Fatherhood as a Focus for Building Empathy and Compassion in the Journey of Behaviour Change



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SPEAQ 2025 Brisbane QLD

Welcome

Thanks for being here. Today we'll explore how conversations about fatherhood can have the potential to open space for empathy and accountability.

But first, a truth: some men weaponize fatherhood—using children to punish or control mothers. So. we hold both possibilities: fatherhood as risk and fatherhood as repair.

This isn't about idealizing dads; it's about asking if the love a man feels for his children can become the part of him that stops doing harm."

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Shared Ground: Safety | Empathy | Accountability

Safety is our non-negotiable. It's the floor we stand on.

Accountability gives the work structure—it's how we keep the truth in the room.

Empathy is the ingredient that makes change possible. Without empathy, accountability just feels like punishment; without accountability, empathy can slide into collusion.



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Discussion point

Take a minute at your table—where do you naturally lead from in your work?

Safety, empathy, or accountability?

And what happens when one of those gets too big and crowds the others out?”

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Values to consider when engaging fathers

- Curiosity over judgement
- Accountability over blame
- Child's voice over adult narrative
- Reflection over reaction
- Boundaries over fixing

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Impact on children.

- 1 in 15 children are exposed to IPV each year and 90% of these children are eye witnesses (**NCADV website)**
- Majority of child welfare referrals are now for domestic violence – and the majority of those are for children under the age of 3 years of age (Canada)
- Young children are disproportionately exposed to IPV – toxic stress on development
- Men who abuse their partners also frequently abuse their children directly – high rates of direct physical abuse
- Children exposed to woman abuse have similar adjustment problems to children who are physically abused, and rate significantly below their peers in areas such as school performance and involvement in social activities which puts them at risk for further adversity
- Often fathers who cause harm slip through the cracks and no one is working with him

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Consequences of Failing to Include Fathers

- **Risk** to children **increases** due to **dad's isolation and depression**.
- **Mothers are left with the responsibility** of protecting children and without the support of our intervention systems.
- **Fathers move on to other families**. When they do, they often abandon their children. Moreover, in these new families, fathers are more of a risk to children.
- We **lose an opportunity** to promote change in men and in the father-child relationship.

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Cautions for Working with Abusive Fathers

- Fathers may use the program to gain leverage in custody and access.
- Fathers may use the program material to further undermine children's mothers.
- Program may overtake, or undermine, services addressing the safety needs of women and children.
- The current apparent progress needs to be balanced with the history of abusive behaviour when assessing risk.

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Reflection

- Work at your tables
- Come up with one principle that would help guide your work with fathers who use violence
- Each table come up with one

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Guiding Principles for this work – our bottom line



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Principles

Guiding Principle #1: Priority must be given to the safety and well-being of children

Guiding Principle #2: Children's safety and well-being is intrinsically connected to that of their mothers

Guiding Principle #3: Intervention must be prepared to address clients whose motivation for change may be low

Guiding Principle #4: Focus needs to be on promotion of child-centered fathering rather than building on child-management skills

Guiding Principle #5: Because abusive fathers have eroded their children's emotional security, the need to rebuild trust will affect the pace of change

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What Opens the Door?

Think of a father who softened or showed insight — what helped that happen?

Let's take a minute to remember one of those moments in your work.

Maybe it was pride. Maybe grief. Maybe the memory of being a scared child himself."

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Empathy is fragile at first

We're about to watch a short piece from a Caring Dads Conversation that shows this in action—the facilitator building trust, holding the line, and inviting reflection without letting the man off the hook."

As you watch, listen not just to what the facilitator says, but how they say it. Notice the pacing, the tone, the pauses, and where empathy and accountability meet in the same breath."

- "Remember: empathy isn't about soothing. It's about helping a man tolerate the discomfort of seeing himself through his child's eyes."

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Video practice example

Video – removed to a separate file - Session 6 Fatherhood - Tim - Slide 14.mp4

Played full screen

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Let’s unpack that together

What moments stood out for you?

- What keeps the conversation safe but honest?
- How does empathy open reflection without sliding into rescue?
- Where do you see the father’s defensiveness soften — and why?
- What moments of empathy stood out?
- Where did accountability hold?
- What kept the facilitator from colluding?

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Summary

“What makes this work hard is the precision of it.

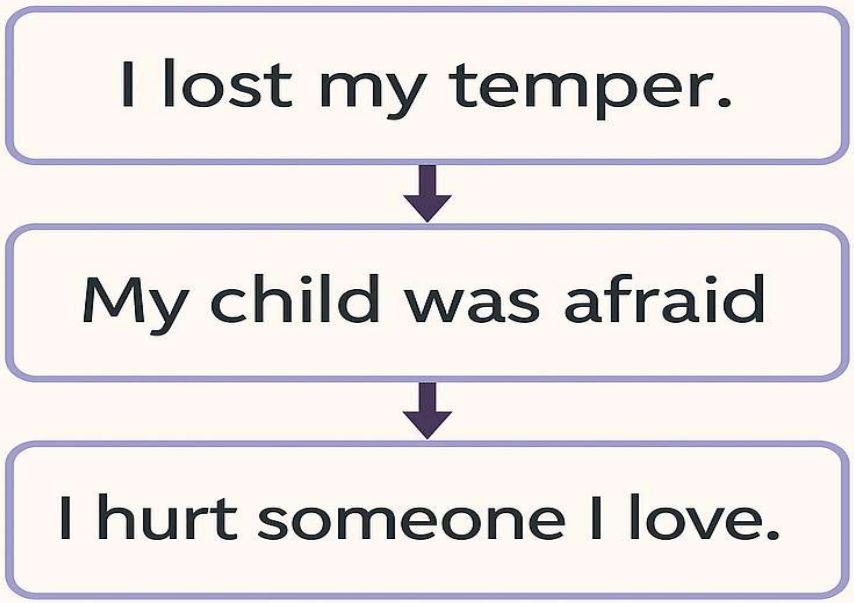
Too much empathy, and we slide into comfort. Too much accountability, and shame shuts things down.

The sweet spot is that overlap we talked about earlier — Safety, Empathy, Accountability.

When men can feel understood and still face the truth, that’s when change starts to take root.”

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From Justification → Responsibility



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Table discussion

"This is one of the most important movements we see in Caring Dads work — and one of the hardest for men to make.

We're asking a father to move from justifying his behaviour — 'I was stressed,' 'She pushed me,' 'It wasn't that bad' — to understanding its impact.

"If a father says, 'I just lost it,' what could you ask that might open **reflection instead of debate**?"



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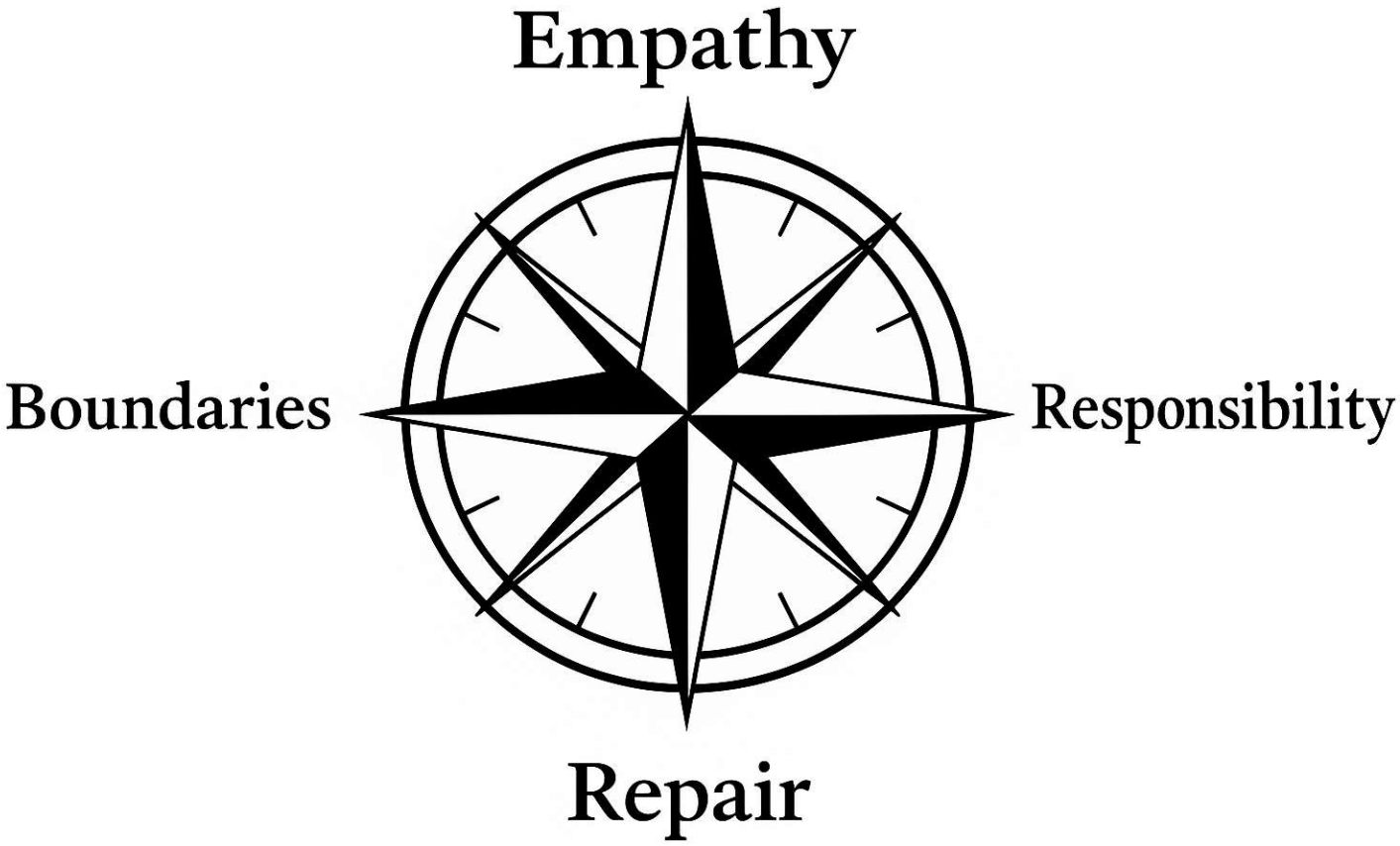
Key Learning Points

- Justification protects ego; responsibility protects others.
- Empathy bridges the gap.
- Language matters: curiosity invites, confrontation closes.



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Fatherhood as Compass



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Holding Care and Accountability Together

"When the work gets messy — and it always does — this compass helps us stay oriented.

You know those moments when a father gets teary and says, 'I just love my kids so much,' and you feel that pull to comfort? Or the opposite — when he minimizes, and you feel the urge to confront?

The compass keeps us from getting lost in those extremes.

It reminds us: empathy without boundaries is collusion, and accountability without empathy is punishment.

The work lives in the balance between those points."

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North – Empathy

"Empathy keeps the connection human. It helps us see the father's capacity for care — but it always points north toward the child's experience.

Empathy here means: I see you, but I also see who's been hurt."

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East – Responsibility

"Responsibility is where accountability lives.

It's the 'owning it' direction — shifting from I didn't mean to toward I see what I did and how it landed.

This is what separates guilt from growth."

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South – Boundaries

"Boundaries are what make empathy safe. They tell both us and the client: This space is for reflection, not justification.

Boundaries also model equality. They're feminist practice in action — saying, I care about you, and I will not protect you from the truth."

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West – Repair

“Repair is the destination.

Not apology or tears — consistent, safe action over time.

It’s how fathers begin to rebuild trust without demanding forgiveness.

Repair honours the harm done while also believing in change.”

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Reflection

"When I center fatherhood in conversations about change, I can help men to…"

At your tables…finish the sentence.

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Key Learning

1. The compass is both a practice tool and a values check.
2. Each point needs the others — empathy without responsibility drifts; accountability without empathy collapses.
3. The compass prevents both burnout (by giving counsellors direction) and collusion (by keeping focus on safety).

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So that's the map…

When things feel murky — when emotion rises or the story starts spinning — this compass helps us reorient.



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Core Takeaways: What We're Really Doing Here

"If we strip all this back — the frameworks, the models, the acronyms — this work is about three things: connection, safety, and courage.

Connection opens reflection. When a man feels seen, he can start to look at himself without collapsing into shame.

Empathy with boundaries creates change. When empathy has edges, it becomes transformative rather than indulgent.

Accountability tied to caring lasts. Men rarely sustain change out of fear or punishment — but they'll work hard to become the kind of father their child can feel safe with.

That's what keeps most of us doing this — believing that change is possible when love and accountability sit at the same table."

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Key Points

1. The work rests on relational accountability — empathy with structure.

2. Change happens inside connection, not compliance.

3. The most powerful thing we can model is calm, consistent belief in safety and growth.

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Final Reflection

"Before we finish, take a moment to think about one sentence you'd want a father in your program to carry with him after a session with you.

It might be something like, 'My kids deserve the safest version of me.'

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We'll end there

"Thank you for the work you do, and for believing that compassion and accountability belong in the same room."

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