

# Teachable Moments<sup>vi</sup>

In addition to the formal education about domestic violence (DV) that fatherhood practitioners provide to fathers through classes and workshops, other opportunities often arise—both inside and outside the classroom—for practitioners to address issues related to the topic. These situations are what we call “teachable moments.” While curriculum-based education tends to be proactive, teachable moments are both reactive (they are used in response to a statement or observed behavior by the fathers) and proactive (they make use of opportunities in everyday interactions).

The following teachable moments are examples of such situations and are meant to provide general guidance—by identifying the problem and some possible options for responding to it—that can be applied in other situations.<sup>vii</sup> It is important to note that practitioners have a number of options for responding to situations and should choose an option based on their relationship with the father, their level of comfort with the subject, and recommendations from their partner DV organizations. Practitioners must also consider their own safety and the safety of others in the situation.

We recommend using these teachable moments as a supplementary training resource. They are not sufficient on their own to replace a training from a partner DV organization. It is important for fatherhood programs to instead develop strong partnerships with DV agencies and then together with their partners establish a clear protocol for referrals.

## Teachable moment #1: Trash talk

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A practitioner overhears a father talking to other program participants about the mother of his children. He refers to her using expletives and blames her for many of his problems.

### What’s the problem?

Men who hold sexist and hostile attitudes toward women are more likely to be directly abusive to them.<sup>55</sup> Using disrespectful and abusive language on the premises of a fatherhood program—even if this happens outside the classroom—fosters a toxic culture for everyone in the program.

### What to do?

Here are some options:

- In the moment, say something to the father (in front of the other men). For example: “*Man, remember we don’t use that kind of talk here.*”
- In the moment, take the father aside and privately say something. For example: “*I would appreciate if you don’t use that kind of language when referring to the mother of your children or any woman for that matter. What would your children think if they heard you?*”

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<sup>vi</sup> The teachable moments concept was inspired by the work of Dr. Jackson Katz and Mentors in Violence Prevention. For more information about the programs, see <https://www.mvpstrat.com/>. The need for teachable moments like the ones described here was identified through the PAIVED study.

<sup>vii</sup> The options for responding to situations were developed by experts in the field of domestic violence at Futures Without Violence. These options are grounded in the field of bystander intervention which promotes that anybody can step in to safely and effectively intervene. For more information on bystander approaches, see: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/prevention.html>.

- Bring up the issue during a one-on-one meeting with the father, emphasizing the consequences of verbal abuse on children and adults and the importance of using respectful language, even when the person is not present.
- Indirectly address the issue by talking about the same topics during a class, and also discuss beliefs about women that can contribute to verbal abuse (such as unhealthy masculinity and rigid gender roles).
- Share information about resources in the community that can work with fathers who use violence.

## Teachable moment #2: No big deal

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A father arrives to the program with visible bruises or a black eye. The practitioner knows that this person has been verbally abused by his partner in the past. When the father is directly asked what happened, he looks down and says that he walked into a door.

### What's the problem?

People who experience violence often do not want to disclose what happened to them for various reasons, including fear of not being believed, feelings of diminished self-worth or shame, and not wanting their partner to get in trouble. Practitioners need to meet survivors of violence where they are and not push for disclosures or try to fix the problem when the person is not ready. Survivors should always be in charge of their own processes.

### What to do?

Here are some options:

- In the moment, take the father aside, express empathy, and privately say something. For example: *"That looks painful. Has someone looked at it?"* or *"I am worried about you. Remember that you can always talk to me about anything and I'm here to support you."*
- Bring up the issue during a one-on-one meeting with the father, providing an opportunity for a disclosure, but not pushing for one. For example: *"You have told me that your partner and you sometimes have bad fights. What do they look like? Remember that everybody has the right to live a life free of violence and that I am here to support you in your own choices, whatever they might be. I care about you."*
- Indirectly address the issue during a class, emphasizing the fact that men can also be the recipients of abuse. In order to be gender-inclusive when discussing DV, be sure to provide prevalence data that includes both women and men, and talk about barriers that survivors face, including barriers faced by male-identified survivors.
- Share the number of the National Domestic Violence Hotline, as well as resources in the community that can support fathers who have experienced violence.

## Teachable moment #3: None of your business

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On his/her drive to work, a practitioner sees a program participant yelling at a woman (not the mother of his children) on the street. The woman seems scared. The father pushes her and walks away. She does not seem to be injured, but walks away, crying.

### What's the problem?

Even though the abuse witnessed by the practitioner does not seem to be extreme, the fact that this violent behavior is happening in a public place might mean that more severe violence is happening in private (possibly with this woman and, likely, with the father's partners). The father is at risk of being arrested and charged with assault and battery.

## What to do?

Here are some options:

- At the next opportunity to speak with the father, take him aside and privately say something. For example: *“I saw you the other day yelling and pushing a woman on the street. I am concerned about you and her. I don’t know who she is, but it looks like she is afraid of you. Remember that I am here to talk and to help you with your problems.”*
- If the father responds defensively or says something like, “Mind your own business,” this is an opportunity to add: *“This is my business. I’m here to help you be the best father you can possibly be, and treating a woman—or anyone—like you did can have serious consequences. Remember, you want to always be a good role model for your children and in your community. Also, you could get arrested if someone called the police. If you end up in jail, you won’t be able to be there for your children.”*
- It is important to add something like: *“I care about you—and your children, your partner, and that woman. I’m here to help you and can connect you with a program that can help you change your behavior. Please do it for your children.”*
- Share information about resources in the community that can work with fathers who use violence.

## Teachable moment #4: Fight for custody

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A father shares during a class that he is going to sue the mother of his children, his ex, to request sole custody because she is an “unfit mother.” He says that she often leaves the children alone while she is out. He also says that she recently got a protection order against him to prevent him from “getting more involved in the situation.” The children are 10 and 12 years old.

### What’s the problem?

While it might be true that the mother took out a protection order to keep the father away, it is also possible that this father may want to retaliate against the mother of his children because the court issued a protection order against him. People who use violence often use systems (including the courts and child protection) to try to continue manipulating their ex-partners. It is important to apply critical thinking to this type of situation to go beyond obvious explanations and consider all factors and alternate explanations.

### What to do?

Here are some options:

- In the moment, say something to the father (in front of the other men). For example: *“Tell me more about the situation. Has she told you why she did this? Did you try to come up with mutually agreed-upon solutions before you were served with the protection order? Are you ready to be a full-time dad, and are you sure you would never leave the kids alone if you weren’t able to find child care?”*
- Later on, take the father aside and privately say something. For example: *“I’m concerned that your problems with your ex are affecting your children. It seems like things are getting worse between the two of you and they are caught in the middle. Do you really think that trying to terminate your ex’s parental rights is in the children’s best interest? I would encourage you to work together to find a more amicable solution.”*
- If you suspect that the father has been abusive, during a one-on-one meeting, explore the topic further. For example: *“How can I help you find a solution to your problem with your ex, so that your kids don’t have to suffer? I can recommend a program (BIP) that can support you in making changes in your life that might improve your situation. Remember that trying to control others often doesn’t go very well. You only have control over yourself and your own actions. And sometimes, a change in your own actions can have positive consequences for others.”*
- Share information about resources in the community that can work with fathers who use violence.