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Walking with Dads - Making men who cause DFV harm visible in Child Safety work

Rodney Vlais, with Steve Lock

Steve Lock is a Principal Program Officer for Walking With Dads (WWD) in Child Safety Programs at the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services. Steve is at the forefront of efforts in Queensland's child protection system to address the cause of harm to so many children and families: men's perpetration of domestic and family violence. In this conversation, Steve talks about the Walking with Dads program, collaborations between Child Safety and men's behaviour change programs, and the future of this work.

Steve, thank you for your time in talking with us today. Could you start by outlining how WWD actually operates?

It's in four sites at the moment, Caboolture, Caloundra, Gympie and Mt Isa. Each Child Safety Centre has a Walking with Dad practitioner, who not only works with a small caseload of DFV-perpetrating fathers themselves, but also focuses on developing a new culture of applying Safe and Together model principles within their Child Safety offices. They support other Child Safety staff to adopt a perpetrator patterned-based approach to their work, such as by accompanying staff on visits and modelling appropriate engagement practices, discussing cases, etc.

It's not only about engaging the man. So far, a lot of what Child Safety staff in these sites have appreciated about the model is how it helps them to take a different approach when interviewing and working with non-offending parents.

The WWD trial sites are in areas that are matched with an existing or newly established men's behaviour change program. This is deliberate. The WWD workers are developing pathways for referrals to the MBCP in their local area. But it's not just about referring the father off to the program. The intent is for the WWD or other Child Safety practitioners to work with the father to prepare him for the program, build his motivation to attend, and to support his attendance through the program. This preparation work is vital to maximise the likelihood that the man will actually get to the program and will participate earnestly.

We also want the WWD practitioners and behaviour change programs to work closely together on risk assessments, information sharing and case reviews. And to take a joint approach towards setting goals to work towards safe parenting capacity. A big part of the WWD approach, and the Safe and Together model, is setting sufficiently high expectations for DFV-perpetrating fathers concerning both what they need to stop doing, and need to start doing, to fulfil their responsibilities as a father. They might not achieve these expectations, and we need to be astute when they don't and constantly monitor and assess risk all the way through. But we've got to set them.

The WWD program has been strongly influenced by the Safe and Together model of David Mandel and his colleagues. What is it about this model that has been so influential?

I think we became aware of the model at just the right time. When he was first invited to Australia by the Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research and No To Violence in Victoria, we were ready



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to hear what he had to say. We'd been uneasy about how our Child Safety systems and practitioners could fall into the trap of taking a punitive approach with the non-offending parent in situations of domestic violence. The Carmody Inquiry had released its final report only a few months earlier and there was a positive energy of trying new approaches.

David came with the principles and practice frameworks that spoke to our unease, articulating stuff that we'd thought and indirectly talked about, but in a lot more depth. While the model has layers of sophistication at both systemic and practice levels, and a lot of important subtlety that can easily be skimmed over, it's also not rocket science. It was like "this stuff is so obvious!"

But it's still a really big shift. Making fathers who perpetrate DFV visible in Child Safety practice, holding them accountable for their behaviour, developing partnerships with the non-offending parent trying to protect her family from his patterns of coercive control, holding high expectations of him ... we weren't really doing this. We still have a long way to go.

This is a big culture change for a child protection system.

Yes. The trouble is that traditional child protection practice has been prone to seeing mothers as 'failing to protect' their children from his dangerous behaviour. Children have been removed from mothers on this basis. This isn't fair and doesn't represent perpetrator accountability. The onus should be on the perpetrator stopping his behaviour, not on the mother to address the DV. It shouldn't be her responsibility to stop the DV, especially when she's already doing so much to try to keep her and her family safe from his behaviour.

I have to say, we've had tremendous support from senior and executive management here. WWD wouldn't have happened without them creating a positive environment for us to develop, document and trial this model.

The stakes are really high here. We are talking about the difference between systemic re-abuse of domestic violence victims – and the damage this does to their relationship with their children – versus working in partnership with non-offending parents to counteract the harm done by the perpetrator. If we judge her as 'failing to protect', we are colluding with the perpetrator and magnifying the intentional harm he is doing to her and her bond with her children.

The model is not only about engaging with domestic violence perpetrators, but also supporting mothers and non-offending parents more generally?

Absolutely. In fact, this is where the WWD initiative has had the most impact so far. Some men who use DFV are hard to engage with ... it's hard to even reach them, it takes a lot of patience and collaboration with other agencies sometimes to make initial contact. Or after starting work with them, their attendance might be irregular. This is something we need to work harder at, or maybe work more systemically at.

But we're seeing a big difference already through the program in how the WWD practitioners are supporting Child Safety Officers to work with mums. It's about the lens through which we view non-offending parents. It's what David calls pivoting to the perpetrator: understanding a mother's messiness, her anxieties, disease with us, her 'non-cooperation' as we'd used to think, and her strengths and resistance to the violence, through the lens of the perpetrator's patterns of coercive control. Her behaviour makes sense if we understand what he does to control her and family, to instil fear and terror. It makes it easier for us to support her and her bond with the children, which he might be deliberately targeting.

This is a big part of the work. Helping her to realise her existing strengths as a mother, what she's already doing to protect her children, and trying to repair some of the damage he's done to her ability to be the parent she wants to be.

And it moves practice away from a 'failure to protect' approach!

Exactly. She could be the most protective parent in the world, but the child could still be at huge risk through absolutely no fault of her own. His behaviour creates the risk, and the accountability needs to be on him to reduce the risk.

It's totally unfair for us to put the burden of responsibility onto mothers to keep their children safe from the father, when this is often outside of their control. It's also unfair to expect them to follow through with measures such as separating in situations where that might actually increase their risk.

We need to make it clear to mothers that the focus of our concern is the fathers' behaviour towards her and the children, and the damaging affect that this is having on them and the family. We can identify and affirm the positive work she is doing to parent and protect her children under difficult circumstances, and use these as the foundation for safety planning.

When we started WWD, we knew that developing partnerships with mothers would be a big part of the initiative. We weren't under any illusions: we're working to change a long history of our Child Safety system – just like every child protection system in Australia and probably the English-speaking world – being unsophisticated about DFV. But six months into the trials, we now realise that the foundation of partnering with non-offending parents to the whole approach is even bigger than we'd imagined.

The typical approach that WWD practitioners support Child Safety Officers to take is to critically reflect on what lies underneath a mother's behaviour in child protection cases. A common example is how Child Safety Officers might characteristically approach a family where the father is using DFV and the mother has a significant alcohol problem. The usual approach in the case plan has been to focus solely on the mother, with the case plan requiring her to address her drinking problem, sort out the DFV (for example, by leaving him), and to learn to be more assertive in relation to her partner. That's the usual approach, with the case plan placing full responsibility on to her.

Instead, in the WWD approach, we encourage Child Safety Officers to consider what he might be doing that leads to or complicates her drinking problem. How he might be deliberately making it difficult for her to address her drinking. How he might be using the child protection system against her, using the system to collude with how he frames her as a useless mother. He might even be contacting Child Safety to make a 'complaint' about her parenting. This stuff happens, very commonly in our cases.

We're getting fantastic feedback from our Child Safety Officers and partner agencies about the impact that WWD is having. Of course, it's just a start in a few trial sites, and there's an independent evaluation in train, but early indications are hopeful. The positive feedback from partner agencies is especially important.

Engaging men who perpetrate domestic and family violence can be difficult. What has been WWD's experience so far?

Well, it's about being patient really. Sometimes a single Child Safety investigation or case isn't long enough to engage with a man. We need to be able to track him over time. The case might be closed because he leaves the family and eventually goes on to form another relationship. In these situations, risk management is about trying to keep him within view of the system. Some men aren't going to engage at all of course, but some might after the third or fourth encounter with the system. And for some particularly resistant men, it's not safe to engage them, or at least not at this point in time.

When we do get to engage with men, a big part of our focus is to emphasise that their behaviour to their partner is a parenting choice, that it has direct impacts on their children and the wider functioning of the family. It's about giving a man the opportunity to contribute positively to the well-being of his children and his family as a whole, whether he is still living with them or not.

We're revitalising a new, voluntary way of keeping some cases open when we want to do further work with a man perpetrating DFV. It's not fair on mothers to keep a child protection case open when we are satisfied that the risk that he poses to the family has reduced sufficiently. But what we can do, with a man's consent, is

open what's called a Support Service Case. This isn't a statutory case, but it enables us to keep working with him over time. Even if the risk he poses to the family we've been working with has reduced, he might well cause harm again in the future, so continuing work with him makes sense in some situations.

But it's also not just about individual casework. The WWD practitioners are working very hard on the ground at an operational level, and their support and liaison with Child Safety Officers to change their practice is identifying systemic barriers and constraints. There are lots of systemic issues that need to be changed so that our child protection system can move towards more of a Safe and Together type approach.

A big theme here is that the more that we try to understand a perpetrator's patterns of coercive control and the ways he sabotages a mother's parenting and relationship with her children – and map out the family's connection to services and cultural supports – the more we realise that we don't have the databases or data systems to record and track patterns over time. We don't have the capacity to track patterns in a way that draws information from partner agencies into some sort of overall, combined narrative about what he does to control and organise the family around his 'needs', or should I say his 'rule'.

The systemic focus is quite important.

Yes. We really want to set the bar as high for fathers as we set it for mothers, and to give them an opportunity to meet our expectations. But when they not only don't reach these expectations, but keep causing harm to their family, we need a systems approach to address the risk.

Just as an example, one thing that Child Safety can do, when the perpetrator continues to be a risk, is to work with police and the victim towards making an application for a DFVO, or varying an existing DFVO, to include conditions on the order regarding his access to his children. This is a really legitimate action for us to take in partnership with police.

There's also a big focus on perpetrator accountability through the WWD program. For you Steve, and for the program, what does this mean? The words 'perpetrator accountability' are used so often now ... that we must 'hold perpetrators accountable' ... it's often talked just about in terms of punishment.

For us this means how the father needs to be accountable to what his children and family needs from him to feel and be safe, and for the children's overall development. It's like what I said before, what he needs to stop doing, and what he needs to start doing. What he needs to do different to be a safe parent, and a safe co-parent, to support rather than sabotage his partner's parenting. And what all this means for his specific family. It's about fine-tuning these goals on a family by family basis. Accountability to their needs.

There are new men's behaviour change programs commencing in each of the WWD trial sites, to work in close unison with the Child Safety Offices in these sites?

Yes, in each WWD site, a men's behaviour change program is being funded to be delivered by an NGO in a local area.

It's early days, but WWD practitioners are developing pathways for referrals to the newly established men's behaviour change program in their local area. But it's not just about referring the father off to the program. The intent is for the WWD practitioner or the Child Safety Officer to work with the father to prepare him for the program, to build his motivation to attend, etc. This preparation work is vital to maximise the likelihood that he will actually get to the program and will participate earnestly.

The new MBCPs are being set up in the spirit of very close collaboration with Child Safety through the WWD practitioners. The intention is for this to stimulate Child Safety and the new MBCP to work closely together to collaborate on risk assessments, case reviews, determination of safe parenting capacity and information exchange about the perpetrator. There might even be tools or templates developed specifically for both Child Safety and the men's behaviour change program to use together, so they are on the same page. We'll see.

There might be opportunities later down the track for WWD practitioners to co-facilitate a men's behaviour change program for a period. But even if this doesn't happen, there will be other opportunities more

generally for WWD and men's program practitioners to learn from each other and skill-share. This will help WWD practitioners on their professional development journey to develop their perpetrator assessment and intervention skills.

And there are Caring Dads programs commencing at some of the trial sites too?

We kind of feel a bit spoilt with options in some ways, with both men's behaviour change programs and Caring Dads available in some of the trial sites. But they aren't alternatives of the same thing. Caring Dads is meant for situations where the main risk from the father's behaviour, at least in the short-medium term, is in relation to the children. When the perpetrator poses a significant risk to the mother, he should be referred to a men's behaviour change program. And ideally, some men would do a men's behaviour change program first and then Caring Dads.

It's really a decision as to what the focus should be on first – the risk to the children, or the risk to the mother. And of course, the two overlap, in the sense that addressing the risk to the mother can reduce the risk to the children. But sometimes, the most pressing dynamic risk factors, and acute risks, point to harm being caused to the children. Provided that their mother is not at significant risk as well, this is where Caring Dads steps in.

Finally, you were saying that WWD is being evaluated?

Yes, CQU Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research is conducting a three-year evaluation. This will include a strong Indigenous perspective focusing on the Mt Isa trial site. WWD is also part of the ANROWS Invisible Practices project, that's setting up communities of practice in Queensland, NSW, Victoria and WA to support quality practice in bringing DFV perpetrators into view of Child Safety and protection systems.

The evaluation will investigate in the trial sites how many perpetrators are referred and then actually commence with a men's program or Caring Dads. It will assess indicators of engagement, outcomes, etc. But going back to what we discussed earlier, the evaluation won't all be about engagement of men. The evaluation also needs to capture the impact of WWD in turning Child Safety's approach around in the trial sites towards partnering with mothers and non-offending parents, rather than colluding with and magnifying the perpetrator's intent to destroy her worth as a mother and the relationship she has with their children.

Thank you for your time today Steve. We hugely appreciate it, and will watch with interest how these trials continue to unfold.

Rodney Vlasis is a policy analyst, writer, researcher and trainer in family and domestic violence perpetrator interventions and intervention systems. An experienced men's behaviour change program practitioner and social justice activist, Rodney is currently consulting to NGOs or governments in most Australian states/territories.