Three anchors model when engaging fathers who cause domestic & family violence and co/parenting harm



Rodney Vlais, May 2025

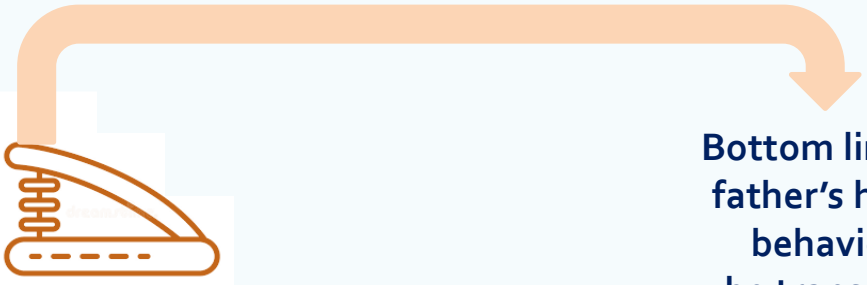
with inspiration from the Caring Dads program,
Safe & Together Institute, and invitational narrative practice

all resources mentioned in this guide can be downloaded from the Featured section of my profile page

We need three anchor points when engaging fathers who cause domestic & family violence, and abusive fathering, harm

Create a positive emotional space for him to see what he can gain through the support you and other services are offering him – engaging him like one would with any father about being the best they can be for their kids





- Patiently open space for him to discuss aspects of his behaviour he's willing to disclose
- Connect with 'the part of him' that wants the best for his children and his family
- Find the hook(s) to encourage his stand against the harmful behaviour
- Begin safety planning: what he can do to move away from causing the harms, and towards alternative behaviours aligned with +ve values
- Listen out for (and proactively assess) indicators of serious risk and harm
- Follow-up and extend over time to more of the bottom lines / his harmful behaviours

Bottom lines: the father's harmful behaviour – be transparent with him, when it's safe to do so, about what he needs to stop doing, or to start doing / do more of, to cease harming child & family functioning and his ex/partner



Help him recognise, and be motivated by this recognition, that how he treats the mother of their children, and how he supports her relationship with them, is one of the most important things he can do as a parent



We can springboard toward the bottom lines from an initial focus on healthy fathering and the behaviour that moves him closer to this

in a nutshell

- Set up emotional safety for the conversation → adopt a strengths-based approach towards the strategies he uses to manage discomfort, invite him to self-monitor during the session to prevent escalation, signpost and negotiate the agenda as you go along, ground towards self-care at the end to help him leave the conversation safely.
- Create opportunities where you can focus on the bottom anchor → invite him to talk about the positive qualities of his ex/partner as a parent and what she/they means to each of their children.
- Early in the conversation, include a strong focus on left anchor → attempt to create a positive emotional space by exploring his views on what being the best Dad he can be might look like to his children and family, what his children and partner would say if they were asked this, what he wants to model to his children, what his hopes are for his children, what he does and can do to contribute towards these hopes.
- If/when he starts to focus negatively on the actions of others (e.g. his ex/partner) or enters into "I'm the victim!" narratives, use **conversational container** and **mid-point skills** to keep the focus on him and his choices.
- Use positive explorations from the left anchor as a **springboard** towards the right anchor. Explore what his children / their Mum see him doing when he's *not* that best Dad… what would they say he needs to stop doing… when he *moves away* from being that best Dad, what does that look like?
- Scaffold elaboration, building upon his language while minimising collusion… invite him to talk more about his behaviours… invite him to talk about impacts, noting that he might only be disclosing or willing to think about the tip-of-the-iceberg of his harmful behaviours and impacts.
- Be prepared for him to intensify his victim-stance narratives as the conversation becomes uncomfortable → you might need to increase your active use of conversational container and mid-point skills.
- Be aware of how he is responding, don't flood him with shame. Check in with him. Support him to sit safely with the tension of how the harmful behaviours he's willing to admit to aren't consistent with being the Dad he wants to be… the best Dad he wants to move towards.

when to use this model

This practice model is relevant for family support, child protection, community-focused or any other practitioners or workers who engage fathers using domestic and family violence, and/or abusive parenting and co-parenting

It's a model about how to focus on our bottom lines about the changes the father needs to make – the behaviours and harms he's causing that we want to hold him accountable for – in the context of a parallel focus on motivational enhancement and positive fathering.

It also incorporates the Safe and Together Model principles on multiple pathways to harm, including how many DFV perpetrators sabotage or impact their ex/partner's parenting, bond with her children, and the child's and family's connections to social, cultural, educational, health and service system supports.

This model is useful when we can't confront the father directly with what we know about his violent and controlling behaviours and the harms caused to children, the adult survivor, and to the family. For example, when we can't confront him because he doesn't know what we know about his behaviours, and if he came to know what we know, might increase his violent and controlling tactics against his ex/partner and possibly also his children

We might also not be able to confront him if going too fast too soon will overwhelm him with shame, resulting in him disengaging, or becoming even more unsafe to his family members.

We also know from the Caring Dads program and other DFV-informed approaches, that to help build a man's focus on abusive fathering and co-parenting, we might first need to engage him on explorations of healthy fathering.

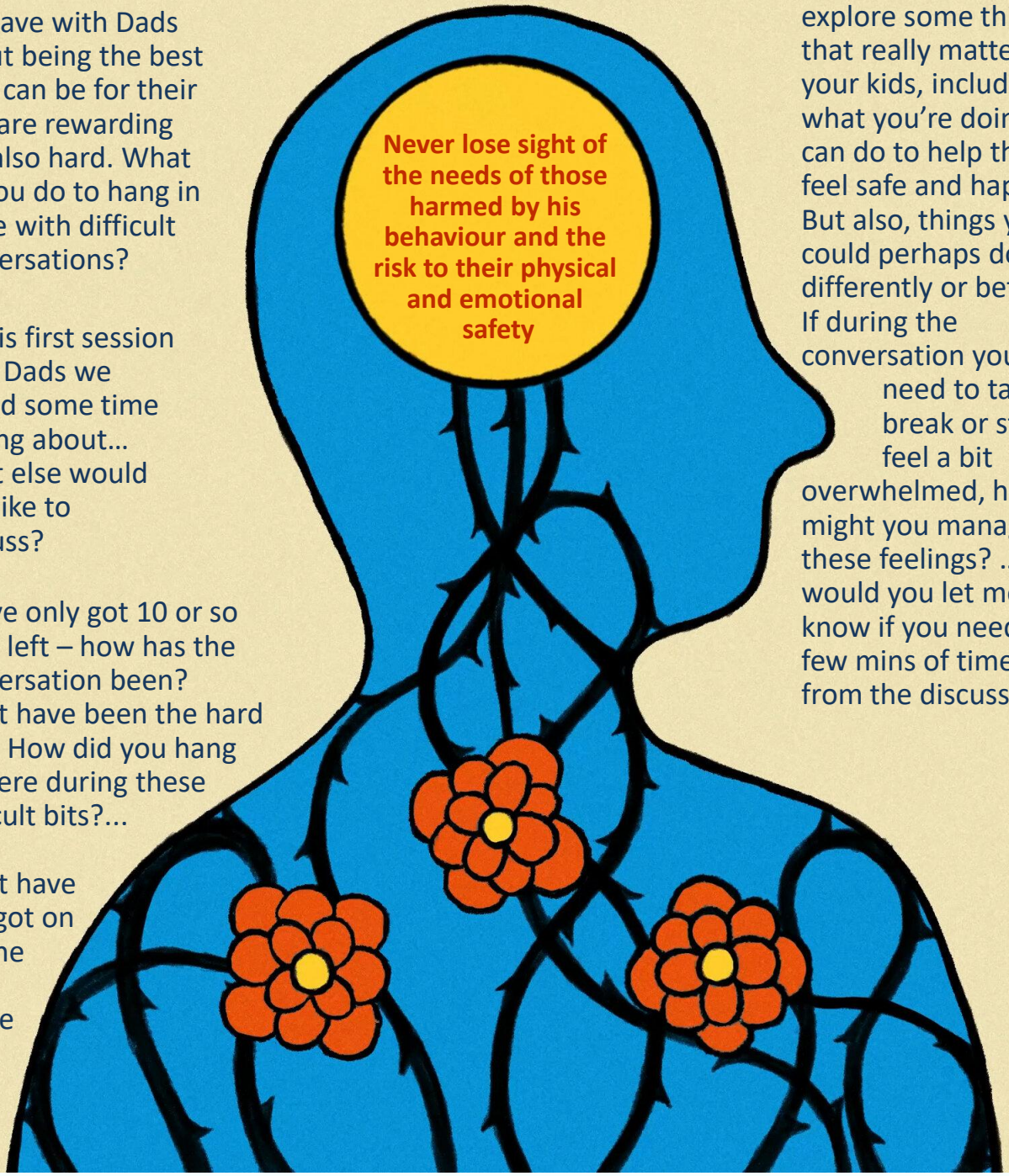
Set up emotional safety for the conversation, and support engagement

The conversations we have with Dads about being the best they can be for their kids are rewarding but also hard. What do you do to hang in there with difficult conversations?

In this first session with Dads we spend some time talking about… what else would you like to discuss?

We've only got 10 or so mins left – how has the conversation been? What have been the hard bits? How did you hang in there during these difficult bits?...

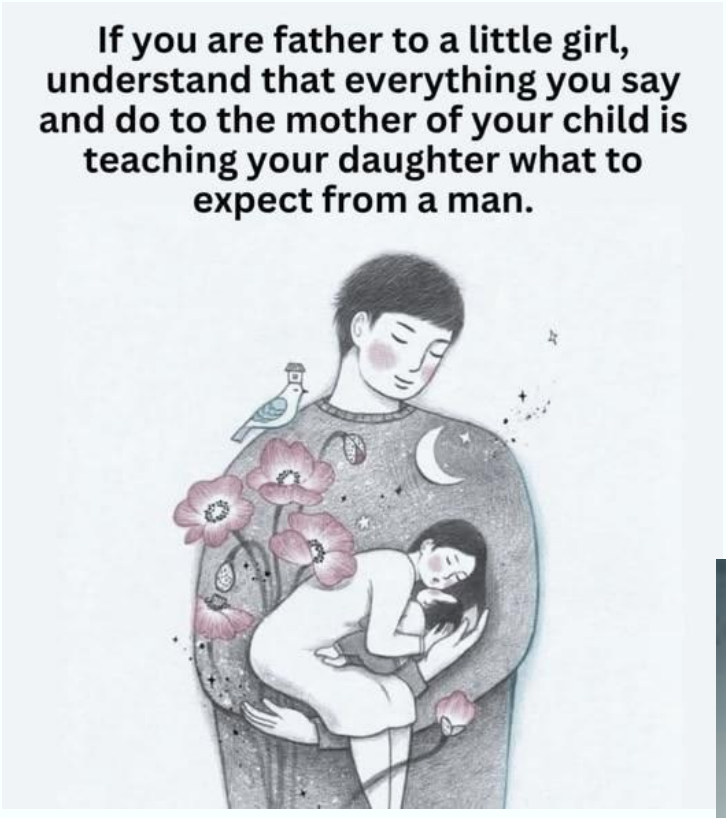
What have you got on for the rest of the day?



We're going to explore some things that really matter for your kids, including what you're doing and can do to help them feel safe and happy. But also, things you could perhaps do differently or better. If during the conversation you need to take a break or start to feel a bit overwhelmed, how might you manage these feelings? … How would you let me know if you need a few mins of time out from the discussion?

See the post and resource **Concepts, models and skills in engaging adults who use DFV** for more guidance

Create opportunities throughout the conversation to focus on the bottom anchor



If we to ask your youngest, what would he say are three qualities about his mother that he really loves?

Let's take a look at your children's needs that are met by their mother… what can you do to help her meet these needs? What needs can you help directly to meet?

Parenting is a hard job. If we were to ask your partner, what would she say that she would want you to do to support her in her role as a mother?



On a scale of 0 to 10, how important is your partner to your children?... What makes her so important to them?... What can you do to support their relationship with your partner?...



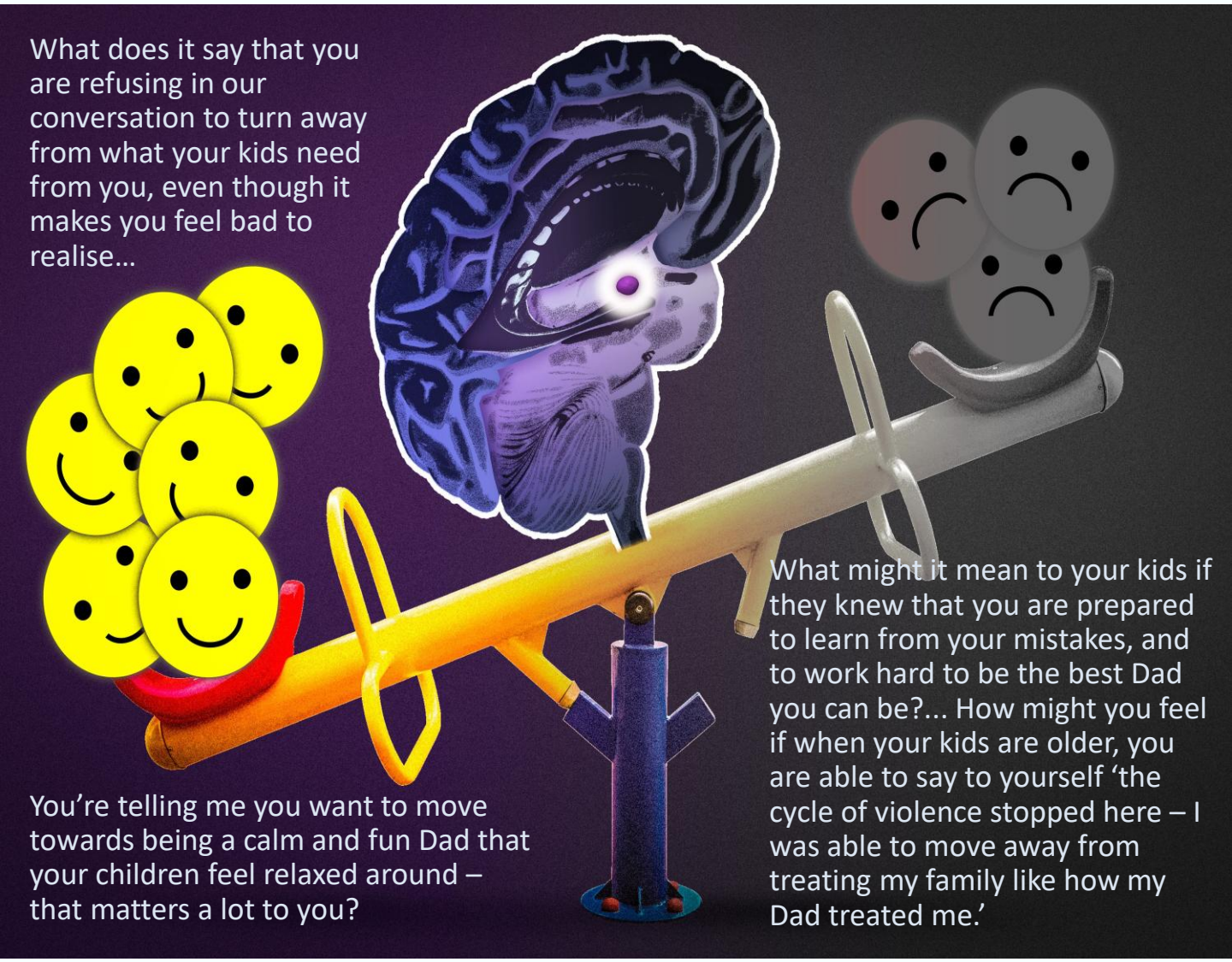
Springboard towards bottom lines:

What might you be doing that hurts your children's relationship with their mother?
What do you need to stop doing that makes it hard for her to meet your children's needs?
It sounds like your partner's Mum means a lot to your kids. What do you need to change in your own behaviour so that you can support their relationship with her?

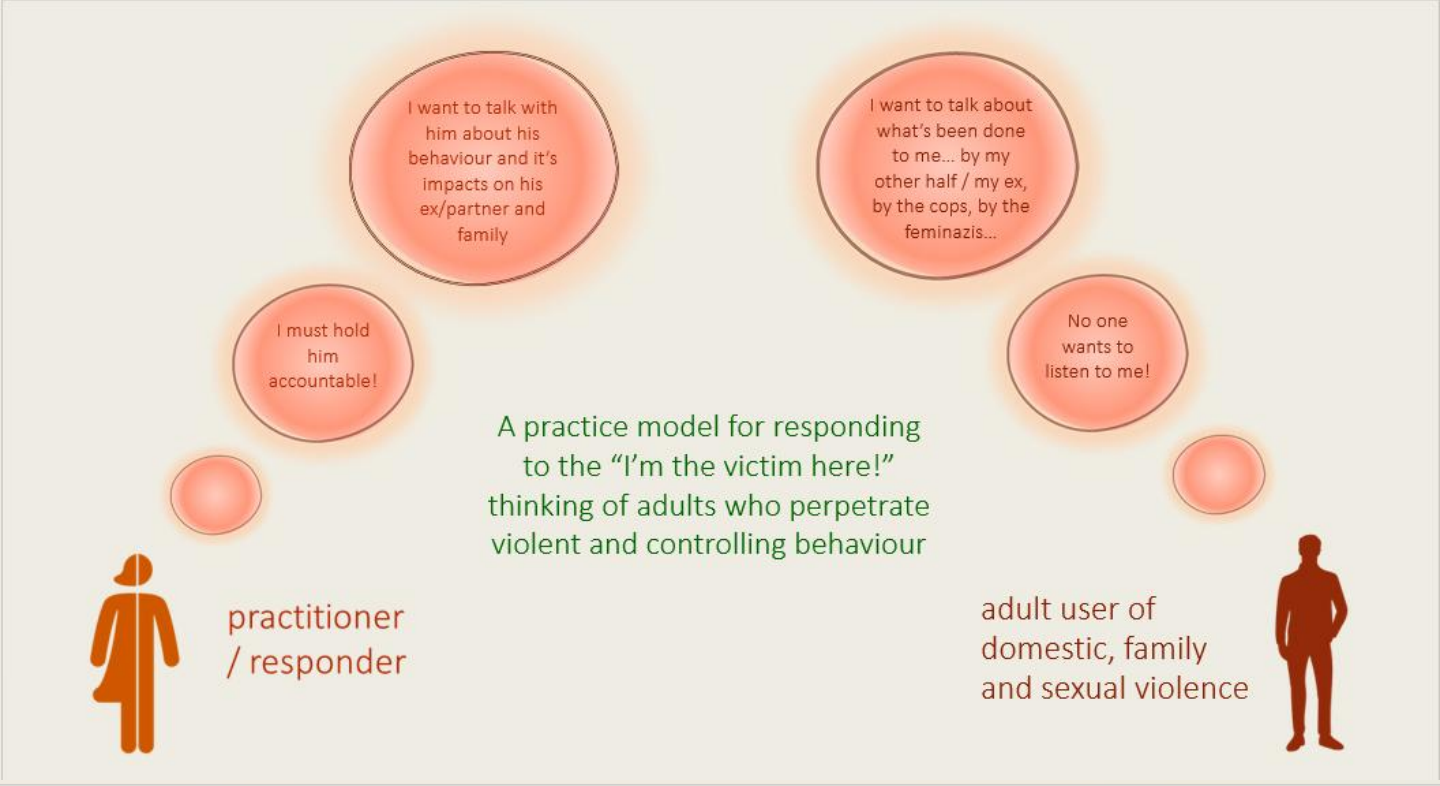
See the post **Engaging fathers who perpetrate violence and control** for more guidance, especially the slide
Build motivation towards him treating the children's mother with respect through, in part, focusing on what he models to his children

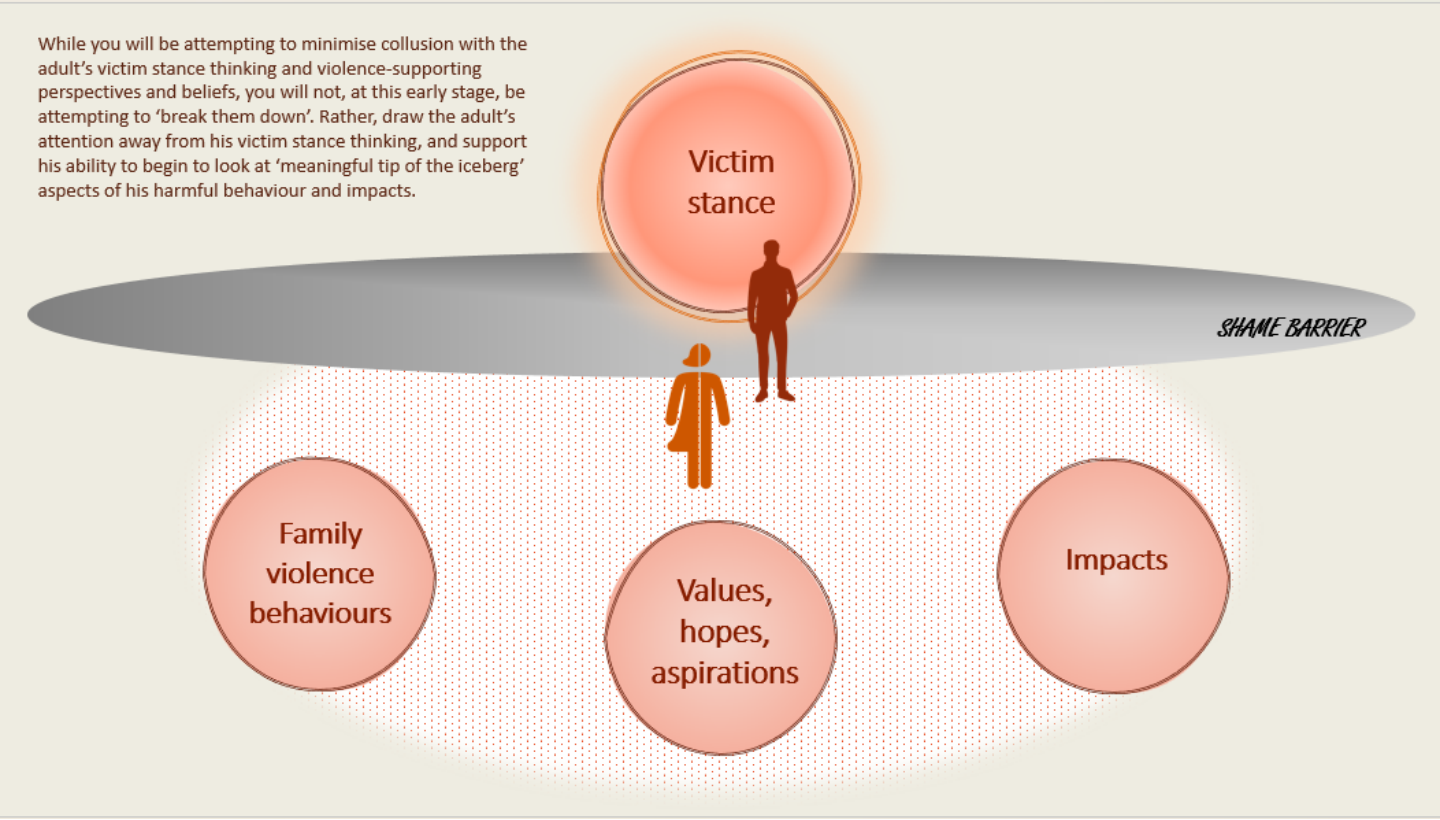
Create a positive emotional space towards the father being prepared to sit in the discomfort of exploring how they are not the father they hope to be… or think that they are…

help him to 'feel good about feeling bad'



See the posts and resources **Concepts, models and skills in engaging adults who use DFV** and **Engaging fathers who perpetrator violence and control** for more guidance. In the latter, for example, see the slides Examples of questions that work across the three anchor points.





See the posts and resources **Concepts, models and skills in engaging adults who use DFV** and **Responding to perpetrator "I'm the victim here!" thinking** (which describes the practice model above) for guidance on how to apply conversational container and mid-point skills. There are further examples in the **practice discussion videos**.

Springboard from positive explorations of what the father can do more of in terms of healthy fathering and positive behaviours, towards the bottom-line behaviours of harm you want to address



I see that being a fun and relaxed Dad around your kids is important to you, and to your kids. You've talked about some things that you do, and that you can do more of, to be that relaxed, fun Dad.

No parent is perfect, and I imagine you aren't always that relaxed, fun Dad. What does it look like when you aren't relaxed around your kids?... When you aren't calm, how would your children describe you?... If they were to draw you when you aren't calm, what might that drawing look like?... How would you describe how you appear to your kids when you aren't calm and relaxed around them?... What expression would they see on your face?... What would your partner say?... What does she see you do when you aren't relaxed and calm?

... Ok, you'd describe it as being an aggro Dad, not a calm Dad. What do your kids see you say or do to their mother when you are being an aggro Dad? What might they overhear?... What impacts might this have on them?... What would they prefer you to do?

This sounds hard to talk about. I know that your kids mean a lot to you. You aren't running away from exploring how being an aggro Dad might be harming your kids. It takes strength to face this. Are you OK if we explore this a bit further, to get to what you can do to move towards being that calm Dad, and away from the aggro Dad?

Watch the practice video **"In this video I explore a few more skills..."** for guidance on how to extend these opportunities into unpacking harmful behaviours, exploring impacts, unearthing the father's values inconsistent with his harmful behaviour, and into preliminary safety planning towards him preventing and interrupting the behaviour

Scaffold further explorations… to the extent that you can push up against his shame barrier, and extend his capacity to experience the shame/discomfort of these explorations… keep cultivating and growing a positive emotional space throughout the conversation

"She doesn't let up, I don't want to lose it at her in front of the kids but you just can't reason with her!"

"Sounds like you were feeling quite worked up?"

"Yeah, she doesn't give me a break, she makes me feel like a shit Dad in front of the kids"



Watch the practice video **"In this video I explore a few more skills…"** for guidance on how to extend these opportunities into unpacking harmful behaviours, exploring impacts, unearthing the father's values inconsistent with his harmful behaviour, and into preliminary safety planning towards him preventing and interrupting the behaviour. See the practice guide **Preliminary safety planning to interrupt violent behaviour**

Remember: even a focus on healthy fathering and positive discussions about the father's children creates opportunities for continuous risk assessment – see the slide Assessing all along the way **in the resource Engaging fathers who perpetrate violence and control**