly from children and young people. Findings from this will ensure that we have a deeper understanding of what children hope for when their father attends a programme. Introducing accountability to children for men on programmes and increasing direct support to children are directions of travel that can begin now.

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**'Direct support would ensure that this group of children and young people does not slip through the net of fragmented services'**

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