Engaging fathers who use domestic and family violence

Rodney Vlais, November 2024

Family support (including intensive support) services have a highly important role in engaging fathers who use domestic and family violence. While child and adult victim-survivors actively resist the violence they experience, and constantly strive to maintain some space for action and normality in their lives, they cannot be left alone to limit the harms they are subjected to. Being allies to children, mothers and other adults and family members experiencing violence means attempting to address the source of the harm, where we can, and when it's safe to do so.

There is no doubt that fathers who use DFV can be difficult to engage, or to engage safely. Workers have understandable fears of causing more harm, of inadvertently escalating him or colluding with the excuses he uses for his violent and controlling behaviour. Workers can also fear for their own safety.

These fears are important to listen to. They can direct us towards the need for proper planning, and to equip ourselves with skills to feel more confident to manage the engagement, support the father's self-management, and to manage ourselves during our interactions with him.

Historically, however, we have let these fears immobilise us, resulting in plenty of engagement with the protective parent, and little or none with him - or at least little focus with him on his harmful behaviour. This has added to loading the adult survivor up with an impossible set of expectations to manage safety for her children, on top of everything she is already needing to shoulder due to the father's use of coercive controlling violence.

So what does it look like to make fathers and their patterns of harmful behaviour more visible in our work? What are the skills required to do so?

The good news, and the bad news, is that we don't need to load ourselves up with impossible expectations either. This is good news because it's important to know the limits of our role, and to recognise that some fathers have gone too far down the rabbit holes of believing that they are the victim, of standing behind (and making full use of) their male entitlement, and of developing maladaptive responses to their own trauma-based wounds, for us to effect any significant change.

The good news is that even in these circumstances, there are valuable things we can do. We can document his patterns of harmful violent and controlling behaviour, and the impacts of these behaviours on children's welfare, family functioning, and on the adult survivor's parenting and wellbeing. We can sensitively explore and document everything that the adult survivor is doing to maintain dignity, safety and normality for her family. We can help other services who have an important role in the developmental ecology around the child to better understand the family's experiences of violence, to see the adult survivor in a new, more positive and resourceful light, and to be less susceptible to the impression management and systems abuse tactics of the father causing harm.

We can listen out for indicators of risk. We can share what we learn about the father's harmful beliefs and thinking, any escalation in his instability or in complex needs, and the unhelpful or dangerous meaning he is making out of any new circumstances, with other services involved in managing risk.

And we might be able to scaffold and support him to walk across some small steppingstones towards later and bigger changes in his behaviour. We might be able to open up some motivational corridors, some lanes through which he might be willing to work on some aspects of his harmful behaviour, even if it's only the tip of the iceberg. Small, incremental first steps that might still make a meaningful difference to his family.

The good news is also that we do not need to feel the pressure to become behaviour change workers and to try to 'fix' him. Our work with him is part of what is likely to be a long journey towards change - our role can be important, but it is only one or two steps along the way. Even if we are working with him for many months, we might only get to a few small, incremental changes. We do not need to feel dispirited about this - we are making a start.

So this is some of the good news. It's also some of the bad news. These men can be very resistant to change. They often have many years (sometimes decades) of adopting thinking and beliefs that makes themselves out to be the victim, not the person causing harm. They can see the actions of police, child protection, the justice system and other responders as further 'proof' that they are being 'victimised'. They are often emboldened by male entitlement and broader men's rights movement and manosphere narratives that tell them 'men are no longer allowed to be men anymore'. Some might have developed coercive controlling attitudes and behaviours in part as a way to cope with deeply traumatic family-of-origin experiences, and/or be facing marginalisation and oppression on a daily basis due to their lack of white or other forms of privilege.

The bad news is that many of these men won't be interested in a referral to a men's behaviour change program (the referral of choice - it is not safe to refer these men to couple counselling, family therapy or to private practitioners who don't have specialised expertise in DFV, as this will often just make things worse). Or at least not when you start work with them. The family support or intensive family support service is often left carrying the can of risk, hopefully in collaboration with other services.

This means we need to both peddle quickly, and work slowly, at the same time. Peddle quickly to attempt to engage the father in some early steppingstone safety planning, to try to open up a lane that he is willing to travel through to explore at least some aspects of his harmful behaviour. Peddling quickly to make a start on something, even if it's only the tip of the iceberg, that might start to make even a small positive difference for his family. And while doing so, peddling quickly to do all the behind-the-scenes risk management work that he might not be aware of, such as sharing information with any other services that also might be attempting to keep his behaviour within view.

At the same time, we can only work with him slowly. His defensiveness, his denial, minimisation and other-blaming, serves to protect him. Not only from the risk that he might incriminate himself if he discloses the true extent of his behaviours. Defensiveness also protects himself from experiencing the shame of confronting that he has behaved in ways that is not truly how he wants to be. He might consider himself to be a 'good Dad', a 'strong man for his family', and other such things. He does not want to see himself as someone who has traumatised his children and taken their childhoods away from them. He might not want to see himself as a 'wife beater' (language that of course we would never use, including because it only further obscures the insidious nature of pervasive coercive controlling tactics that do not involve physical violence).

The ugly truth is that some fathers are so down the rabbit hole of wanting to punish their (often separated) partner, due to the righteous anger concerning the 'injustice' that 'she has done to him', that they remain closed off to the harm they are causing their children. They are single-mindedly intent on punishing her, at all costs, irrespective of the impacts on their children. They might also be deluding themselves that "I am the only sane parent!" and that somehow their children would be better off without her (or with less contact with her). Of course, this can smokescreen their sense of male entitlement over their children.

But many fathers can be reached, if we don't go too quickly. If we are mindful of not pushing up too hard, too fast, against their shame barriers. While we want to minimise collusion with men's denial and other-blaming, and minimise collusion with their violence-supporting narratives and victim stance attitudes and beliefs, we can't flood them with shame, humiliate them, or moralise at them. There are a set of *mid-point skills* that we can use between colluding and being overly confrontative.

Finding this balance also involves a dance between three anchor points in our engagement with him.

First, we have bottom lines regarding the behaviours we want him to change. Behaviours that he needs to stop doing, as well as others that we might want him to start doing, or to do more of. Behaviours that we want him to be accountable for arising from what we learn through sensitive engagement with those who experience his violence, and from information obtained through other sources. We might not know all or even many of these bottom lines at the start - sometimes it takes a few months of engagement with family members to discern a clear picture of the extent of his harmful patterns of behaviour, the multiple ways in which his behaviour impacts child and family functioning.

We cannot flood him with demands for behaviour change stemming from these bottom lines. In some situations, it might not be safe to introduce them into our engagement with him, especially if he is not aware of what we know about his behaviour and if he might retaliate against family members for disclosing about his behaviours to us. Ignoring the bottom lines completely however can often be collusive; when and how we scaffold a focus on (some of) them requires discernment.

This also means keeping two other anchor points for the engagement in mind. One of these is to create a 'positive emotional space' (as my colleague and MBCP trainer and supervisor Sarah May from NSW so clearly says) for the father to sit with the discomfort involved in exploring how he could be more of the father that he really wants to be. This involves lots of positive questions about what it would look like to be the best father he can be, about what his kids need from him, what he might be modelling to his children (the good and the bad), what his kids are learning from him that might not hold them in good stead in life, how he wants to help them cope with their own big feelings, what roles he can play as a Dad, and so much more. Invitational explorations that we could ask any father, not just those who use DFV.

David Mandel from the Safe and Together Model emphasises that to prepare ourselves to build fathers' motivation to look at their harmful behaviour, we need to practice engaging fathers per se in positive, energising explorations of what it means to show up for their kids, and to be the best Dad they can be. These explorations can also of course involve helping the father to explore the different ways that he can be a Dad (not just being a 'providing Dad' and a 'decision-making Dad'), and whether he can contribute to his family outside narrow 'man box' confines.

Of course, with many fathers who use DFV, we will need at some point to attempt to open up a positive emotional space for the father to explore the problematic parenting practices that he is using. Many fathers who cause DFV harm adopt authoritarian methods of 'managing' (controlling) children's behaviour, and believe that their partner is 'too soft' on the kids. They are often under-involved in their children's lives, or alternate the provision of affection with the elicitation of fear. These fathers often choose to 'let it rip' in front of their children to control their behaviour, rather than seeing children's 'problematic behaviours' as ways in which they attempt to communicate their needs. We need to work with these fathers to support child-centred, rather than self-focused, parenting.

The third anchor is to create opportunities to help the father see that one of the most important parenting choices he can make is how he treats the other parent(s) of his children. That he cannot be the best Dad that he can be if his behaviour impacts his ex/partner's ability to parent, and her bond with their children. That supporting these relationships - and the family's broader relationships with extended kin, community and health and community-based services - is crucial for his children's wellbeing.

For example, my colleague and friend Peter Thorpe from Queensland, one of Australia's leading subject matter experts in engaging fathers who use DFV in child protection systems, takes opportunities to do this when constructing initial genograms with fathers. He might ask them, when talking about each of his children, some of the vital things that his partner does to support that child's wellbeing, and to meet the child's needs. He writes these positive qualities down on the genogram, as seeds for later conversations to explore in more depth.

If these are our three anchors for the engagement, and we attempt to dance between them, how do we hold the father in a conversation anchored by them? When what he wants to talk about is his story of how 'unfair' he has been treated - a story of blame, the 'problems' that his partner has 'caused him', how 'unfit' she is to be a parent or that 'she is the one who needs help'...

There are several sets of skills involved here. They might seem like a lot, but we might already have more of these skills than what we might first think. Existing skills that we can stretch to apply carefully and discerningly with adult users of DFV, if we are supported through some training, coaching and collaboration with our peers.

One set of skills, as mentioned above, concerns how to stay in the mid-point between colluding with, and moralising at, the father. There's many micro-skills involved here (for a brief snapshot of some, see section five of the practice resource at https://nada.org.au/resources/engaging-men-who-perpetrate-domestic-and-family-violence-in-the-alcohol-and-other-drugs-treatment-context/) or the demonstration videos and scripts at https://nurturing-nonviolence-rccf.sydney.edu.au/safer-children-safer-communities-action-research-project/

Importantly, the use of mid-point skills requires us to manage ourselves in the engagement, and to know the situations in which we might tend to drift too far towards either collusion or coercion. Self-awareness is critical!

Another set of skills involves creating what could be termed a *conversational container* for the engagement. How to respectfully keep the conversation on track given that we are wanting him to sit in some discomfort to talk about things that he might want to avoid. There's a range of skills involved here - signposting, normalising, 'verbal contracting', re/directing, the use of open directed questioning, talking about the talking and others.

Another involves supporting the father to self-manage difficult feelings during the engagement, and to attempt to prevent escalation. There are a range of things that workers and managers can do to support staff safety, especially in the context of home visits. This includes helping workers to learn the skills to attempt to prevent client escalation, and to open up avenues for de-escalation through how they support the client to manage themselves during the engagement.

There are a set of skills involved in creating a positive emotional space, as mentioned before. How to find the 'hooks' through which the father might be willing to sit in some degree of discomfort - how to adopt invitation practice that might gradually build the father's willingness to open up to more of his harmful behaviours, and the impacts of these behaviours. To help him see that these behaviours and impacts are not in line with his aspirations, his values, his hopes for himself and his family, and with how he sees himself, or would prefer to see himself, as a father and as a man.

It's this dissonance, the discomfort through which he comes to realise that he is not living up to his aspirations, hopes and values, that can create the greatest lever for change. At the same time, flooding him with this discomfort, too fast too soon, might only lead him to feel humiliated - not a safe state to leave a man who is using DFV in.

South Australia is our nation's home to invitational approaches towards helping people address heavily ingrained behaviours. Many of you will have invitational narrative, or maybe motivational interviewing, skills towards helping your clients to themselves articulate goals towards change. Often, building upon a father's articulation of some starting goals that you have 'led him' to articulate through patient questioning, rather than us coming in too heavy with the bottom lines, will result in more productive engagement over time. Peddling slowly to build engagement and commitment, while simultaneously peddling quickly (at least behind the scenes) to respond to any escalating risk.

And there are safety planning skills. When we have been able to open up a conversational container focusing on at least some starting aspects of the father's harmful behaviour, and/or when the father has articulated some things that he realises he needs to do differently, we can commence some safety planning with him. Often, this can't get straight to the heart of the matter. We might need to start indirectly, or with some 'adjacent' safety planning on things that seem to be skirting around the edges, but which nevertheless might make a start towards something more direct in the weeks or months ahead.

Going back to the bottom lines anchor, sometimes it is safe and productive to be direct and honest with him. To not beat around the bush. He might appreciate a 'no bullshit' approach. We might be able to introduce some goals into the safety planning conversation directly and transparently. But other times, we will need to start off at the edges, and focus on something that he has articulated that he wants to change, that if he is able to change, might then make a more direct and central change at a later time that little bit easier. The sort of initial 'little lever' change that might be a steppingstone to later and greater things.

Peddling slowly, and quickly, at the same time.