Chapter 4

Batterers and the Lives of Their Children

David Mandel

It hurt me to see the pain across my mother's face
Every time my father's fist would put her in her place.
Christina Aguilera, “I'm Okay”

Protector. Provider. Mentor. Friend. Abuser. Abandoner. Betrayer. Enemy. Violent. Father. What if all these words described your father? How would you make sense of the contradictions? What if you only experienced your father as the “enemy,” as someone who couldn’t be trusted and with whom you never felt safe? How would you fill the space in your heart that should have been occupied by the father who was your protector, the provider and mentor? What lessons would you learn from the pain you felt about masculinity and relationships? And how would you want the police and other systems to respond to your father and his abuse of your mother? 1

These and related questions about the intersection of domestic violence and fatherhood have preoccupied me. About 20 years ago, hoping to support victims of abuse, I started leading six-week classes for men arrested for violence against their partners. Seeing the need for a more comprehensive response to abusive men, two colleagues and I started an agency that has provided batterer intervention programming for a few thousand court-mandated and self-referred men. I was struck by the lack of knowledge about batterers among social workers, substance abuse counselors, police, and other professionals working with families. So, I began training these and other groups to integrate principles of batterer intervention into their work with families.
After a batterer killed his partner’s child, the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) invited me to train child welfare workers to improve their interview and assessment skills with perpetrators. This work led to my current passion, improving the capacity of professionals and systems to respond to the needs of children exposed to batterers’ behavior. My approach focuses on the needs of children to be safe and together with their mothers and interventions that address the harms created by violent fathers. My work has included research into batterers’ perceptions of their children’s exposure to their violence, speaking to different groups about batterers as fathers, and consulting to child welfare agencies around the country who are seeking to improve their response to domestic violence. I currently oversee a team of domestic violence consultants who work to help child welfare workers respond more appropriately to domestic violence.

As meaningful as my work is, many experiences reinforce how far we still have to go to make violent fathers “visible,” and therefore accountable, in our response to domestic violence. I am still amazed by how many conversations I’ve participated in where nobody ever mentions the violent father—even when it’s his actions that have led to the system’s involvement with the family. These “invisible” batterers frequently find unwitting allies in systems that are intended to keep children and their mothers safe. For example, family court files often say little or nothing about an abuser’s role as a father. Child welfare agencies typically open cases in the names of mothers, regardless of who perpetrated the abuse and/or neglect. Double standards are routinely applied, with mothers expected to assume virtually all household responsibilities from cleaning to getting children to doctor’s appointments while fathers are praised if they change a diaper. Paradoxically, low cultural expectations of fathers and high expectations of mothers often work to batterers’ advantage by reducing the probability they will be held accountable for violent behavior, let alone for the harms children suffer because of their domestic violence. A greater emphasis on the role of batterers as parents is critical if children in these families are to be kept safe.

When I began this work, fatherhood was ignored in the domestic violence field as well as in discussions about men and violence. The entire experience of parenthood, arguably one of the most important aspects of any person’s life, was left out of the conversation about men and violence. It was a cultural and programmatic blind spot. The field has evolved since then thanks to the efforts of survivors, their advocates, batterer intervention providers, and family violence researchers. Despite advances in our understanding of how violent fathers impact their children, we are still in the youth of our understanding and the infancy of our ability to tackle with focus, energy, and sophistication the complexity of batterers in their role as parents and co-parents.
Children didn't ask to have a violent and abusive parent. But violent fathers are permanent fixtures in their lives. This fact doesn't change when their father is labeled a batterer, arrested, or ordered out of the house.

This chapter looks at batterers' interactions with their families in the role of parents, and the problems these interactions create, the challenges and dilemmas posed by batterers having legal access to their children, the double standard we use to evaluate mothers and fathers as parents, and our ambivalence about batterers as parents. Finally we consider some positive aspects of parenting by batterers, including looking at the possibility that some men may be able to stop their abuse for the sake of their children, and how to promote these transformations.

I will be using examples from my work to illustrate the complexity surrounding batterers as parents. The following sketch juxtaposes the real physical danger batterers can pose to their families with how children can motivate them to change.

Tom speaks of how his children stopped him from killing their mother. It was their screams that made him suddenly aware that he had his hands around her throat. He realized he had been moments from choking her to death. "They saved my life at the same time," he relates. Tom's children became the reason for changing his violent and abusive ways. "When they get old enough to understand, I want to be able to tell them honestly that it was because of my behavior that me and their mother are no longer together." Initially coming in on his own, Tom attended court-ordered counseling for his violence for five years. When he finally left counseling he and his wife had safely divorced, he was working on getting along with her partners, and he was beginning to see the sexism in his parenting.2

Batterers make choices that harm their children and the children of their partners. Tom made a series of choices that brought him to the brink of killing his wife. Through his choices, he terrorized her and the children. The near murder perpetrated by Tom that particular day was merely one event in a long history of physical, emotional, and financial abuse he had perpetrated against multiple women.

Patterns of coercive control like Tom's are the defining characteristic of battering and affect their children's lives at numerous points. Understanding the scope and subtlety of the impact that batterers have on children is essential if we are going to create meaningful expectations for change and healing.

A range of mental health problems in children have been linked to their being exposed to domestic violence, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As we come to appreciate the broad nature of partner abuse, however, an entirely new range of harms come into view, like the financial and emotional tolls of losing the role model of
an educated, engaged, and independent mother when she is prevented from working, completing a college degree, or carrying on a normal social life with family or friends. Even the “remedies” used to protect children from a batterer—removal from violent homes, going to a shelter, divorce, and incarceration of the batterer—can lead to jarring dislocations and disruptions of a child’s normal development. Children often feel profound grief and loss when separated from a violent parent even if they also feel some relief from fear.

Like many batterers, Tom went through stages of denial and acceptance related to his violence. Initially, he admitted to some of the violence but struggled against accepting responsibility for the consequences of his actions. But as he faced criminal punishment, and received counseling and positive and constructive support from family and friends, he begun to understand his culpability. He began to appreciate not only his wife’s fear and hurt, but also the damage to his children. His process of change included stopping his physical abuse and control, identifying and interrupting the pattern of feelings and thoughts that undergirded his behavior, and helping his children heal. Changes like these are reasonable to expect from coercive, controlling men who aspire to be better fathers.

BEFORE THE BEGINNING: FERTILITY, PREGNANCY, AND CHILDBIRTH

When we appreciate the extent to which “control” is the aim of battering as well as one of its principal means, it is easy to appreciate how conception, pregnancy, and each developmental stage of a child’s life after they are born are fertile grounds for violence, psychological abuse, intimidation, isolation, sexual abuse, and financial exploitation. For some batterers, having a child with a woman is a way of tying her to him by making her more financially dependent and indicating to other men that “she’s his property.” Teenage girls report that their partner wanted them to have a child to stop them from working or completing school, a process referred to as “sabotage.” Batterers may assume their partner will be less attractive to other men if she has children, will need to be home more often rather than with friends, or will embrace “family values” or redefine herself as a “mother,” making it less likely she will leave him. Women often talk about how they didn’t leave their batterer because they “wanted their child to have a father.”

What do batterers do when they want to exercise control over a partner’s fertility? Some batterers simply use physical force. They rape their partners to get them pregnant, or the pregnancy is a side effect of the unwanted sex. Other partners engage in manipulation, deceit, and emotional coercion. Some batterers will throw out birth control or replace it with placebos. Other batterers will threaten to get sex
somewhere else or pressure someone into not using a condom because “they love them.” They may insist on “makeup” sex after being abusive to their partner.

Once their partner is pregnant, a batterer may use violence and abuse to control her behavior during pregnancy. Unfortunately, because medical providers are often unaware of the abusive dynamics in these cases, they may inadvertently collude with the batterer in exploiting an apparent concern for a woman’s well-being as a pretext to extend his control. In this example, a partner’s smoking during pregnancy becomes the justification for one man’s violence.

Alan was in recovery for alcoholism and drug abuse. He and Alicia were about to be first-time parents. Both he and Alicia were smokers. She said she would quit while she was pregnant. One afternoon he smelled smoke in the house and angrily confronted her, accusing her of smoking and endangering their child. She denied smoking. Feeling manipulated and lied to, Alan threw Alicia down to the ground and kicked her—a punishment for smoking and lying to him.

Alan’s behavior represents one twist in the braid of a batterer’s pattern around sex, family planning, pregnancy, and childhood. His motivations tap into strong cultural beliefs about how “good mothers” should behave, reinforced by the power of the health establishment. This example also illustrates how culture and institutions actually extend batterers’ leverage beyond their ability to intimidate or inflict physical harm. Given the medical establishment’s warnings about the dangers of smoking during pregnancy, Alicia might even feel guilt and shame for her behavior, wrongly blaming herself in some degree for the assault perpetrated by Alan.

Alan’s violence affects Alicia’s perceptions of herself as a mother and, through its effects on her feelings about the fetus, her relationship with her unborn child. Research indicates that mothers can project the batterer’s violent motivations upon her unborn child’s kicking in the womb—“He’s beating me up.” These feelings during pregnancy carry over into childhood. Some survivors indicate that they struggle with children whose personalities and presentation remind them of the batterers.

This next example further illustrates both how cultural attitudes toward the control of women’s sexuality intersect with domestic violence and how batterers use children as weapons against survivors.

Simon was a successful businessman who had three children with Tanya. His emotional abuse started early in the relationship when he said he wouldn’t marry her because she wasn’t a virgin when they met. But he was willing to have three children with her. As the relationship continued, he became physically violent with her. He assaulted her while she was pregnant with one of their children. He sometimes made her sleep
on the floor when he was angry with her. After one of the arrests, the local child welfare agency became involved. When he violated a court stay-away order, they removed the three children from both Simon and Tanya. It was only after a court hearing that the children were returned to their mother. But the children now treated her with disrespect, and passed along nasty messages from their father. For her part, Tanya struggled with remaining close with her youngest child, who reminded her the most of his father.

In this scenario, Tanya ended up paying three times over for Simon’s abuse. She directly experienced his physical, emotional, sexual, and financial abuse. Her children were removed from her for a period of time by the local child welfare agency because Simon violated a court order not because of anything she did. Finally, her relationships with her children were strained because Simon had undermined her authority with the children and actively worked to turn the children against her. Sadly, Tanya’s experience is not unusual. Women often report that their contacts with child welfare reinforce the impact of abuse. One result is that many battered women fear child welfare agencies as much or more than they fear their partner. Alongside the fear of their children being removed, they often feel punished by child welfare for the actions of their partners and are angry that they are made responsible for or expected to exert absolute control over his actions.

Not all batterers want children. The common theme is simply that they are willing to use coercion to get what they want. Sometimes a batterer pressures a partner to end a pregnancy, threatening to leave or seriously hurt or kill her if she doesn’t. He may abuse her physically and emotionally during the pregnancy, sometimes intentionally trying to cause a miscarriage. Some batterers begin or escalate their physical violence during pregnancy. Interestingly, another group of batterers seem to stop their physical violence during pregnancy, a dynamic I explore in a subsequent discussion of the positive aspects of parenting by batterers. With or without physical abuse, many batterers continue emotional abuse of their partner during pregnancy. As we saw with Alan and Alicia, this process can be unwittingly supported by medical professionals who encourage a batterer to “help” his partner follow certain health guidelines while she is pregnant. When she resists his efforts, she can be perceived as “noncompliant” with medical recommendations. In this process, she may be isolated by medical providers at the very moment when she needs their intervention most.

ONCE THE CHILDREN ARE BORN: VULNERABLE NEWBORNS AND TODDLERS

Starting during pregnancy, a batterer can create a broad array of obstacles to his partner’s parenting. He may prevent her from going to
the doctor because he is afraid her bruises will lead to questions about the abuse or that she will frankly discuss her fears at home. His control of the phone and the car may make it difficult or impossible for her to keep prenatal visits. With each of these choices—and it is important to remember that he is making parenting choices when he denies a partner the right to make the best decisions for herself or her baby—the batterer puts his needs ahead of the needs of his child and selects some combination of coercion and control to meet these needs.

Safety, stability, routine, and nurturance are as important once a child is born as they are during pregnancy. Batterers often interfere with these critical needs, putting their children at risk. A self-centered batterer may demand attention from his partner when the child needs her. One father in my practice demanded that his partner stay in bed with him in the morning when their young children were already up and needed supervision and tending. Batterers commonly isolate their partners to ease their own fears of abandonment, keep the abuse secret, and create a growing dependency that makes it more difficult for her to leave. Tactics designed to isolate and control his partner may also interfere with her parenting. In my work, I have encountered men who have isolated their partners by not letting her:

- Take a child to well-baby visits
- Receive medical or other professionals into the home to help a child with special needs
- Get child care from family and friends.

In addition, they have taken financial control by taking their partner’s money or credit cards, making her beg for money or explain every penny spent. Conversely, they have squandered the family’s money on alcohol, drugs, or gambling, leading to eviction and moving away from supportive networks of friends or family.

Physical violence in the home by the batterer can threaten the physical safety and developmental needs of young children. Children can develop problems ranging from attachment issues and speech delays to problems with toilet training or walking. Young children are uniquely vulnerable to physical violence because they are unable to remove themselves from a dangerous situation. In one case, the abuser left his infant alone at home for hours as he drove around looking for his partner to continue his physical violence. The trauma of violence in the home can also cause regression from normal developmental milestones. In another case, a child who had been normally breast-feeding stopped abruptly the day after his mother was physically assaulted by her partner.

Abusive men often have expectations for their children’s behavior that are inconsistent with their age and become abusive when the child
fails to meet their standard. These expectations may relate to everything from walking and toilet training through reading and playing sports. Conversely, mothers may be blamed and abused for children’s issues, real or perceived, or when children disturb the abuser’s tranquility (by crying or being sick, for instance) or violate his “rules” (such as not touching his things). In one instance, a batterer punished his three year old because he believed he should never have to repeat his instructions. In turn, these punishments can elicit developmental delays in children. The combination of abuse and blame can create an escalating cycle that looks something like this:

Batterer-created stress
↓
Developmental delays in child
↓
Abuse in the form of blame, verbal degradation, and violence at mother’s parenting
↓
Further developmental delays in child

As children learn to walk and talk, their exposure and risks evolve. Toddlers can now place themselves in the path of the violence of the abuse. As language skills develop, young children may repeat degrading and humiliating words and phrases. A small child who innocently parrots his father referring to his mother as a “stupid bitch” will eventually learn the significance of this phrase. Even young children may insist that “Daddy, stop!” Batterers may use young children as spies, betraying their trust by asking them to report on their activities with mother during the day.

Preschool children can suffer from a range of consequences from their father’s violence. The emotional development of preschool children makes them very vulnerable to blaming themselves for the abuse in the home. Psychologically, this is an egocentric stage. The child believes, “Good things happen because I’m good; bad things happen because I’m bad.” Young children categorize things in simplistic and categorical ways. A father’s arrest may lead a child to see all police as bad. Young children may experience fears of the violence reoccurring, nightmares causing sleeping problems, and aggressive behavior. Focused on keeping the family together, preschool children may be very distressed by a move into shelter or being separated from father by the court.

Fathers loom large in the emotional lives of preschool children. Rarely do batterers fully understand the impact of their violence on their young children. In conversations with batterers, their children’s exposure to violence is often denied or rationalized with comments like
“The children were asleep” or “They’re too young to understand.” When we consider that children’s exposure may be auditory or emotional as well as visual, however, and that even infants appear to be affected by exposure, it is clear that virtually all children are affected in some way by abuse in their families. Batterers minimize the impact they have on children to shield themselves from external consequences, the judgment of others, and their own self-judgment. Professionals also may lack sensitivity to the connection between abusive fathers and children. After we had worked together for a while, a woman who ran a domestic violence program confessed that while they regularly provided emotional support for young children in their shelter, her staff never asked these children how they felt about their fathers. It is often easier for professionals working with battered women and their children to avoid rather than confront the combination of relief, anger, sadness, and loss that burdens many children who have to flee from an abusive parent. While it may be simpler to exclude the father or define him simply as the “bad guy,” we do children a disservice by not helping them work through their complex feelings about a violent father.

School Days, School Daze: Violent Fathers and School-Age Children

As children grow up, the impact of the batterer’s behavior extends to their lives outside the home—school, friends, sports. Children can be physically uprooted and moved to avoid violence or because the batterer’s behavior has led the family to be evicted from their home, disrupting their friendships, academic progress, and social development. Even though the decision to move, enter a shelter, or even go into hiding may have been made with the mother’s own and her children’s safety in mind, it can lead to behavioral, emotional, or academic problems in children. In these circumstances, internalized low expectations of fathers and high expectations of mothers can compound a mother’s guilt, particularly if she believes the children’s problems are the direct result of her actions.

Agencies that work with survivors can help them acknowledge and cope with the effects of separation from the familiar, including angry outbursts that may be directed at the mother. This is facilitated, and a mother’s guilt at leaving relieved, if she is reminded that the problems her children are suffering are not the result of her decision to flee toward safety, but instead are the continuing impact of the batterer’s behavior. The following example illustrates the need for professionals to clearly conceptualize the batterer’s responsibility for creating certain problems—even when the batterer is no longer physically present in the home.

A social worker was telling me one day about a mother who had done “everything right.” When her boyfriend got violent with her, she called
the police and went to a domestic violence shelter. While she was in the shelter, she decided that she couldn’t go back to live with him. She found a new apartment for herself and her children. I asked the social worker if the children had to change schools because of the move. She said “Yes, the children transferred schools and they are both having some trouble. The teenager is getting into fights. He had been fine, no behavioral issues, at the old school. His sister is falling behind in her grades. At the old school, she had a tutor. This school isn’t providing the tutoring services." I asked if she had considered that it was the batterer’s actions that had created these social and academic problems for the children. She said, “No, I was focused on what the mother needed to do to get the children stabilized. I never thought about how all this is the result of the Dad’s behavior. But now I will. And I’ll make it my business to tell the mom that what’s going on now isn’t her fault. I think she needs to hear that.”

A range of professionals may inadvertently collude with the batterer by blaming the surviving mother for her children’s academic and behavior problems. School counselors, child welfare agencies, pediatricians, and other professionals may focus on the mother’s so-called parenting deficits instead of the abuse she suffered, then refer her to support services to improve her parenting skills, sending the message that she is at fault. Failure to understand the dynamics of abuse prevents these professionals from providing effective support by helping abused mothers appreciate how the batterer has undermined her parenting, sabotaged her relationship to her children, and created the stress to which the children’s problems are a response. In this case example, the social worker could play an invaluable role with this mother, helping her and the children make sense of what is going on her home.

In other cases, a mother may have done everything in her power to shield their children from many of the batterer’s behaviors. But a paradoxical result of these efforts may be that her children blame her for leaving the batterer and creating problems in the family. The probability of this happening is greatest where the batterer has continually insulted, humiliated, or otherwise blamed his partner for problems in the household in front of the children; is adept at emotional manipulation; pits one family member against another; and presents himself as the “real” victim to others. Again, unless professionals working with the family are absolutely clear that the father alone bears responsibility for the family’s disruption, they will reinforce the message that the problems with the children are the mother’s fault.

As children come into contact with people outside the family, there are new opportunities for disclosures about what is going on in the home and interventions from helping professionals. While these new opportunities can lead to positive changes—such as support from a school
counselor, or productive reports to child welfare agencies—the batterer may extend his manipulation and coercive control to target outsiders, successfully exploiting their involvement to his own advantage. Some batterers are quite skillful at using the system as a tool to continue to hurt their partners. In one case, a batterer who was violating a court order to be in his home reported his own violation of this mandate to the local child welfare agency. He had repeatedly threatened that he could have her children taken away from her. Now, based on his report, the child welfare agency investigated his claim, found it to be true, and used his violation of the court order as grounds for removing the children from their mother—which was his entire purpose for calling.

The following are some sound bites from violent fathers who were attempting emotionally manipulate their children, even after they were out of the home.

- “Don’t go to that counseling, son, it will make you crazy.”
- “While daddy’s away [in jail], be a good son—give mommy a hard time.”
- Calling from jail with his one call: “It was your mother who got me arrested. It’s her fault I’m here.”
- “You shouldn’t take those pills—they will make you sick.”

In each of these families, a father who was supposed to be supporting the health and well-being of his children was actively sabotaging their physical and mental health. In some of the cases, they were seeking to turn the children against their mother. These are fundamental betrayals because the abuser is using his special relationship as the children’s father, and the trust they have for him, against them. These acts are not ancillary to their violent acts. To the contrary, violence, emotional manipulation, and betrayal are part of a single process that solidifies a batterer’s power over his wife and children.

Batterers’ interference with children’s medical and mental health care deserves special attention because it is poorly understood, is often kept off the radar by the double standard of parenting, and represents one of the more corrosive behaviors batterers engage in because it directly aggravates a child’s health problems. The quotes above illustrate how a batterer can make a child afraid of outside help. His motivation may be a fear that the involvement of a health professional will lead to a disclosure of his behavior or otherwise disrupt the system of mental and emotional control he has established over his wife and children. For some men, any sort of counseling or outside professional help symbolizes a threat to their narcissistic image of a “perfect family.” In these cases, his sense of self—and his denial of his abusive behavior—may be tied to the illusion that everything is OK at home. In these instances, it is only his needs that matter, no one else’s.
In a number of instances over the years, I have seen violent fathers exercise control over children when they were most vulnerable. In one case, the father intercepted an ambulance that was taking his child to the hospital to get him help for an emotional breakdown. In another case, a father denied recommended counseling for his son, who later took his own life. In another family, the batterer interfered with the medical care and physical therapy his stepdaughter needed to deal with a congenital disease. Ironically, he boasted that he was taking care of his family.

The statements above also exemplify the almost universal trait of batterers, blaming their partners for their own behavior as well as the misbehavior of their children and the resulting problems. Social workers and other professionals, seeking to engage batterers about their children's medical and other needs, frequently ask me how to talk to batterers about the impact of their abuse on their children. Rarely are they appropriately trained to interview or work with violent fathers and they are worried, often justifiably, about the potential for their intervention to increase the risk to survivors, the children, or even themselves. Speaking to fathers directly about their abuse or confronting their manipulative behavior also frightens them.

To avoid manipulation by batterers, I encourage child welfare professionals to talk to men about the specifics of their violence. I also suggest they expand their interview to questions about the broader pattern of coercive control, like what they told their children about the violence or about the problems caused for the family by their arrest or child welfare involvement. If the children are school-age, the batterer can be asked whether he told them, “I’m not home because your mother called the police. As soon as she says I can come home, I will.” Does he tell the children that all the problems in the home “are mommy’s fault”? By shifting the responsibility for his absence from his behavior to her calling the police or her behavior, he avoids having to deal with any shame, blame, or anger in his relationship with his children and sends his children back to their mother as guided missiles. Because of this explanation, it is more likely they will act out, direct their anger and blame at her, and advocate for their father’s return.

Thus, the child welfare workers now understand that effective intervention must address how he is talking to his children about the violence as well as the behavior itself. Conversely, a battering father who is sincere about changing would not only be working to stop his violent patterns, but also explaining to his children that he alone is responsible for the family’s current troubles. He would also encourage the children to be honest with him about how they felt when he was arrested and put out of the home and not encouraging them to be angry at their mother for calling the police. By focusing on positive ways
he can relate to the children, the worker is forming an educational bond with the abusive father, but not aligning with his abuse.

In *Batterers as Parents*, Lundy Bancroft and Jay Silverman outline the varied ways that batterers act to harm children. They change rules, play favorites, and create all kinds of instability. They disrupt holidays, vacations, and children’s relationships with their friends. They demonstrate that the way to get what you want is through the use of force and manipulation. They also can physically abuse their children. Research shows that more than half of the children living with domestic violence are also experiencing physical maltreatment themselves. In this example, Jerry’s violent behavior toward his children continues even after his partner drops out of the picture.

Jerry and Patty lost their children to the state for a period of time because of their use of cocaine and Jerry’s violence to Patty. Jerry eventually got clean and sober, and their girls were returned to him. Unfortunately, Patty couldn’t stay clean. Perhaps she continued to use drugs to help her not feel the shame, fear, and other emotions and memories from his violence. Whatever the reason, she floated in and out of their lives. As the girls grew up and went to school, Jerry was their primary parent. Jerry remained very conflicted about Patty’s attempts to contact the girls. He showed very little awareness of and compassion for how his behavior may have contributed to her troubles. Whenever he spoke of her, his voice dripped with contempt and hatred as he talked angrily about how she had abandoned him and the girls. In treatment, he struggled to connect his lack of compassion toward Patty’s addiction with his overall pattern of control and history of violence. Over time, Jerry became aggressive with the girls. He would grab the youngest and yell in her face when she failed to listen. He grabbed the older one by the arm and dragged her up the stairs. When they “wouldn’t listen,” he would escalate into rage, yelling and screaming and blaming their behavior for his actions. Despite some efforts to take responsibility for his actions, Jerry eventually had both of his children removed by the state.

I never knew Patty because I started working with Jerry only after he and Patty split up. So it is impossible for me to say with certainty what damage his abuse did to her or how he may have disrupted her attempts at recovery. What was clear to me was that, like many violent fathers, Jerry eventually directed many of the same emotions at the children, including anger, that he did toward Patty, perhaps because they were a constant reminder of the failure of his relationship and his perception that she had abandoned him. His resentment at being alone in parenting his children was always palpable.

Jerry’s case illustrates a critical point: that despite protestations by many abusive men to the contrary, the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors batterers direct toward their partner are often intimately inseparable
from the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors they bring to their children. In several of my cases, the batterer’s control and violence toward his partner were part of his effort to gain sexual access to his stepdaughter. In another case, the father abused his wife as she lay dying from a terminal disease. Then he fought her family for custody of their children, won, and then continued to abuse the children until the eldest child spoke out at school.

The impact of an abusive parent on a child depends on a range of factors. Research and clinical experience suggest that if the batterer is a child’s biological father, he looms larger and that their emotional experience can be more complicated and confusing than if the batterer is unrelated to them. They may feel doomed to become like him or blame themselves for their negative feelings toward him. Even as they grow into adulthood, children of batterers may struggle with their feelings toward their father. In this example, Al, a man in his thirties, maintained a complicated relationship with his father.

Al was extremely violent. In and out of jail, he alternated between being proud of his toughness and afraid of the demon of his violence. He grew up in a home where his father constantly belittled his mother and was violent with her. He abused and demeaned Al. Al remembers the time he was dragged to counseling by his father because he was getting into trouble at school. He remembers how his father blamed everything on him and never once admitted to being violent and abusive. As a grown man, his love for his father was still palpable. I could feel how he still wished his father was a different man, that he could be close to him. And he was tortured by the violence he had perpetrated against his father to stop him from abusing his mother. You could still hear the little kid in him who felt it was wrong to hit your father even if you were doing it protectively.

Al’s story was complex, like his relationship with his father. While he went further than his father ever appeared to in terms of admitting he had a problem with violence and by seeking help for his behavior, he continued to remain dangerous to others (and to himself). Even after working with him for a number of years, I never felt fully confident that his risk for violence had been reduced significantly. His semiannual visits with his parents were ongoing sources for distress, anxiety, and anger. He alternated between anger at his father for not seeming to live up to his expectations, and contempt for the person who he felt failed as a father and as a man. Al eventually dropped out of counseling while continuing with a series of failed romantic relationships, every one damaged by some level of his abusiveness.

**Sweet 16? The Role of Violent Fathers through the Teen Years**

Teenage years are a time of serious changes and growth. Teens usually have more contacts outside the family, learn more about
independence, and are further developed in their thinking, communication, and capacity to identify emotions than their younger peers and siblings. These differences create opportunities and risks for teens growing up in violent homes. School routines and activities may provide safety and a place to excel.

School staff often have no idea what a child is suffering at home. This was true, for instance, in two of my cases that ended with a homicide. In one, a high school boy killed his father to protect himself and his mother. In another, the father of the teenager killed the boy's mother and then himself.

Greater contact with the wider world can also increase the opportunities for teenage children to get involved in drugs, gangs, and other illicit activities. As they grow in size, strength, and independence, teens are more likely to physically and/or verbally try to stop the batterer, sometimes with catastrophic results. In this example, John responded to his father's violence with his own act of violence.

John was 15 when he shot and killed his father. He and his mother, Jeannie, had endured years of abuse from this man. At one time, the two fled halfway across the country only to be tracked down by John's father. Calling the police had never led to any real safety. So those calls had stopped long ago. Jeannie decided that since calling the police and fleeing didn't make things better, she and her son would just have to make the best of it. They moved back to their hometown, where at least they had a support network and were in a familiar environment. The assaults continued until one day John's father struck his mother outside their house. John saw his mother's head hit the ground and thought she was dead. He ran inside and grabbed a gun that his father had given him "to protect him from bullies" in the neighborhood. John pointed the gun at his father, who said, "If you are going to point that at me, you better use it." John pulled the trigger and shot his father. John's mother recovered from the assault. She stood by John during the trial, explaining the years of abuse and her efforts to protect them both. John wrote a letter to the court outlining the abuse, most of which was unknown to his friends and teachers at school. Considered college material, John's school administrators spoke for him at his trial. John ended up serving almost five years for manslaughter—his sentence considered light under the state's laws. While in prison, John completed his GED. He was eventually released early into a halfway house.

John's story is filled with irony and tragedy. It is sadly ironic that his father gave him the gun to use against neighborhood bullies when the most significant risk in his world was his father. It is also ironic that his father's frequent use of violence was reflected in his son's willingness to use violence to prevent further violence against himself and his mother. In perhaps the ultimate tragedy, John's father's father had
killed his grandmother. The thread of violence connects John’s grandfa-
der, his father, and him.

By the time children reach their teens, many if not all of their de-
velopmental stages may have been influenced by a violent father’s be-
vior. In some cases, children have experienced multiple traumas in
addition to domestic violence. In the short life of a child, he or she
might have experienced war, sexual abuse, violent dislocations from
one country to another, the death of close friends, and the ravages
of substance abuse on the health and well-being of caretakers. John
not only experienced his father’s violence at different ages. His father’s
violence also led to significant moves and other dislocations. Each trauma
potentially disrupts a different development task such as learning,
attachment, establishing autonomy, or developing healthy gender roles
and integrating multiple roles into a distinctive self.

Age, birth order, gender, and degrees of violence and abuse may
impact how a child experiences a parent who is a batterer. Older chil-
ren may bear the brunt of the violence while trying to protect their
mother and their younger siblings. Some children turn inwards in
the face of the abuse, retreating into school or depression. Others may
be consumed with guilt. One boy attempted to kill himself because he
blamed himself for failing to protect his mother. Another adolescent
away at a juvenile detention center spent his time worrying about the
safety of his family when his father got out of jail.

Like Al, a number of children adopt their father’s patterns. Still,
most children who grow up in homes with violence do not repeat
those actions as adults, either as victims or as perpetrators. In many
instances, this is a testament to their own resilience and the support
and love of their mother, other family members, teachers, and other
significant adults. These networks of support can provide children a
place to talk about and make sense of their experience, influence how
they interpret the abuse and relate to the battering parent, and give
them a new experience—that the world has more to offer than the real-
ity created by the batterer.

Finally, as strange as it may sound and as difficult as it may be to
admit, a child’s development may also be supported by the positive
things given to them by the batterer—whether it is financial security,
encouragement to achieve in school, or the development of a talent or
skill.

**BATTERERS AS PARENTS: DILEMMAS AND DECISIONS**

During a meeting of domestic violence professionals, a leading crim-
inal court judge leaned over to me and said, “You know, I issue court
orders telling these guys to stay away from their families for six
months and then one day the criminal case is over. Maybe he goes to
jail for a few months, maybe he doesn’t—but then he goes home. What have we done to deal with what it’s going to be like for him and his family when he goes home?"

This judge was honing in one of the true dilemmas we face when dealing with batterers as parents. Criminalizing partner violence was a watershed in our commitment to protect women and children and in our moral progress as a society. Despite this, we are just beginning to address the day-to-day realities of how most batterers remain legally and emotionally connected to their families, especially their children, or to confront the challenge posed to working with batterers as parents, regardless of whether they are biological or social fathers. We are also challenged by our deep ambivalence about engaging violent men in general and toward facilitating batterers’ access to their children in particular.

I believe the difficulties of working with batterers as parents is a subset of two things—the difficulties we have thinking about batterers in general as people who are embedded in families and communities, and the limitations of our institutions in constructively engaging men, in general, about their role as parents.

News coverage of a murder illustrates how hard it is to think of batterers not merely as "violent men" but also as "violent men embedded in networks of relationships."

The newspaper article of Tawanda’s death and her cousin’s serious injury at the hands of Tawanda’s boyfriend, Tyrone, explored the history of their relationship, including the boyfriend’s violence and her attempts to stay safe. The article described how her friends and family implored her to go into shelter and to end the relationship. The implications were that she might still be alive if only she had listened to her friends and family and so, therefore, that it was her failure to take the "correct" action that led to her murder. As importantly, the reporter treated Tyrone without exploring any of his interactions with his family and friends. How did they respond to his early arrests? To his violent behavior? Were there friends or relatives who were filling him with negative talk about Tawanda or women in general?

In essence, the news story treated Tyrone as an isolated actor versus someone who was probably like most of us—embedded in a web of relationships. Since most batterers will remain in or be quickly returned to the communities in which they were abusive and continue to play multiple roles, including roles as fathers, it behooves us to treat their lives in this context, as the lives of persons who are loved and needed as well as feared.

Our ability to engage batterers as parents is also hampered because many professionals lack the competencies needed to engage men. Educational institutions that instruct social workers, psychologists, and
therapists provide little or no training on male adult development. These educational gaps repeat themselves at the policy and practice levels. Human service agencies designed to serve "families" are primarily geared to serving women and children. In part, this reflects who comes for help as well as a possible bias about who should be "fixed" if families are to function properly. Planned Parenthood or agencies that address reproductive health and family planning almost exclusively serve women, even when men are intimately involved in the many of the activities concerned.

Ten years ago, when I first started working with child welfare workers, I asked a roomful of seasoned workers, "How many of you have worked with a father?" and the response was that only a quarter had ever met with a father. Today, if I ask a room of 200 human service professionals, "How many of you took a course on male socialization?" and "How many of you did your internship with a primarily male population?" only a handful will answer affirmatively or indicate they’ve had training to work with men.

**Children (and Their Mothers) Want Safety and Contact**

In this example, the daily routine and emotional life of a young child are intimately connected to his violent father.

Cameron was a young child, four years old, whose father was arrested and sent to jail because he had been violent with the child’s mother. Cameron’s father had been his primary care taker while his mother worked, supporting the family. When he disappeared from Cameron’s day to day experience, Cameron cried, often inconsolably.

Cameron’s circumstance highlights the bond that can exist between a batterer and his children. Betsy McAlister Groves, Patricia Van Horn, and Alicia Lieberman, national experts on working with children affected by violence, acknowledge the importance of battering fathers in the emotional lives of their children. In case examples, they highlight the coexistence of fear and sadness related to their father’s violence with a desire for connection, and a concern about their father’s well-being. In one case, a young girl expresses her fears that the police would kill her father. In another example, a girl expresses her sense of abandonment by her father who is in jail.

In each of the cases they present, the children’s fathers had committed serious violence against the children’s mother, causing fear, significant stress, disruption, and upheaval in the lives of their family as well as physical injury. The dramatic violence perpetrated by some batterers can make it difficult to recognize the day-to-day stress created by their choices. In Cameron’s case, or cases with similar circumstances, a
father's incarceration may force his mother to scramble to provide child care. A likely source of such care would have normally been his father's family. But if they blame his mother for the arrest and so become estranged, the victim can be further isolated and stressed. At
the very moment when the children are trying to cope with the trauma of the violence and their father's incarceration, their daily routine is altered. They may also be deeply affected emotionally by losing their connection with their extended family, aggravating the sense that they had lost their father.

To meaningfully support the children of batterers and their mothers, we need to acknowledge their desire for both safety and connection. One of the most basic mistakes bystanders, friends, family, and professionals can make when trying to help battered mothers and their children is emphasize one, their safety for instance, without acknowledging the other. Reaching out to battered mothers and their children is most successful when we can accept the importance of the batterer to them and appreciate their visceral desire that he change and become a better person. As with individuals who reject a man's violence, but want to sustain a relationship, so too do families look to "change" as a process that will provide them with everything they want—safety and togetherness as family. The children would have two loving parents and the mother would not have to choose safety for herself and her children at the cost of financial and emotional hardship. Even when the batterer is incapable or unwilling to change and even as we acknowledge how unlikely significant change may be in a particular case, we can still honor the desire for it to happen.

Looking in from the outside, it is easy to believe there are only two simple choices, either to permanently separate the abusive father from his wife and children or to guarantee him continued access to his family regardless of what he has done. If left unexamined, either of these beliefs can lead to the vilification of battered mothers.

If you believe that the only answer is to "get rid of the bum," you are likely to harshly judge any battered mother where contact continues, even with the children. This "get rid of the bum" attitude frequently boomerangs back on battered mothers. In the child welfare system, this attitude is often embedded in the expectation that she take unrealistic and even personally dangerous steps to prevent a batterer who is a father from having access to his children. Such steps might include a guarantee that the children will have absolutely no contact with their father, even in the face of family court orders that he be allowed visitation. In what Evan Stark terms the "battered mother's dilemma," she is caught between the potential of her children being removed by one court or being charged with contempt in another court.

Moreover, these expectations are often placed on battered mothers regardless of whether a separation is in the best interests of the
children’s emotional attachment to the batterer. Where access continues, even if the woman has made every effort in her limited power to prevent it, it may be alleged that she is “failing to protect” the children and the full weight of the child welfare system may come crashing down on her and her children.

Conversely, a similarly tragic outcome for victimized mothers results when the belief is adopted that fathers have an unqualified right to access their children regardless of their history of violence and abuse toward their mother. Here, the battered mother is judged harshly when she acts protectively based on her legitimate fears for the safety and well-being of the children. Battered mothers who attempt to bring their concerns for their children forward in family court may be accused of trying to alienate the children from their father (see chapters 7 and 5 by Joan Meier and Evan Stark, respectively, in this volume). Actively benefiting from this attitude and the positive regard given to fathers who appear to be expressing interest in parenting their children (even when it’s primarily a façade to win in court), batterers are frequently treated better in custody and visitation than nonbattering fathers. Researcher Cris O’Sullivan found that men who had protection orders filed against them were significantly more likely to be granted visitation with their children than men without such orders against them. When combined with the compromised parenting that battering has caused or with the portrayal of the victimized mother as an inadequate parent, it is easy to see how a batterer may gain custody or the victim lose it in courts that fail to appreciate the gravity of abuse and its effects on parenting. Moreover, batterers utilize an adversarial legal system to their advantage. Coercive control, limited previously to the privacy of the home, can be extended through the family court system in motions that harass and intimidate the other parent.

**Equal before the Law? Maybe Not**

It happened halfway through a evening talk I was giving to a group of law school students. I was discussing how to hold batterers accountable for the physical and emotional damage their violence does to their children. A raised hand. The student identified himself as a police officer. He shared that he had been an officer for 11 years and that he felt compelled during some calls to homes to speak to the mother privately and say, “How could you put your children through this?” I waited a moment and asked if I could ask him a question. “How many times in your 11 years on the force have you ever sat down one of those fathers who were being violent to say to him, ‘How can you treat the mother of your children like this?’” Dead silence. He had never chastised an abusive father in the same way as he felt license to address a domestic violence survivor who in all likelihood was the person who had called the police for help.
This brief exchange summed up the challenges we all face when trying to tackle the conundrum of the relationship between batterers and their children. And this conundrum affects a child welfare social worker trying to help a child living with a violent father as much as the battered woman fighting in court for the custody of her children.

THE DOUBLE STANDARD REVISITED

As we have seen, in most families mothers are expected to meet the emotional, physical, and social needs of their children, arranging child care, taking them to medical appointments, and maintaining contact with the children’s school. Beyond this is our general belief, perhaps because they have given birth, that mothers will be more attentive to their children’s emotional needs. By contrast, our expectations are that father’s roles in their children’s lives will be extremely limited at best, or nonexistent. Although we are mixed in our expectations about who has primary responsibility for discipline and homework, most people believe that a father’s primary responsibility is to provide for their families financially. Of course, while these cultural stereotypes may typify the reality in most households, they do not reflect the division of labor in millions of families where single mothers or fathers carry the total load of parenting or where parents have consciously chosen to parent differently.

Our double standards around parenting are of great significance when it comes to thinking about batterers as parents. Without appreciating what men can do and how children look to them to provide physically and emotionally, it is almost impossible to fully articulate the damage that batterers cause children when they neglect them or to conceptualize how a batterer interferes with a battered mother’s parenting. And it is extremely difficult to describe the extent to which he gains leverage in his control from expectations of parenting based on gender stereotypes.

To return to an earlier point, the double standard is also played out at the institutional level, where cultural beliefs influence decision making in cases where batterers’ behavior creates concerns for child safety and well-being. Batterers’ behavior frequently leads to the involvement of child welfare agencies in the lives of families. The mission of these agencies is to promote the safety and well-being of children, protecting them from abuse and neglect that might be perpetrated by parents or other caretakers. While statutes governing abuse and neglect make no distinctions between mothers and fathers in terms of their responsibility for the safety and well-being of children, in practice, because the expectations of mothers are different and higher than for fathers, batterers are at a significant advantage when child welfare becomes involved. For example, social workers who are exploring a child’s
medical and immunization history will almost always turn to the mother for information. When a child is not clean or is poorly dressed, the automatic assumption is that the mother has somehow been negligent in her duties. In homes where the batterer’s control over the phone, car, and finances may have limited the mother’s ability to take the children to the doctor or her ability to purchase new clothes for growing children, the batterer’s role in the neglecting the children may be invisible. Similarly, when a batterer who has been ordered out of a home can manipulate a child into blame and anger at their mother, social workers may blame the mother, who is the custodial parent, for the child’s emotional and behavioral issues.

Social workers may naïvely offer a battered mother in-home services to support her “parenting deficits,” inadvertently reinforcing her partner’s message that she is a bad mother, making her more vulnerable to his threats to report “violations” to child welfare and making his responsibility for the emotional damage suffered even less visible. Because these misdirected services do little or nothing to address his coercive control, the root cause of the problems in the home, they inevitably fail. The social worker may then document the mother’s incapacity to improve her parenting.

Alternately, reflecting their stereotyped beliefs about gender roles, social workers may develop case plans for families that rely almost entirely on steps taken by the battered mother. Backed up by the court, the child welfare agency may get a battered mother to agree in writing to ensure the children go to medical appointments and attend counseling, and even promise that the children will not be exposed to any more violence in the home. She may sign these agreements “voluntarily,” but under the implicit or direct threat that if she fails “accept services” her children will be removed. Often the father is not a party to these agreements, sometimes because he is not the child’s biological father, is ignored in court proceedings, or is simply held to a much lower standard of compliance. This situation makes it easier for him to sabotage a mother’s efforts from outside the view of the social services agency and the court. A batterer may control access to a car, fail to give the mother messages from a medical provider or therapist, or turn his child against counseling. And since the batterer is in control of whether he is violent or not, he can choose to expose his children to violence even if there is a court order of protection. In the end, what the institutions see is the children who miss appointments, fail to attend counseling, or witness more violence, and a mother who has “failed” in her agreement to meet her obligations as a parent. This dynamic is illustrated in the following example.

Joan and Sam were both addicts living with their two children. Sam had a history of being violent with Joan. Child welfare became involved in
their family because of their drug addiction. The social worker involved also identified the domestic violence in the family. The social worker asked both parents to sign service agreements outlining what they would have to do get their case closed. Joan’s service agreement had twice as many items on it as Sam’s. While both their plans included expectations that each of them would remain clean and sober, Joan’s plan made her alone responsible for feeding the children, getting them to medical appointments, and avoiding any further violence.

So what happens if Sam relapses and takes the car when Joan needs it to take the children to a medical appointment? Or decides, in the course of his coercive control, that Joan really wants the car to have a sexual liaison? Who will be held responsible for the missed appointments? I have found that even many professionals who recognize the challenges faced by battered women expect them to work miracles, meaning completing their rounds of child care, nurturance, and protection whatever the obstacles created by the batterer.

The paradox is that more effective intervention with batterers starts by raising our standards of men as parents, equalizing our expectations so that it becomes possible to ask what we would expect from an emotionally engaged, responsible parent regardless of his or her sex. Only with this standard in hand are we likely to objectively evaluate the source of the neglect and emotional damage suffered by the children in abusive homes and hold batterers accountable for change.

**POSITIVE SIGNS AND CLEAR EXPECTATIONS: SETTING THE BAR FOR CHANGE HIGH**

For most men, fatherhood is a watershed event, possibly the most important in their adult development. In a batterer’s identity as a father, there is a potential source of motivation to change, to become a better person. Psychologist Rob Palkovitz, a noted fatherhood author, reports that many men point to becoming a father, not marriage, as the catalyst for becoming “less self-centered and more giving.” Other research indicates that men involved in criminal and antisocial behavior may make a significant turnaround when they have their first child.

Authors Janna Lesser, Jerry Tello, and their colleagues share stories from young men on how becoming fathers changed their behavior including leaving gang life, giving up drugs, and improving their respect for their partner. One young father relates how he made the decision to stop doing drugs after he saw his one-year-old son pick up a crack pipe and try to imitate him. Other men discussed how becoming a father made them more empathetic and led them to turn away from a life of violence. A 22 year old said, “I just don’t want to have all that anger come out in a negative way one day toward my daughter.”
or toward anybody else... One of the things that I've seen is domestic violence. It could be from putting your kids down to putting your wife down. That would be something I wish no kid would have to go through.” Becoming the father to a daughter can challenge a man to consider male disrespect and abuse of women.

In sum, therefore, while fatherhood provides batterers with a new arena and new “tools” to control a partner, it also offers perhaps the single most important opportunity to promote changes in their behavior. Given the sensitivity that children have to batterers, real changes in how men behave can have immediate and positive outcomes for how children think and feel. It is in the interest of children, their mothers, batterers, and the community at large for us to explore how batterers’ relationships with their children may be a catalyst for change. And this process begins by advancing the dialogue about what we should expect from men generally as fathers, facilitating the changes that help position men to meet these expectations, and clearly fixing responsibility for the harms caused by men who fail to make these changes. Setting clear expectations for batterers as fathers will allow us to create opportunities for meaningful positive change and clearly articulate the failure of men who do not change.

**Awareness Indicates Potential for Change**

Some batterers seem to understand the negative impact of their violence on their children, their own co-parenting relationship, and their own identity as a father. Research I conducted with over 1,000 batterers in batterer intervention programs across Canada and the United States produced results indicating that most batterers involved with these programs could identify that physical and emotional abuse of their partner caused their children or their partner’s children to feel sad, scared, or confused. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of the biological fathers identified that their violence against their partner negatively impacted their children’s behavior at home and school, their mental health, and their relationship with their mother and with them. Fifty-three percent indicated that they were worried about the long-term effect of the abuse on their children and even more were worried that their boys were going to grow up to be abusers and their girls to be victims. The same percentage said they thought less of themselves as fathers because they were abusive to their children’s mother. (It is important to note that within this study there were a significant number of men who showed little or no concern for the impact of their behavior on the children in their lives. For example, almost one-quarter said they wouldn’t be upset at all if their children thought violence was normal.)
Other evidence exists for believing that batterers may be interested in change because of their children. Researchers Einat Peled and Jeffrey Edelson, in their article about barriers to children's domestic violence counseling, quoted a batterer who felt excluded from participating in a parenting program: "I understand the women's needs, being intimidated, but I felt I was left out. I really wanted information as a parent." Another man expressed his desire to work on himself before he could help his son heal from his violence. Peter Jaffe, in his book on the children of battered women, quotes one batterer who wrote about his attempts to change his behavior: "Dear Dad ... I'm not as abusive to my kids as you were to me but I put them through hell... Dad, this is my last chance for a family life... Wish me well." 

In Australia, researchers explored the attitudes of batterers toward change as part of their efforts to construct a domestic violence social marketing prevention campaign. Their results underscored the important role children can play in the change process for abusive men. This is what they had to say about the results of their focus groups:

Various themes were tested in the groups (e.g., the threat of criminal charges; the damaging effect on the female partner; accusing violent men of cowardice/social disapproval; the effect of intimate partner violence on children; etc.). The most effective motivating theme for those accepting of their need to change was the consequence of the perpetrator's behavior on children. This applied whether or not they themselves had children. Cognitive response data revealed that a likely explanation for this was that for a number of perpetrators, this theme generated memories of the respondent's childhood exposure to physical or verbal family violence. A further positive for the "effects on children" theme was that it was accepted as true by precontemplator perpetrators. Hence there was the possibility that it could contribute to movement of this group toward contemplation.

The effectiveness of this approach was demonstrated when a social marketing campaign using this theme prompted 2,800 batterers and potential batterers to call a special hotline over the course of two years. Out of those calls, almost 60 percent accepted a referral for treatment. (The conclusions of this research should be approached cautiously. Even if the sentiments expressed by batterers in a counseling group or survey are honest, it doesn't guarantee that they will translate into the changed behavior that is the only real test measure of whether children's situations will improve.)

Batterers who are parents need to examine their own lives and behaviors in light of what they have done and how it has impacted their children, their children's mother, and themselves. The first step a batterer can take as a parent is to admit that his behavior is solely his responsibility and not the fault of children or their mother. This admission made directly, honestly, and in an appropriate way without any
strings or expectations attached can be significant step toward healing a family. Admission of responsibility also opens the door to make credible changes in behavior. A batterer can also make himself available to listen to his children’s experience of his abuse—without pressuring the children into talking, trying to change how they feel, or imposing his own viewpoint. Batterers who are serious about change can also support children in getting the professional help they need and openly describe their abusive behavior to the professionals working with their children. A batterer can support his children’s relationship with their mother and express to the children (and Mom) his respect, gratitude, and appreciation for her as a person and a parent.

Challenging batterers to change is not the sole responsibility of the courts and law enforcement. Many of us have friends and family members we know to be abusive. We should ask how we can use our relationship with this person and awareness of their love for their children as a jumping off point to discuss how their abuse is harming their children. Medical and mental professionals, clergy, and others can build into their assessments and interventions questions about anger, jealousy, and control. When indicators of abuse are present, these professionals can educate clients or congregants to the impact that abuse has on children. Prevention efforts can target new fathers with educational information about abuse. Premarital counseling can include similar information. And clergy can develop sermons addressing the connection between being a good father and treating a partner with respect.

A gratifying result of my own research is that it has helped stimulate public awareness campaigns directed primarily at men who are fathers. The posters in this campaign ask men to consider the connection between their treatment of their partner and their child’s well-being. One says, “How does your child feel when you abuse her mother?” Over the face of a young girl looking out from the poster are the words “sad” “scared,” and “confused,” the top three emotions the batterers I surveyed attributed to children. Designed to raise awareness and as vehicles for outreach, the posters are hung in courthouses, social services agencies, and even men’s rooms, frequently with the phone number for a local domestic violence agency, and have been incorporated into public awareness campaigns that utilize bus ads and billboards.

Although service providers may feel uncomfortable working with abusive men, I am convinced that we cannot end violence and abuse in our homes unless we increase our capacity to address men who are violent. They are our fathers, friends, brothers, and sons. They are the source of the risk to our families, and this risk can only be significantly reduced if we devise ways to change their behavior. Importantly, more and more domestic violence advocates are embracing this approach, in part because working directly with perpetrators has increased their
ability to be better understand and advocate on behalf of domestic violence survivors and their children.

Nothing I have said in this chapter is meant to diminish the responsibility that abusive men bear for the harms they cause to the women and children in their lives through their violence and control. To the contrary, I believe that holding these men solely accountable for the harms they cause is fully consistent with the central messages here: that if we want our families to thrive, we must raise our expectations of men as fathers, address batterers directly about their violence and abuse, and afford them the education and opportunity to change.

NOTES

1. I want to thank my wife, Rosalyn Dischiavo, for her extensive editing and comments as I developed this chapter.

2. The extracts are based on real cases or composites of real cases. The names and other potential identifying features have been changed.


