

“CHANGING THE VIOLENT AND CONTROLLING BEHAVIOR OF PARTNERS AND PARENTS”

EXCERPT FROM

ADVOCACY **BEYOND** LEAVING Helping Batter Women in Contact with Current or Former Partners

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CHANGING THE VIOLENT AND CONTROLLING BEHAVIOR OF PARTNERS AND PARENTS

Victims in contact want their current/former partners to stop their violent behavior. Their children want their fathers to be competent and supportive parents. For advocates, it can seem just too scary, too risky to even try to change violent behavior.

We don't want to take the chance- but some victims do (or have no other good option). As victim-defined advocates, our role is to provide information, options, and resources to enhance the safety of victims and their children, no matter what decisions victims make about their relationships or giving their partners a chance to change.

Do those who batter reduce or stop their violent and controlling behavior?

Some don't. Some do. Those who do change, reduce their violence and control in varying degrees. There are critiques and limitations of the research and evaluations of batterer intervention programs and other efforts to reduce violent and controlling behavior, yet some trends are clear. Some men change for the better and some remain violent, controlling and dangerous to their partners and to their children.⁵ There is hope and there is a warning. To help victims in contact we need to be better able to determine those who might change from those who won't. We also need to learn more about what made it possible for some abusive partners to change.

What should I say to a victim about her partner changing his violent and controlling behavior?

Begin by understanding what she thinks, and what changes and efforts her partner has already made - if any. Advocates have important general information about domestic violence and those who batter, but they do not know a victim's partner like she does. It is essential to understand what she thinks about her partner and what he is capable of both in terms of violence and the possibilities of change.

Keep in mind that despite our understanding of domestic violence as intimate partner violence for the purpose of power and control, in practice there is a broad range of behavior that falls under programs, laws, and services for domestic violence. These behaviors might include a wide range of domestic violence, family violence or child abuse, violence without control, sexual violence or sexual abuse, violence in self-defense, control without violence, or the actions of a mean-spirited or incompetent partner. Advocates may be working with women facing only one or several of these behaviors. Get a sense of what the victim is facing before talking about behavior change or identifying safety strategies.

As advocates, our goal is to help inform a victim's view of her partner's violence and what might happen if he has a chance to change. On the practice level, there are three categories advocates can use when talking with victims in contact about their partners:

- *He poses the possibility of lethal or life-threatening circumstances to her or the children. He won't change for the better.*
- *He might/will change for the better.*

It would be very helpful for a victim in contact if an advocate could help her to make sure she's accurately placed her partner/former partner in one of those three categories. Unfortunately, our ability to predict human behavior is limited and not always accurate. Sometimes, to “err on the side of safety”, we tell victims that every batterer is capable of lethal violence and that no batterer will change. This approach does not provide helpful information to the victims whose partner is not life threatening or may change for the better, and could even be alienating to the many victims who hold a different view of their partners/ex- partners and the level of violence that they face. We need to listen to victims in contact, continue to test and improve current assessment tools, and learn from providers working with those who batter in order to offer information that will help victims.

What types of services, intervention, and strategies for change should I talk about with victims in contact?

The types will depend on what change in her partner/former partner will make things better for the victim and her children. Keep in mind that her priority might not be physical or sexual violence.

Advocates might ask, “What would make things better?” She might be worried about how he interacts with the children, his attitude towards her and how he treats her, his jealousy or cheating on her, or maybe his inability to help financially support the family. Once you understand her priorities, the next steps are to identify potential resources and then talk through with her which ones he’d use voluntarily and which ones he’d have no choice in (e.g. she calls the police). Also discuss whether there are ways to “encourage” him to try the programs, for example, having an influential person in his life talk with him. Resources might include: batterer intervention programs, community services, faith-institution programs or groups, substance use programs, responsible father- hood programs, counseling, workforce/employment services, supervised visitation pro- grams, and marriage or couples programs. Of course, advocates would explore with each victim how her partner’s involvement with any of these might impact her safety and her children’s safety.

Note about mental health, substance abuse, and trauma: Mental health and substance abuse are factors in behavior and in violence – although not the sole cause or an excuse for violence. Some men who batter, particularly those who are poor, have experienced hardship and trauma in their lives, in ways both different and the same as victims. Effective intervention and/or treatment for these issues may make a difference for him and make things better for the victim and her children.

What if reducing her partner’s violent and controlling behavior is her priority? What strategies should I recommend?

Start by learning more from the victim about his use of violence and control. Ask about what she’s tried and if he’s made any attempts to change. Reinforce that it is his decision to be violent, his responsibility to end the violence, and that only he can decide to change. Talk with her about what she thinks might push him and/or support him to make that decision.

Here are some of the questions an advocate might ask:

- *What does he do that you want him to stop?*
- *What has she tried? How did that work? If it didn’t, does she have any idea why? What has he tried? Has he ever tried to change? Has he ever sought help to reduce his abuse? How did that work?*

- *What does she think will work?*
- *Does he have any awareness of the effects of his behavior? Does he realize that his behavior isn't good for the children?*
- *Has he changed any behavior for the better? Does he have any willingness to change?*
- *Does he take responsibility or blame others? Do you think he wants to be a better/good father or father figure?*
- *What does he say he needs?*
- *Is he working with or connected to anyone now? Who is influential? Who in his support system does he listen to? Whose opinion does he respect?*

Your discussion may identify options and a plan that offers him a chance to change.

It is also likely that with some victims the discussion will lead to a conclusion that there is nothing he will voluntarily use. Advocacy will then shift to discussions of safety strategies to protect the victim and her children and the potential use of more coercive interventions, such as the legal system.

What should I say to victims about batterer intervention programs?

Accurately describe the programs that are available in your community. Talk about the details and approach (see list of key issues below). Ask victims if they think there's a chance it might make things better for them or the children. THEN, be sure to point out that there is no guarantee it will work for her partner or that a change for the better will last. Always develop safety strategies with each victim.

There is a wide range of programs designed to reduce battering behavior. Advocates should be well-versed in the ones available in their community, including any that are not connected to the criminal legal system. There are many potential sources of information, including victims whose partners have attended, victims who have attended (victims get arrested too), program facilitators or funders, and there may also be information from reports, assessments or oversight committees.

Advocates may not like or trust the programs that are available in their community. It is important to make sure your view of the program is accurate, not just based on a few stories or on outdated information.

Key things to know about your local batterer intervention programs:

Program approach, philosophy, and cultural relevance of program to participants. “How do they go about getting those who batter to change?”

- *Eligibility requirements, cost, length, waiting list, process to enroll, and any other eligibility criteria (e.g. domestic violence only or any violence).*
- *What does the participant have to do to successfully complete the program? Is there any evaluation or research component? What are the results?*
- *Interactions with victims: Do they contact victims? Can victims contact them? Is the victim’s information confidential? Will they disclose information about a participant to his partner? Do they contact victims if they identify danger for her or the children? Do they help victims assess their partner’s progress or lack of progress?*
- *Will they talk to an advocate?*
- *How do they handle re-assault, threats?*
- *Is the program involved with the criminal or civil legal system? How?*
- *Does the program deal with parenting issues? How do they respond to risks to children? Do they make reports or get involved with custody or child protection issues?*

What about changing his behavior as a parent? What should I talk about with battered mothers?

Talk about her children's relationship with their father (or her partner if he is not their father). In general, victims in contact want their children to have a safe and better relationship with their fathers. Some children, whose fathers are abusive to their mothers, may benefit from the support and attention their fathers provide. However, some children are afraid of their father, some need protection from him, and all would be better off if they were not exposed to his abuse and control of their mother, or see their father abuse a new partner, if he is no longer involved with their mother. Try to talk about the good parts of her children's relationship with their father, and talk about the more difficult parts too.

Talk to her about his parenting. Does he spend time with the children? Does he show interest in them? How? What things do they do together? Discuss what would make him a better parent. Does she think that it is possible for him to change? What does she think would help him to do that? Did he have any role models for being a father? What does he think fatherhood means?

Also, always talk to victims about how they support their children and encourage them as mothers. [See Section III C for more information.]

What about fatherhood or community programs for men? How can I know which ones to talk about?

Find out what the programs are about and what they have to offer. For example, most "responsible fatherhood" programs work with men living in poverty and try to help them to find a job or a better job, pay child support, and have a healthy involvement with their children. Some might offer services to men that make things better for a victim and her children. They might offer concrete resources and may also help to support change in her partner and encourage him toward more positive actions and behavior. Other programs, particularly "fathers' rights" or "men's rights" organizations, will not be helpful to victims in contact as their typical goals are to dispute reports of domestic violence or child abuse, reduce child support, and gain an advantage in custody and divorce cases.⁶

Community programs for men tend to be focused on employment and/or child support enforcement, and some are for men “re-entering” the community from prison. They have varying levels of resources. Since the priority for most of these programs is economic issues, they are unlikely to have policies or protocols for responding to a participant who is violent toward his partner. Still, some of the programs may be open to it or are encouraged by funders to develop plans to respond to domestic violence.

All these programs are typically voluntary, so advocates will need to emphasize that the victim’s partner will need to want to go and see it as having some value. Advocacy will include explaining what the program has to offer, talking with the victim about the best way to let her partner know about the program, and – as always – safety planning with her about possible risks/dangers of his participation.

Key issues to know about fatherhood / men’s programs and to talk to victims about:

- *What resources and other services they have to offer the man, the woman, the children.*
- *Eligibility criteria and process.*
- *Approach to offering services, including cultural responsiveness.*
- *Do they offer the chance for men to talk? Do they offer support? If so, it is more likely that they are not just an employment or child support enforcement program. They are also more likely to acknowledge the whole family, including the children and their mother.*
- *Do they have a policy or position on domestic violence? How do they respond to domestic violence by a participant? What process do they have for partner contact?
See Appendix 2 for more information.*

When and how should I refer victims to fatherhood or community programs for men?

Advocates should talk about these programs whenever they might offer what a victim's partner or her family needs. The program may not help reduce domestic violence or control but may make some other part of her life and/or her children's life better. Advocates should also explore whether his participation could make the domestic violence worse for her or her children. If so, help the victim weigh the possible benefits and consequences or risks for her or the children. If there is a chance his participation will make things worse for her, develop strategies to prevent that from happening or to limit the negative effects. Always make sure she knows how to contact you and that you will welcome that contact.

Some advocates worry that a father's attendance in a fatherhood program will give him an unfair or unwarranted advantage in a custody case or might lead a court to increase visitation, even if there is still danger for the children or their mother. If advocates know this to be the practice in their community, they can describe the potential legal risks and refer a victim to a lawyer for legal advice. Advocates should also explore with the victim the potential for the program to help make a particular father's contact with his children safer and better.

Important reminder:

As victim-defined advocates, we follow the needs, perspectives and culture of each victim. This may require us to refer a victim or her partner to a program that is not in line with our culture or that we disagree with politically or philosophically.

It is up to the victim whether or not to use a program or to tell her partner about a program. Our job is to make sure it is an informed decision based on her particular situation, not our own views. For example, a victim tells us that she wants her partner to get sober and get a job. We know that there is a faith-based substance abuse and employment program in town. One of the messages used by the program is that men need to be sober in order to meet their responsibility as the head of the household (a view in conflict with our view that women are equal partners in a relationship and should not be subservient or controlled by their partners). Rather than not tell her about the program, we can explain that his participation might make him more convinced than ever

that he has the right to control all aspects of the family, including her. We should also talk about the possibility that he might also stop drinking and get a job and support her decision if that is OK with her. Even if it is uncomfortable for us personally, our role is to be a gateway to - not gatekeepers from - potentially helpful services.

What safety strategies should I suggest for victims whose partners are participating in community programs?

Advocates can help a victim learn as much as she can about the program and tell her how to get more information. Information that would be helpful includes:

- *Length of program, when it meets, cost and approach.*
- *Whether they will give her information about her partner.*
- *Whether they will contact her; how they will use information she gives them.*
- *If they can help if there is violence or the threat of violence.*
- *If the program is court-related, then how it interacts with the court.*

Advocates can also help a victim decide how she'll know if "it is working," if it is making things better. For example, advocates might develop with a victim a list of questions or observations that will indicate her partner is making a change for the better. The list might include: "Does he share what he's learned? Does he complain about attending?"

Does he express pride or enthusiasm about his accomplishments in the program? How has his behavior changed?" Advocates should also talk about what the victim can do if things are the same or worse. As always, talk about safety strategies and develop an escape plan, with particular attention if there is a high risk of violence or the possibility of life-threatening violence. Also offer information that enhances her emotional support of the children and helps her keep watch of how the children are doing.

Endnotes

⁵ See for example: *Programs for Men who Batter: Intervention and Prevention Strategies in a Diverse Society*, by Etiony Aldarondo and Fernando Mederos, Civic Research Institute, 2002. *Batterer Intervention Systems: Issues, Outcomes, and Recommendations*, by Edward W. Gondolf, Sage Publications, 2002.

⁶ *Collaboration and Partnership: Fatherhood Practitioners and Advocates Against Domestic Violence Working Together to Serve Women, Men and Families*, Jacquelyn Boggess, Rebecca May, And Marguerite Roulet, CFFPP, June 2007.

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