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THE PARENTING OF MEN WHO BATTER

It's Saturday morning in the Franklin home. Breakfast is rushed because Marty, who is 12 years old, and his sister Rhonda, 9, have early soccer games. Their mother Donna is scurrying around while her husband Troy eats and reads the morning paper. Marty grumbles to his mother, "Ma, hurry up! I told you last week, the coach picks the starting players 20 minutes before game time."

His mother snaps back, "If you had washed your uniform last night like I asked you to, we wouldn't be in such a hurry." Rhonda pipes in, "I did mine."

Marty shoots his sister a dirty look and says, "Oh, I guess I just can't compete with goody two-shoes here. Hey, maybe my soccer suit is dirty, but at least I don't get the Bitch of the Year Award."

Donna reacts sternly, saying, "Don't talk that way to your sister, young man!" Troy now glances up from his paper, annoyed. "How the hell do you expect Marty to react? If he's not absolutely perfect, both of you are all over him."

"Never mind, Dad," Marty breaks in flippantly, "I'm used to it. If one of them isn't bitching at me, it's the other."

*Donna's blood begins to boil as Troy returns to reading. "Your son just called me a bitch. You're his father - you have nothing to say about it??" Troy half rises out of his seat. "Yeah, I do have something to say. If you would conduct yourself like an adult, instead of getting all hysterical, things wouldn't get like this with the children. Don't be so damn sensitive. Marty didn't call you a bitch, he said you bitch **at** him, which is true. You do."*

Marty laughs. Rhonda does too, then immediately feels ashamed towards her mother and turns red in the face. Their mother yells loudly at Troy, "It's not me! You're the problem here, you're just encouraging his bad attitude!"

Troy pounces out of his seat yelling back, "That's enough out of you, you goddamned bitch!," and hurls his newspaper to the floor. He shoves Donna hard towards the kitchen door so that she stumbles and falls. "Get the hell out of here, right now," he screams, "or you'll be sorry!" Donna bursts into tears and runs up to the bedroom. Marty and Rhonda are left trembling, although Marty forces a smile and mumbles to Rhonda, "What the hell does Mom expect?"

[The above scenario is a fictional account, incorporating dynamics from a number of my cases.]

The published research on children's exposure to domestic violence focuses largely on two aspects of their experience: The trauma of witnessing physical assaults against their mother, and the tension produced by living with a high level of conflict between their parents (e.g. Rossman, Hughes, & Rosenberg, 2000). As important as these factors are, they are in fact only one aspect of many complex problems that typically pervade the children's daily life. The bulk of these difficulties have their roots in the fact that the children are living with a batterer present in their home. The parenting characteristics commonly observed in batterers have implications for the children's emotional and physical well-being, their relationships with their mothers and siblings, and the development of their belief systems. All of these issues need to be examined in making determinations regarding custody and visitation in cases involving histories of domestic violence.

The Batterer Profile: Implications for Children

Batterers have been established to have a profile that distinguishes them from non-battering men. Each of these identified characteristics can have an impact on children's experience and development. Some of the critical areas that court personnel should be aware of include:

Control: Coerciveness is widely recognized as a central quality of battering men (Lloyd & Emery, 2000). It is commonly true that one of the spheres of the battered woman's life that is subject to heavy control by the batterer is her parenting. In some cases this control begins even before the children are born, through such behaviors as the batterer refusing to use birth control, requiring or forbidding the woman to terminate a pregnancy, or causing her pregnancy through a sexual assault. (Some history of intimate partner rape is present in 25-40% of domestic violence cases, and statistics that include other kinds of sexual assault to battered women are even higher; see review in Mahoney & Williams, 1998.) Once children are born, the batterer may overrule the mother's parenting decisions, and he may enforce his will by verbally abusing the mother or physically assaulting her when he is angry about the children's behavior or when she does not cede to his parenting directives (Ptacek, 1997), as we see with Troy in our opening scenario. It is predictable, therefore, that battered women would be far more likely than other women to feel that they have to alter their parenting styles when their partners are present, and researchers have found that this is in fact the case (Holden & Ritchie, 1991). Thus children are being raised in a context where their mother cannot safely use her best judgment about how to care for them.

Entitlement: Batterers have been demonstrated to have much higher rates than other men of believing that they are entitled to use violence towards female partners when they deem it to be necessary (Silverman &

Williamson, 1997), and to take an overall stance in the relationship of claiming a superior status and expecting catering and deference (Adams, 1991; Edleson & Tolman, 1992). Troy exhibits his entitlement and sense of superiority by, for example, contributing nothing to the work of a very busy morning and actively encouraging his son's negative attitudes towards females.

Clinical observation indicates that the higher a batterer's level of entitlement, the more likely he is to chronically behave in selfish and self-centered ways. He may, for example, become irate or violent when he feels that his partner is paying more attention to the children than to him, which can make it difficult for the mother to properly meet the children's physical and emotional needs. Similarly, he may treat the mother like a servant in front of the children, so that they learn to disrespect her and treat her in a similar fashion. In addition, many batterers cause *role-reversal* occur in their relationships with their children, where the children are made to feel responsible to take care of the battering parent and meet his needs. This can create a burden of parentification for the children, in addition to making them more vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Manipulation: It is common for a batterer to be manipulative of family members, using such tactics as dishonesty, false promises, and the sowing of divisions to increase his power and escape accountability (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Batterers tend, for example, to cultivate a public image of generosity and kindness. When children observe the batterer's popularity in the community, they can become more likely to blame their mother or themselves for the abuse in the home, since other people do not seem to believe that their father has a problem. Manipulation may also involve lying to the children, or drawing them in as agents of the abuse, as exhibited by Troy when he gets his children to laugh at inappropriate jokes about their mother. Children who are traumatized by exposure to violent acts can safely be assumed to be at greater risk of being psychologically harmed by such manipulation than children who are less emotionally vulnerable.

Possessiveness: It is common for men who batter to perceive their partners as owned objects (Adams, 1991), and this outlook extends to their children in many cases. Many clients of mine have, for example, defended their physical or sexual abuse of the children by insisting that it is their paternal prerogative to treat their children as they see fit. Batterers' possessiveness towards both partners and children can have important post-separation implications; for example, batterers have been found to seek custody at higher rates than non-battering fathers do (APA, 1996), to be at their greatest risk of committing homicide of women or children during and after the break-up of a relationship (Langford, Isaac, & Kabat, 1999; Websdale, 1999). Parents who perceive children as possessions have been observed to have high rates of child abuse in general (Ayoub, Grace, Paradise, & Newberger, 1991), and the link between such attitudes and incest perpetration is widely noted (e.g. Leberg, 1997; Hanson, Gizzarelli, & Scott, 1994; Salter, 1988).

This is a brief and partial review of the batterer profile. Each of the characteristics commonly found in

batterers, including denial and minimization about their abusive and violence actions, battering in multiple relationships, and high level of resistance to change, can have an important impact on children who are exposed to them. (These issues, and several related ones, are discussed in greater detail in Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

Risk of Child Abuse

The various published studies of physical abuse of children by batterers indicate that roughly half of batterers repeatedly assault children in the home, a rate about 700% that of non-battering men (e.g. Bowker, Arbitell, & McFerron, 1988; Straus, 1990; Suh & Abel, 1990; and other studies). An equally substantial body of research finds batterers four or more times more likely than other men to sexually abuse their children or step-children, with exposure to domestic violence one of the top risk factors for incest victimization (e.g. McCloskey, Figueredo, & Koss, 1995; Paveza, 1988; Sirles & Franke, 1989; and several other studies). The literature on incest perpetrators describes a profile that is compatible with battering, including a high level of control, entitlement, and manipulateness, and a tendency to view children as owned objects (e.g. Leberg, 1997; Salter, 1995).

No evidence currently exists to suggest that the risk of child abuse by a batterer declines post-separation, and in fact there is considerable reason to believe that such risk may *increase*. Batterers tend to be enraged and retaliatory for an extended period after a relationship ends, contributing to volatility in their behavior, and they sometimes increase their targeting of the children as a way to frighten or upset the mother because the separation causes a loss of access to avenues to abuse the mother directly (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). The risk to children may also be augmented by the fact that the battered mother is no longer able to monitor the batterer's treatment of the children during his times of contact with them. Clinicians sometimes observe that courts are reluctant to believe reports from battered women regarding mistreatment of their children during court-ordered visitation, which can sometimes leave children vulnerable to ongoing abuse by the batterer.

The Batterer's Parenting Style

Apart from the risk of overt child abuse, batterers often tend toward authoritarian, neglectful, and verbally abusive approaches to child-rearing (Margolin, John, Ghosh, and Gordis, 1996). The effects on the children of these parenting weaknesses may be intensified by their prior traumatic experience of witnessing violence. For example, children whose battering fathers yell or bark orders at them appear to be more shaken by these experiences than children who have not been exposed to violence, as they are aware of his capacity

for physical assault whether or not he has ever assaulted them directly. My colleagues and I also often observe that a batterer's authoritarian or intimidating behaviors in the children's presence, or towards them directly, can cause traumatic memories to be reawakened in them, with resultant increase in their symptoms and interference in their social and intellectual development. Batterers have also been observed to exhibit neglectful parenting, including unsafe levels of supervision, manipulateness (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Additional crucial problems in the parenting of men who batter include the use of the children as weapons against the mother and the undermining of the mother's authority, which are discussed further below, with important post-separation implications.

The Batterer as Role-Model

Boys who are exposed to domestic violence show dramatically elevated rates of battering their own partners as adolescents or adults (Silverman & Williamson, 1997), and research suggests that this connection is a product largely of the values and attitudes that boys learn from witnessing battering behavior (Markowitz, 2001; Silverman & Williamson, 1997). Daughters of battered women show increased difficulty in escaping partner abuse in their adult relationships (Doyme et al., 1999). Both boys and girls have been observed to accept various aspects of the batterer's belief-system (Hurley & Jaffe, 1990), including the view that victims of violence are to blame, that women exaggerate hysterically when they report abuse, that males are superior to females, and that the use of violence against women by men is justifiable (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Donna and Troy's son Marty exhibits, for example, his absorption of his father's negative and degrading attitudes towards females, which he acts out towards his sister Rhonda and towards his mother.

The destructive influence that batterers can have on children's belief-systems, and therefore on their future behavior, has not received adequate attention in most professional publications, and appears to be largely overlooked in crafting custody and visitation determinations. It should be further noted that children who are traumatized may be particularly easy to influence, due to their elevated needs for belonging, security, and self-esteem, and therefore decisions to place children in unsupervised contact with a batterer should be made with great care.

Undermining of the Mother's Authority

Battering is inherently destructive to maternal authority. As we saw with Troy in the opening scenario, the batterer's behavior provides a model for children of contemptuous and aggressive behavior towards their mother. The predictable result, confirmed by many studies, is that children of battered women have increased rates of violence and disobedience towards their mothers (Jaffe & Geffner, 1998). These

inherent effects are aggravated in many cases by the batterer's deliberate weakening of the mother's ability to set limits, which may be accompanied by violence towards her regarding issues about the children (Ptacek, 1997). We saw Troy, for example, give explicit approval to his son's disrespectful language towards Donna. Troy is able in this way to enhance his own power in the family and ensure that his wife will appear to be an ineffective or volatile parent. Troy then goes on to assault Donna to retaliate against her for her efforts to stand up for herself and for her daughter.

Impact on Family Dynamics

Many other behaviors that are commonly observed in batterers can distort family functioning. Some common examples include:

Interfering with a mother's parenting. Partners of my battering clients make frequent reports of being prevented from picking up a crying infant or from assisting a frightened or injured child, of being barred from providing other basic physical or emotional care, and even of being forbidden to take children to medical appointments. Interference of this kind can cause the children to perceive their mother as uncaring or unreliable, feelings which the batterer may reinforce by verbally conditioning the children through statements such as, "Your mother doesn't love you," or, "Mommy only cares about herself." The trauma caused to the mother by domestic violence can also sometimes make it more difficult to be fully present and attentive for her children (review in Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2000), which ironically the batterer may then use to his advantage in a custody or visitation dispute.

Sowing divisions with the family: In our opening scenario, Troy uses favoritism to build a special relationship with one of his children (Marty), demonstrating a dynamic that occurs frequently in the parenting of men who batter. As other researchers have noted, the favored child is particularly likely to be a boy, and the batterer may bond with him partly through encouraging a sense of superiority to females (Johnston & Campbell, 1993).¹ Batterers may also sow divisions through deliberate creating or feeding of familial tensions. These behaviors are a likely factor in the high rate of intersibling conflict, including violence, observed in families exposed to battering behavior (Hurley & Jaffe, 1990). Descriptions of division-sowing behaviors in incest perpetrators (Leberg, 1997) are remarkably similar to clinical observations of these behaviors in men who batter (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

Use of the children as weapons: Many batterers use children as a vehicle to harm or control the

¹ Although Johnston and Campbell make observations that are very similar to mine regarding family functioning in domestic violence cases, they reach almost opposite conclusions, greatly minimizing the risk to children from unsupervised contact with most batterers. For a detailed critique of their formulations, see Bancroft & Silverman, 2002.

mother (Erickson & Henderson, 1998), through such tactics as destroying the children's belongings to punish the mother, requiring the children to monitor and report on their mother's activities, or threatening to kidnap or take custody of the children if the mother attempts to end the relationship. These behaviors draw the children into the abuser's behavior pattern. Post-separation, many batterers use unsupervised visitation as an opportunity to abuse the mother through the children by alienating them from the mother, encouraging them to behave in destructive or defiant ways when they return home, or by returning them dirty, unfed, or sleep-deprived from visitation (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). This important dynamics rarely appears to be taken into account in crafting custody and visitation plans.

Retaliation for the mother's efforts to protect the children: A mother may find that she is assaulted or intimidated if she attempts to prevent the batterer from mistreating the children, or may find that he harms the children more seriously to punish her for standing up for them, and therefore may be forced over time to stop intervening on her children's behalf (e.g. see the extended case description in Jones, 1994). In our opening scenario, Troy's assault on Donna was a direct result of her efforts to protect her daughter from psychological harm, and may have the effect of intimidating her the next time she would like to protect her children from him. This dynamic can lead children to believe that their mother doesn't care about the ways in which the batterer is hurting them because she sometimes maintains a frightened silence in the face of his behavior. This perception in children can be exacerbated in cases where a court requires a battered woman to send her children on visitation with their father over their objections. It therefore becomes critically important for children who have been exposed to domestic violence not to be required to see or speak with the perpetrator when they are voicing or demonstrating a preference not to do so.

Post-Separation Implications

Custody and visitation determinations in the context of domestic violence need to be informed by an awareness of the destructive parenting behaviors exhibited by many batterers, and in particular the ways in which these behaviors may damage or eliminate the potential for children to heal psychologically and socially from the traumatic experiences they have endured. Exposure to a batterer's inappropriate parenting has especially important implications for children who are struggling with two sets of psychological injuries, one from previous witnessing of domestic violence and the other from their parents' divorce. (The great majority of children who live with a batterer directly see or hear one or more acts of violence, research that is reviewed in Kolbo, Blakely, & Engleman, 1996, and a substantial number witness sexual assaults against their mother, as discussed in Wolak & Finkelhor, 1998).

In evaluating custody and visitation and crafting appropriate parenting plans, the following elements

require close examination:

The children's healing needs. There is a wide consensus that children's recovery from exposure to domestic violence and from divorce depends largely on the quality of their relationship with the non-battering parent and with their siblings (reviews in Heller, Larrieu, D'Imperio, & Boris, 1998, and in Graham-Bermann, 1998). Therefore, visitation plans should take into account whether the batterer is likely, based on his past and current behavior, to continue (or begin) to undermine the mother's authority, interfere with mother-child relationships, or cause tensions between siblings, all of which can interfere significantly with children's healing. Children also need a sense of safety in order to heal well (van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996), which may not be fostered by leaving them in the unsupervised care of a man whose violent tendencies they have witnessed, even if they feel a strong bond of affection for him. (It should also be noted that both children and adults can become strongly bonded in an unhealthy way to a perpetrator of abuse through a process known as *traumatic bonding*, elucidated in Dutton & Painter 1993, 1983, and in James, 1994. I have observed that evaluators who assess the strength of children's bonds with their battering fathers rarely address the role of traumatic bonding.)

The need for detailed assessment. A batterer's history of parenting behaviors needs to be investigated carefully, to assess for the presence of any of the common problems described above, with particular attention to the risk that he may use children as a vehicle for continued abuse of the mother. Such an assessment cannot be properly performed through reliance on clinical evaluation of the father, mother, or children, as it must involve extensive collecting of evidence from other sources of information such as school personnel, witnesses to important events, police and medical reports, child protective records, telephone and mail communications, and other sources. Courts need further to ensure that custody evaluators have extensive training on the multiple sources of risk to children from unsupervised contact with batterers, such as the ones discussed above. (A detailed guide to performing proper custody and visitation evaluations in the context of domestic violence allegations can be found in Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

Safely fostering father-child relationships. Except in cases where a batterer has been terrifyingly violent or threatening to the mother in the presence of the children, or has abused the children directly in a severe and repeated form, it is common for children to request some degree of ongoing contact with their battering fathers. In many cases they may benefit from such contact as long as safety measures are provided, the contact is not overly extensive, and the abuser is not permitted to cause set-backs to the children's healing process.

One way to foster these goals is to increase the use of professionally-supervised visitation, ideally based in a visitation center. A future transition to unsupervised visitation should not be assumed, but should

instead be conditioned on the batterer completing a high-quality batterer intervention program, dealing seriously with any substance abuse issues he has, and showing other indications of being serious about changing his abusive behavior and accepting responsibility for his past actions. (It should be noted that batterer programs that are run on a "power and control" model have been found to be quite a bit more effective than was previously believed, especially if any attendant drug and alcohol issues are also properly addressed - see Gondolf, 2001.)

Where careful assessment leads to the conclusion that unsupervised visitation is physically and emotionally safe for the children, visits that are kept relatively short in duration and that do not include overnight stays can help to reduce the batterer's ability to damage children's critical healing relationship with their mother. Such restricted contact can allow the children to meet their need to have an ongoing bond with their father and to share key life events, while simultaneously limiting his influence as a destructive role-model, which has been shown to put them at very high risk for future involvement in domestic violence (discussed above). A plan of this kind also helps to ensure that children feel securely and safely attached to their primary home, and to feel that the court system is empowering their mother to protect them, elements which are indispensable to recovery in traumatized children.

Conclusion

Children who are exposed to domestic violence have multiple potential sources of emotional and physical injury from the batterer's behavior, well beyond the witnessing of assaults alone, and their potential for recovery from past domestic violence can be compromised by ongoing unsupervised contact with their father. Additionally, children are at risk to develop destructive attitudes and values that can contribute to behavioral and developmental problems. Abused mothers face many obstacles in attempting to protect their children from a batterer, and can benefit when their protective efforts receive strong support from courts and child protective services. Family and juvenile court personnel, as well as those working in child protection agencies, can increase the quality of their interventions on behalf of children by deepening their understanding of the common patterns that may appear in the parenting of men who batter, including ways in which a batterer may damage mother-child and sibling relationships and make it difficult for a mother to parent her children. Courts can increase their effectiveness in domestic violence cases involving children by focusing on maternal and child safety, and by seeking ways to reduce the batterer's influence as a role model, particularly for his sons.

NOTES

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