

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Batterer Programs - successful rehabilitation or false hope?

From Andy Klein

Remember the old saying about the road to hell being paved with good intentions? I fear the "Fathering After Violence Projects," though greatly well intentioned, represent a potential disaster for abused women and their vulnerable children. My concern is heightened because the project intends to build upon a base of batterer intervention programs. Among other things, it will develop material for these programs to use to make abusers who renounce violence better fathers.

First of all, how do we know whether abusers "renounce their violence?" Is mere attendance enough? Do we assume graduation certifies them as ready to assume their roles as parents? Furthermore, will batterers turn around and use attendance at these programs to successfully remove visitation or custody restrictions imposed because of prior abuse? And will battered women let down their guards and let abusers back into the family because they trust the program has transformed the batterer into good fathers? To the point: Will these new programs work in general to stop abusers from continuing their abuse?

The research suggests batterer programs remain unproven at best. A recent domestic violence fatality review in Montgomery County, Ohio, found that five of the last 19 women murdered by their partners had completed a batterer intervention program! The premise of the Fathering Project is that if abusers really understood the negative impact of their behavior on their children, they would be motivated and able to change. Last year, hundreds of children were murdered by abusers who also murdered their mothers. Do you really think these abusers wouldn't have committed these horrendous acts if they just understood that shooting, strangling, smothering, bludgeoning, or knifing children negatively affected them?

Supervised Visitation Centers recently promoted by the Violence Against Women Office presents the same dilemma as the project. Designed to protect mothers while allowing abusers to maintain contact with their children, these programs act as enablers, allowing

courts to take high-risk gambles on dangerous abusers by allowing visitation rather than just saying no. These programs also promote the same message as this project: We should strive to preserve the abuser-child relationship. I no longer share that basic premise.

The two batterer programs that will pilot the project's material, Common Purpose and EMERGE, are about as good as they get. As a probation officer, I used both. Unfortunately, they are not representative of the vast majority of such programs proliferating around the country. For starters, Common Purpose and EMERGE are twice as long as most programs. Even if they use this material well for select abusers, how will other programs use it?

I recently completed a study of six batterer programs in Pennsylvania. Two reported that they had abusers attending who had been imprisoned previously for killing their spouses. How much do we want to help these men "talk to their children about their violent pasts, make amends, and start healing their relationship with their children when possible and appropriate?" Do we want batterer programs deciding when these things are possible and appropriate? Do we even want courts to make these determinations, courts that order abusers into batterer programs who continued to abuse new partners after being released from prison for murdering their former partners?

Too many courts have yet to understand or appreciate that batterers make bad fathers. Call me cynical, but isn't it a bit naïve to start programs that suggest that abusers can become good fathers once they go through a few reformulated classes?

Peace,
Andy

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