



# Ten Ways to Engage Fathers in Addressing and Preventing Domestic Violence

This section presents practices that fatherhood programs use to address and prevent domestic violence (DV) with their participants. For concrete examples of how to use some of these practices, see the Teachable Moments resource on page 12.

## 1 Create safe, non-shaming spaces for fathers

There is a lot of stigma and shame associated with both using and surviving domestic violence. In order for fathers to feel comfortable sharing their experiences with DV, they should feel supported, believed, and understood. However, practitioners should always be careful not to justify any abusive behaviors.

## 2 Develop ongoing opportunities for fathers to disclose DV perpetration and victimization, including one-on-one meetings

Once fatherhood program staff have developed trust with fathers, fathers might be more inclined to share their experiences with DV perpetration and victimization. It is important for staff to create opportunities to regularly meet privately with fathers and ask about domestic violence and unhealthy relationships in different ways. Fathers are more likely to disclose their experiences in one-on-one meetings.

## 3 Use non-stigmatizing language to describe people who have experienced or used violence in relationships during education and other services

It is important for practitioners to be explicit about what constitutes domestic violence (including physical, sexual, psychological, and financial abuse and coercion), its consequences for various family members, and the fact that violence is never justified in relationships. However, practitioners also need to be mindful that the labels used to describe people involved in DV may add to their shame and discourage disclosure. Practitioners should use “people-first” language to refer to those involved in DV. For example, it is better to say “person who uses violence in relationships” than to use terms like batterer, offender, or perpetrator; and it is better to refer to a “person who has experienced or survived DV” than to a victim (some people also prefer the term “survivor of violence”). Practitioners should also pay attention to the language that fathers use and mirror that language.

## 4 Provide universal information about the consequences of violence for children

Teaching fathers about the consequences of exposure to DV for children is a powerful strategy to motivate some fathers who use violence to start the process of changing their behavior, and may help prevent DV from happening in families. Understanding the consequences of DV for children is also important for the healing journey of people who have experienced DV as adults or children. Information about the consequences of DV for children should be balanced with facts about healing, resilience, and protective factors in children and adults.

## 5 Use relatable, relevant examples

As with any other kind of education for fathers, practitioners should use relevant and relatable examples when talking about DV. The examples should be gender-inclusive, and include couples who are still together and couples who are separated (as DV can happen in both instances). Practitioners should also be careful not to always characterize the person who uses violence as male and the survivor as female

(although this is the most common situation), and they should use a variety of examples from diverse racial and ethnic groups and sexual orientations.

## **6 Create connections between practitioners and fathers by participating in educational activities and sharing relevant personal experiences<sup>53</sup>**

One effective way to develop trust between fatherhood practitioners and participants is for staff to participate in all educational activities—including the group’s check-in and check-out—and exercises. Practitioners should decide for themselves how much of their personal histories they are willing to share but recognize that offering some information about how they struggle in their own relationships can create a sense of connection and help reduce the imbalance of power between facilitators and group members. It is also powerful for practitioners to share success stories about how they have dealt with relationship problems as this allows them to model positive behavior and bring hope to group members.

## **7 Connect fathers with battering intervention programs (BIPs) and DV services when appropriate**

When fathers have disclosed domestic violence perpetration or victimization, it is important that practitioners not only refer, but also connect fathers to agencies that address these issues. When making a referral, it is always preferable for the practitioner to call the other provider while a father is present and pass the phone to him, rather than only giving a father the provider’s telephone number to call. Establishing relationships with staff from DV agencies and BIPs is essential for offering appropriate referrals. For more information on collaborations with DV agencies and BIPs, see the Partnerships resource.

## **8 Create safe and welcoming spaces and services for fathers**

In both small and big ways, fatherhood programs can make their spaces and activities more accessible for fathers. Examples include having baby changing tables in the men’s restroom, providing food and diapers for young children, and displaying positive images of fathers and children in printed materials.<sup>iv</sup> Additionally, providing literature and displaying posters that address victimization and perpetration of DV (with a focus on men) helps reinforce the message that the fatherhood program is committed to addressing and helping to prevent DV.<sup>v</sup> Offering childcare (as well as food) for fathers during educational sessions, including those that address DV, might improve their attendance and participation.

## **9 Use motivational interviewing strategies**

Motivational interviewing (MI) is a clinical approach to help people change negative behaviors using various motivational strategies. MI is often used in work with individuals who have addiction and physical health issues. In some cases, these strategies and the principles of motivational interviewing have proven successful in engaging with individuals who use violence.<sup>54</sup> The strategies include reflective listening, open-ended questions, and affirmation, among others. For more information on motivational interviewing, see the Resources section.

## **10 Use teachable moments**

Teachable moments are opportunities outside the regular curriculum—or even outside the classroom—when practitioners can provide education and intervene in situations concerning DV.

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<sup>iv</sup> For a checklist and assessment to make your space more father-friendly, see <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/sites/default/files/youngfathers-introtoolkit.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> For examples of DV materials for men, see <https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/role-model-poster/> and <http://www.joyfulheartfoundation.org/blog/it%E2%80%99s-not-%E2%80%9Cjust-women%E2%80%99s-issue%E2%80%9D-men-are-survivors-too>