
Stephanie Holt

School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Dublin, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

‘Clear evidence of post-separation contact facilitating the continued abuse of women and children’

‘Abusive men need to be held responsible for their abusive behaviour before the potential for safe contact can be considered’

Post-separation Fathering and Domestic Abuse: Challenges and Contradictions

This paper explores the experience of post-separation fathering, in the context of a prior history of domestic abuse from the perspectives of mothers, fathers, children and professionals participating in a three-year doctoral research project. A mixed methodological research design conducted over two phases involved both the completion of survey questionnaires by 219 mothers and the participation in focus groups and individual interviews by children and young people, mothers, fathers and professionals. The findings highlight clear evidence of post-separation contact facilitating the continued abuse of women and children. The findings also highlight a lack of attention to the parenting of abusive men who were identified as struggling to realise their fathering aspirations and take responsibility for the impact of their abusive behaviour on their children and ex-partners. Particular constructions of family life are found to sustain the often unmonitored presence of abusive men in post-separation family life. This paper concludes by asserting the need to prioritise the construction of fathers as ‘risk’ in the context of post-separation father-child contact. Doing so does not mean excluding fathers from children’s lives; rather, what is critical is to find ways to ensure that abusive men can be ‘good enough’ fathers. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGES:

- Separation is not a ‘vaccine against domestic violence’, with women and children at risk of continued abuse in the post-separation period.
- Abusive men need to be held responsible for their abusive behaviour before the potential for safe contact can be considered.
- All of the key players – mothers, children and fathers – may need support from the impact that domestic violence has on parenting capacity and family life.

KEY WORDS: fathering; domestic abuse; post-separation child contact

A developing empirical knowledge base on the role and influence of fathers in family life and child development suggests that children with highly involved fathers are understood to demonstrate increased cognitive abilities and empathy, less stereotyped beliefs and a greater internal locus of control (Flouri and Buchanan, 2003; Lamb, 2004), with the absence of fathers subsequently considered harmful for children (Lamb, 1997). Indeed, evidence

*Correspondence to: Stephanie Holt, School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Dublin, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland. E-mail: sholt@tcd.ie

regarding the implications of separation and divorce for children's wellbeing is drawn upon to underpin the prevailing discourse in the majority of jurisdictions, that outcomes for children are better when they can maintain relationships with both parents. Those outcomes are, however, dependent on the quality of post-separation relationships (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999), and further reliant on the ability of the non-resident parent to engage in authoritative parenting (Greif, 1997).

Drawing on a doctoral study conducted in Ireland, this paper explores post-separation paternal relationships in the context of a prior history of domestic abuse perpetrated by the father against the mother, from the perspective of the key stakeholders involved – fathers, children, mothers and relevant professionals. It highlights the struggle that these stakeholders face in reconciling the child's needs regarding the paternal relationship, and the potentially deleterious impact that both the absence of parental contact *and* ongoing and perhaps unwanted contact with an abusive father can have on the developing child.

Literature Review

Empirical evidence regarding the father-child relationship in domestically violent families characterises these fathers as individuals with low self-esteem and a poorly developed sense of identity, resulting in neediness, dependency, self-absorption, a lack of trust in others and an inability to see the impact of their violence on their children (Bancroft and Silverman, 2002; Mullender *et al.*, 2002). They are described as physically punitive but not physically affectionate (Holden and Richie, 1991), employing more disciplinary and less constructive parenting behaviours than their non-violent equivalents (Fox and Benson, 2004). Research also highlights the complex relationships these children have with both of their parents (Levendosky *et al.*, 2003). Peled's (1998) research with 14 pre-adolescent children found them implementing strategies to both minimise the negative view of their fathers *and* find ways to see their fathers in a positive light. Both strategies evoked complex emotions when it came to making choices involving their parents.

Post-separation contact is a potentially abusive experience for children who are 'caught in the crossfire' (Kernic *et al.*, 2005, p. 991) and exposed to the physical, sexual and psychological abuse of their mother during contact visits (Radford *et al.*, 1999; Saunders and Barron, 2003). A strong correlation exists between child contact and child physical and/or sexual abuse, with Australian research finding this to typically involve multiple forms of abuse 'at the more severe end of the child abuse continuum' (Brown and Alexander, 2007, p. 14). Furthermore, there is a growing concern about maternal and child deaths connected to child contact arrangements (Holt, 2008; Saunders, 2004).

Arriving late or not at all for contact, not spending time with their children and rigidity around arrangements that are unresponsive to children's changing needs are commonly cited examples of poor post-separation fathering and contrary to those characteristics of parenting identified as central to the achievement of quality contact (Reece, 2006; Trinder *et al.*, 2002). Jaffe *et al.*'s (2005) review of the literature cautions that contact facilitates children's exposure to poor role modelling while Peled (2000) reminds us that the 'instrumental approach' of abusive men's post-parenting behaviour results

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‘Little evidence about the effectiveness of programmes for abusive men who are fathers’

in a construction of fatherhood in terms of ‘rights’ to children, with little emphasis on nurturance.

Responding to Rakil’s (2006, p. 198) poignant question ‘Are abusive men good enough fathers?’, experts argue that a simple linear connection cannot be drawn between abusive men and their fathering potential (Fox and Benson, 2004; Fox *et al.*, 2002). Fox *et al.*’s (2002) qualitative study with eight perpetrator group participants found the men expressing complex and diverse feelings concerning their fathering, including guilt, shame, regret and accountability, while participants in Perel and Peled’s (2008) research reflected on their longing for close relationships with their children. This yearning existed alongside restriction, distance and absence. Indeed, Perel and Peled’s (2008) research identified the many ways in which the men constructed their image as a good father through their perceived role as providers, protectors and educators. Both their actual and perceived paternal aspirations were, however, eclipsed by numerous personal limitations and difficulties, including childhoods characterised by absent, distant and emotionally challenged fathers who were simultaneously aggressive, controlling and abusive (Perel and Peled, 2008).

These somewhat conflicting descriptions of fathering demand that we consider abusive men as fathers through a dual lens of harm and vulnerability (Perel and Peled, 2008). While fathers are identified as craving for a deep and meaningful relationship with their children (Harne, 2004), generally reflective of more contemporary fathering practices (Lamb, 1997), they are also presenting as clearly influenced by the more traditional approaches to fathering (Perel and Peled, 2008). This contradiction was found to be particularly heightened for violent fathers (Perel and Peled, 2008). Rakil (2006) asserts that this contradiction is reinforced by a lack of coordination within the judicial system, where men can be convicted of domestic abuse-related crimes in the criminal court, yet given contact with or residency of their children in the civil court. Indeed, Rakil (2006) cautions that for many professionals involved in child protection, it is not assumed that abusive men are not ‘good enough’ parents. Rather, it has been more usual for the mother’s protective capacities to be questioned (Dominelli *et al.*, 2005; Scourfield, 2003).

Separating out their partnering from their parenting behaviour results in another split image where men may engage in treatment for their abusive behaviour towards their ex-partner but not acknowledge or address the impact that this behaviour has had on their children (Rakil, 2006). Echoing these sentiments, Perel and Peled (2008) call for a more integrated intervention model which explores fathering in the context of the man’s abusive behaviour in an effort to blend these split issues in a more holistic manner. Concerns with the capacity of abusive men to change and take responsibility for their behaviour (Buchbinder and Eisikovits, 2008) also need to be acknowledged, as does the limited insight that abusive men have demonstrated into the impact of their behaviour on their children (Harne, 2004).

However, there is a marked absence of any consideration of the fathering of abusive men in perpetrator programmes and little evidence about the effectiveness of programmes for abusive men who are fathers (Peled, 2000). Acknowledging the potential risk of men misusing an intervention that addresses their violence to strengthen their control over the family (Peled, 2000), Perel and Peled (2008), nonetheless, propose that this intervention may also facilitate change. This change can only occur when they both

acknowledge and take responsibility for their behaviour and are actively attempting to stop it. With the research evidence establishing that abusive men are rarely able to prioritise their children's needs over their own (Sturge and Glaser, 2000), Perel and Peled (2008) conclude that abusive men should be viewed simultaneously as dangerous and needy and that this requires denunciation of their abusive behaviour while concurrently responding to their vulnerability. Similarly, Rakil (2006) concludes that an abusive father is not a 'good enough' father; to be a good enough father requires that abusive men understand and take full responsibility for their behaviour.

Methodology

Ethical approval for this research was received from the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin, and the School of Social Work and Social Policy Research Ethics Committee, Trinity College Dublin. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were employed in a mixed methodological research design, conducted over two phases. Phase one collected survey data from 219 separated mothers regarding their 449 children, accessing them through a national network of Irish-based services providing refuge, outreach and support to women and children experiencing domestic abuse. The survey involved the completion of two questionnaires during the month of July 2007: One by 147 mothers of 317 children who were or had been engaged in post-separation contact with their fathers over the year prior to completing the questionnaire; and the second completed by 72 mothers whose 132 children were not or had not been engaged in contact over the same period. Data were systematically collected in respect of a 'number of variables' broadly concerned with the prevalence of post-separation contact. These variables captured socio-demographic familial details: contact arrangement (court ordered/informally arranged); frequency and type of contact; child's involvement in the decision-making process; presence of domestic violence orders; mothers' satisfaction with contact arrangements; extent and nature of professional supports; and child and women protection and welfare concerns. Opportunities for qualitative comments, in addition to the required quantitative responses, were also provided.

The research design explicitly involved the analysis of phase one findings informing the design of phase two. The quantitative survey questionnaire data were analysed using the SPSS program for data analysis (SPSS Statistics version 17.0.1, SPSS Inc., 2008, Chicago, IL) while the qualitative data recorded on the questionnaires were analysed using NVivo (QSR NVivo 8).

Informed by the analysis of phase one, phase two sought in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of contact as it was directly experienced by the people concerned, including children, fathers, mothers and a range of professionals. Informed by the researcher's experience (Buckley *et al.*, 2007) and by international research guidance (Aubrey and Dahl, 2005, 2006), focus group interviews were chosen as the primary method for interviewing the children, mothers and professionals, with individual interviews the chosen method for interviewing the fathers.

The phase two sample was sourced through professional gate-keepers, with one of the organisations involved in phase one acting as the primary sampling source for the mothers, children and professionals. Participants included 16 children and young people aged seven to 24 years of age, nine mothers, six

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fathers, and 30 legal, health and social care professionals. Cognisant of the emotional wellbeing of participants, the sampling criteria were restricted to families where the parents had been separated for at least one year prior to participation in the research interview. Considering children’s ages and developmental abilities, an upper and lower age criteria of between seven and 25 years was applied, with a stratified sampling technique employed, so that each focus group was representative of age (7–10, 11–14, 15–17, 18+) and gender, insofar as it was possible.

While initial access to the children and young people was facilitated through the participating organisations and with parental consent, the researcher also secured the informed consent of the children and young people themselves. Sixteen children and young people participated in focus groups, individual or sibling group interviews. The gender breakdown resulted in five male and 11 female children/young people. Inspired by Aubrey and Dahl’s (2005) finding that activity-based techniques can support and improve interviews with children, the two focus groups and all of the individual interviews with the younger children employed age-appropriate vignettes to stimulate discussion. A schedule of prompts or thematic questions was also prepared. Similarly, interview schedules were prepared for the interviews with the mothers, fathers and professionals.

The fully transcribed interview transcripts were read and re-read to gain a general understanding of the database and identify emerging themes and trends. The data were then entered into NVivo, where a process of coding and re-coding began. In accordance with mixed method sequential approaches (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007), phase one and phase two data-sets were kept analytically separate from each other, with results from each of the respective data-sets combined at the interpretative stage of the research process.

Discussion of Findings

Overview of Research Participants and Contact Activity

Phase one gathered data on 449 children aged between six weeks and 18 years of age, with slightly more girls (226) than boys (223) participating (see Figure 1). Both ‘contact’ and ‘no contact’ groups recorded the highest percentage of children in the six to 12-year-old age group (Figures 1 and 2).

‘Contact’ children were reported by their mothers to be engaged in a wide range of contact activities, including overnight and non-overnight visits, telephone calls, texting, e-mail, and the sending and receiving of photographs and letters during the year prior to participation in the research. Weekly non-overnight contact was the most popular form of contact reported, with 20 per cent (63) of all ‘contact’ children engaged in this activity. Overnight contact was most actively engaged in by six to 12-year olds, with 23 per cent of children having overnight visits once a week to 22 per cent once a fortnight. Forty-four per cent of children had not engaged in overnight contact over the previous year. There was also a particularly low use of other more indirect forms of contact by all participants, such as telephoning and the sending of e-mail or texts. Texting was used by just over half (54.9%) of the 13–18 age cohort and e-mail used by five (1.5%) of the 317 children. There were no discernible patterns or difference in the reports of contact activity along gender lines.

**Phase 1 Questionnaire Survey Total Sample
by child's age group and gender**

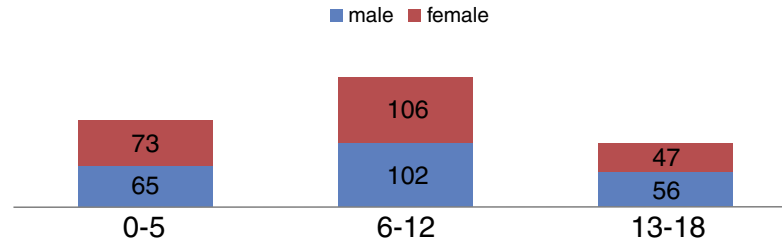


Figure 1. Survey sample: Phase one age and gender of children ('contact' and 'no contact' families). (N=449 Children: 223 boys and 226 girls).

Contact by child's gender and age

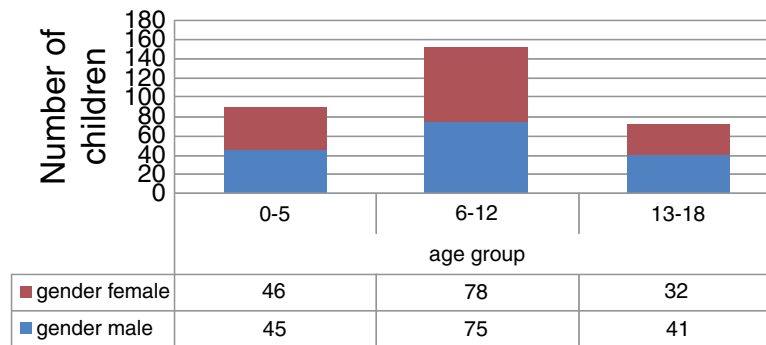


Figure 2. Survey sample: Phase one age and gender of 'contact' children. (N=317 Children: 161 boys and 156 girls).

A number of families participating in phase one also participated in phase two of the research. These included all of the 16 children and young people and eight of the nine mothers who were sampled from two of the 28 organisations who participated in phase one. The remaining participants were recruited through four other organisations.

Analogous to phase one, only 40 per cent of phase two children engaged in overnight contact with their fathers over the year prior to interview. In fact, the six participating fathers described a narrow range of contact activity, perhaps indicative of the fact that contact for three of the six fathers was supervised. None of the participating fathers engaged in overnight contact and there was also a particularly low use of other more indirect forms of contact by all participants, such as letter writing, telephoning and the sending of e-mail or texts. Texting was only engaged in by three children, despite the fact that 11 children owned a mobile telephone, whilst none of the children engaged in e-mail contact. Weekly non-overnight contact was again the most popular form of contact. There were no discernible patterns or difference in the reports of contact activity along gender lines, although children aged seven to 12 years were the most actively involved in contact across almost every contact activity.

Echoing Radford *et al.* (1999) research with a similar (albeit smaller) sample of domestic abuse survivors, analysis of *phase one* data found child protection and welfare concerns expressed by mothers for 68.7 per cent of the 147 families or for 62.5 per cent of the 317 children engaged in contact. The

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‘Children clearly articulated their distress at hearing this abuse’

predominant concern emerging across both phases of the research was for the emotional welfare of children engaged in contact, representing 74 per cent of all child protection and welfare concerns noted in the survey sample. Participants across both phases of the research described children’s continuing exposure to the verbal abuse and derogation of the mother, when contact was being arranged, at hand-over points and during contact. Children clearly articulated their distress at hearing this abuse, their efforts to stop it and their sense of powerlessness when they were unable to, as this participating child explains: ‘He shouts and curses and calls my Mum really, really mean names. I would say ‘stop Dad’, but he doesn’t listen.’ (Rachel, 11)

Post-separation Fathering: The Child’s Perspective

Similar to the children in Smart’s (2004) research, children described contact arrangements that they felt reflected their father’s need for control, with a marked absence of reciprocity in the parent–child relationships and an absence of the nurturance that Peled (2000) referred to. For example, one participant described an arrangement where she and her sisters telephone their father at set times each week. Outside of those calls, she says: ‘He never ever rings us, never ever. Sometimes when he is in a mood he won’t even be bothered talking to us.’ (Rachel, 11)

In a similar vein, Ciara (9) and Todd (7) reported that they were only allowed one telephone contact with their mother when staying overnight with their father, something Ciara described as particularly distressing because she is struggling with mental health issues that she needs her mother’s support with: ‘Sometimes even when I am really upset and need to talk to her, Dad won’t let me.’ (Ciara, 9) This may be an indication of their father’s difficulty in accepting his role as the non-resident parent and giving permission to their mother to be the primary carer, a task that Trinder *et al.* (2002) identified as integral to working post-separation parenting. It may also be a reflection of the low self-esteem of abusive men (Bancroft and Silverman, 2002), where a child’s expressed need for their primary parent is experienced by the contact parent as rejection (Smart, 2004).

‘A child’s expressed need for their primary parent is experienced by the contact parent as rejection’

Participating children and young people expressed a level of both apathy and frustration with contact, with their father’s lack of interest in them and unwillingness to spend time with them fuelling that indifference and irritation. Unreliability and unpredictability was also something that children began to anticipate, as this young participant explains: ‘Sometimes he makes up an excuse and then he doesn’t see us...so we’re just hanging around for ages waiting.’ (Cathy, 9)

The quality of the father-child relationship was a determining dynamic affecting the contact experience, for most, if not all, of the young participants. For example, Eva (16) and her sister Leah (12) introduced the idea of a ‘proper’ Dad, and were very clear about what this entailed, as this extract from their interview illustrates:

‘To be a ‘proper’ dad, he doesn’t have to bring us anywhere, he doesn’t have to spend anything, we just wouldn’t have to feel awkward around him, we could actually talk to him, just being in the same room as him and not being all tense and awkward.’ (Eva, 16)

‘...And feel like you have to talk to fill in the gaps.’ (Leah, 12)

‘Being there’, as referred to in the above quote, implies more than physical presence, and is perhaps more importantly encompassed in what Krampe (2009, p. 875) terms ‘psychological presence’ or ‘connection’ (p. 882), a concept that arose frequently in this research. Steve (father) considered that his children were ‘always on my mind...I need to connect with them all the time’. Conversely, Eva (16) stated that her father ‘doesn’t know me; he knows nothing about me or my life’ while her sister, Leah (12), asserted that ‘he might be my father but it takes a lot more to be my Dad and he is not in my life’.

Reflecting existing research (Peled, 2000), the conflicting feelings of love and hate and yearning for and rejection of a fathering relationship also emerged with clarity from the children’s narratives. ‘Lots of the time I really, really, hate him, but at the end of the day, he is still my Dad.’ (Rachel, 11)

Fathering and Being Fathered: The Fathers’ Perspective

The six participating fathers in this research identified fathering as one of the most significant facets of their lives. However, previously established concerns about the capacity of men to change their abusive behaviour and their limited insight into that behaviour also emerged (Buchbinder and Eisikovits, 2008). While four of the six participating fathers acknowledged their abusive relationship with their child’s mother, some did so more openly and extensively than others. Their responses ranged from guilt and shame at what they had exposed their children to, to a sense of injustice and indefensible marginalisation from their children’s lives. Resonating Rothman *et al.*’s (2008) research, there were clear indications that while some of the men could demonstrate insight into how their behaviour had impacted on their children, this insight was not always accompanied by a willingness or perceived need to alter that behaviour. For example, Brian stated he was only attending the perpetrator programme so that this might positively influence his application for increased contact, while Luke, who was incarcerated at the time of interview for holding his ex-partner hostage at knife point in front of their children, asserted that his ex-partner needed help with her parenting and that he was the ‘good’ parent.

All of the fathers’ narratives were tainted with a deep sense of loss, but for some this was more heavily flavoured with deep-seated resentment and bitterness at what they saw as their ex-partner’s vindictiveness in preventing them seeing their child: ‘I’m not doing anything wrong, he’s me own kid and I missed the best part of his life growing up... she stopped that.’ (Brian, father)

While the arrangements for contact were regulated by a court order for three of the six fathers interviewed, two of those fathers could neither understand nor accept the restrictions imposed. They experienced restricted contact as revengeful behaviour by their ex-partner and co-parenting as obstructing their fathering. The role of provider was highlighted by all participating fathers as an important facet to their fathering role and by mothers and children as a mechanism by which fathers could continue to exercise control over the family finances. The ‘provider’ role was somewhat resentfully engaged in by one father who equated the provision of maintenance with a ‘charge’ for seeing his child: ‘A tenner an hour to see my kid, that’s what it feels like. How can I be a father in four hours a week? She wants me to have nothing to do with him, but she’ll take the money.’ (Brian, father)

‘Being there implies more than physical presence’

‘Insight was not always accompanied by a willingness or perceived need to alter behaviour’

‘They experienced restricted contact as revengeful behaviour by their ex-partner’

‘They could not recall their father ever hugging them or telling them he loved them’

The above quote reflects Brian’s construction of his partner as ‘malicious’ for restricting his time with his child, but without the recognition that his violence might render him ‘dangerous’. Furthermore, Holden and Richie’s (1991) assessment of abusive men as physically punitive but not physically affectionate, employing more disciplinary but less constructive parenting behaviours than their non-violent equivalents, resonated in this research. Two participating children said that they could not recall their father ever hugging them or telling them he loved them. Nine-year-old Ciara concluded that her father ‘just doesn’t care at all’, while 13-year-old Kate stated ‘he can hardly take care of himself – how can he take care of us too?’ Implicit in this is a question of capacity, specifically the capacity of abusive men to rise to the challenges inherent in fathering.

While the fathers’ narratives reflected clear evidence of mental health difficulties, ‘hope’ was cited as a coping mechanism, couched in their aspirations for their future or potential fathering. The inherent contradiction between their expressed yearning for closeness and the concerns raised by the participating women and children allow us to question if parenting wishes were a means to continue contact with a partner who they previously abused.

The men’s descriptions of their parenting poignantly mirrored their recollections of their own experiences of being parented, an experience grounded in traditional fathering discourses (Perel and Peled, 2008). Their childhoods were characterised by absent, distant and emotionally challenged fathers who were also intermittently aggressive and abusive. For example, Steve spoke about a childhood where his father was ‘never there’ while Tom also reflected on parental absence for the first 13 years of his life, brought up by his grandmother as his mother ‘couldn’t cope’, returning to a family he had no relationship with when his grandmother died.

Professionals on Fathers and Fathering

‘Three key findings emerged regarding the professional focus on fathers’

Three key findings emerged regarding the professional focus on fathers. First, an explicit criticism emerged of protective and supportive services engaging with men, resonating Featherstone and Peckover’s (2007) reference to the phenomenon of disappearing domestically violent men. Concurring with Featherstone and Peckover’s (2007) assertion of the critical need to establish ways to engage men, the issue and difficulty of achieving this was one that participants were quite vocal on:

‘Men won’t engage in that process because they won’t accept that they are violent and abusive – it’s her fault, kids fault, dogs fault, anyone’s fault but not theirs.’ (Professional 1)

Second, even when a connection was made between abusive men and professional interventions, the pessimism with which professionals regarded the capacity of abusive men to change emerged with a potent force. Some professionals believed that by attending and completing a perpetrator programme, a man is signalling his willingness to change his behaviour. Other professionals, however, were more cynical, challenging whether abusive men could engage in non-abusive, post-separation co-parenting because of ‘very self-righteous dogmatic single minded worldviews’ (Professional 15).

Criticisms of perpetrator programmes, particularly those run outside the judicial system, also emerged, largely due to the lack of follow through or accountability, particularly where attendance is used as a way to demonstrate that abusive behaviour has been addressed, without any proof that this behaviour has actually changed (Edleson and Williams, 2007).

A third key finding concerned the lack of evidence of the parenting concerns of abusive men being heralded by any organisation working with perpetrators of domestic violence. Hardesty and Chung's (2006) call for the modification of programmes or the development of new ones aimed at meeting the needs of separating fathers and their children seems appropriate, particularly in light of Fox *et al.*'s (2002) research which highlighted evidence of a programmatic focus on fathering helping abusive men to understand the impact of their violence on their children. Perhaps, however, as Buchbinder and Eisikovits (2008) and this participating father argue, the key to positive and successful outcomes is as much about the timing being right, about abusive men recognising the need for change and having the capacity to engage with change: 'I needed to do it for meself, not for anybody else because I needed to take control of me life because me life was out of control.' (Steve, father) Buchbinder and Eisikovits's (2008, pp. 619–620) assertion that the willingness and capacity to change requires a level of insight, empathy and responsibility that many of the participating fathers in this research were unable to demonstrate. Cognisant of the research evidence on demonstrating insight (Rothman *et al.*, 2008), the potential disconnect between that insight and their subsequent intention or capacity to alter their behaviour accordingly is somewhat disconcerting where vulnerable children are concerned. Consequently, Bancroft and Silverman (2002) caution that programme completion should not be understood as 'safe parenting', and recommend ongoing monitoring and assessment of risk to women and children for a defined period after the programme is over.

In many ways, these three key findings reinforced each other in a self-fulfilling capacity, with the construction of men as 'incapable' of change negating the need to either provide services or engage fathers in those services. This study therefore questions whether men are not engaging with services, or whether services are not engaging with men, whilst simultaneously confirming the critical need for abusive men to be engaged with, as fathers, for safe quality contact to be a realistic goal. It therefore seems reasonable to question whether contact should automatically be considered to be in children's best interests where there has been a history of domestic abuse. This question assumes a critical importance when we are reminded by Pryor and Rodgers (2001, p. 3) that: 'The mere presence of fathers is not enough...' This does not automatically mean that the policy of promoting contact is mistaken. Rather, the challenge is to promote contact in a way which delivers benefits to children while not jeopardising their safety or wellbeing.

Conclusion

Returning to Rakil's (2006) question, this paper concludes that abusive men are not good enough fathers, but qualifies this assertion by stating that this does not negate their capacity to *become* good enough fathers by addressing their

'Criticisms of perpetrator programmes, particularly those run outside the judicial system'

"I needed to do it for meself, not for anybody else because I needed to take control of me life because me life was out of control."

'Whether men are not engaging with services, or whether services are not engaging with men'

'Mandating perpetrator interventions with core modules on fathering is one way to address this issue'

'To find ways to ensure that abusive men can be 'good enough' fathers'

abusive behaviour and acknowledging the impact this behaviour has on their children. When this happens, they then become the primary problem, held responsible for *both* their abusive behaviour *and* their fathering. Mandating perpetrator interventions with core modules on fathering is one way to address this issue. Concurring with Rakil (2006), this paper concludes that abusive men need to take responsibility for their abusive behaviour *before* they can be good enough fathers (Rakil, 2006).

Reflective of the empirical evidence (Fox *et al.*, 2002), the participating fathers in this research expressed a deep yearning for a better quality of relationship with their children. While their capacity to achieve that was not possible to establish within the remit of this research, what was potentially clear was that the potential for abusive men to become better fathers cannot be accommodated or responded to within a system that only recognises vulnerability arising from their absence and not the vulnerability and risk that accompanies their presence. Lack of attention to abusive men as fathers, or alternatively viewing them as *either* abusive men *or* fathers, not only undermines the support and protection needs of mothers and children, but also fails to challenge the potential of 'good enough' fathering through the provision of an infrastructure of interventions for all of the key players involved. This paper challenges those charged with supporting, protecting or regulating the lives of the key players involved in contact, to focus on the reality of abusive men's behaviour rather than an ideology of involved fatherhood. This demands a significant paradigm shift to prioritise the construction of fathers as 'risk' in the context of post-separation father-child contact. Doing so does not mean prioritising finding ways to exclude fathers from children's lives; rather, what is critical is to find ways to ensure that abusive men can be 'good enough' fathers. This involves acknowledging and addressing the continued presence of domestic abuse, holding abusive men accountable for their abusive partnering and parenting, whilst simultaneously viewing them through a dual lens of risk and vulnerability.

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