

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Engaging fathers who commit family violence: Issues and challenges for family courts

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Abstract

Intervention with fathers who commit family violence is an essential but often overlooked part of effective family court proceedings. This article provides an overview of how evidence-informed engagement with fathers around family violence can complement family court efforts to achieve safe and healthy outcomes for children. The focus on fathers is not based on bias against fathers, men, or masculinity, but rather it is consistent with the fact that fathers comprise a substantial proportion of those who use family violence. These men need more effective engagement and interventions. Fathers in these circumstances need to be engaged in services that can assess, monitor, and manage ongoing family violence and risk as well as develop skills to form more positive, healthy relationships with their children and children's mothers. Courts, in turn, need to consider evidence of accountability and change. Application and continued development of the strategies recommended herein would enhance the safety of mothers who experience violence, their children, and the well-being of fathers who have used family violence. Collaboration with community partners serving families must become cornerstones in promoting the safety for and with all family members.

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KEYWORDS

accountability, family court, family violence, fathers, impact of family violence on children, intervention

Key points for the family court community

- Intervention with fathers who use family violence is an essential part of family court proceedings.
- There are evidence-based programs for treating people who use family violence in their roles as intimate partners and parents.
- Evidence of change in fathers is crucial to decisions to drop supervision and increase parenting time.
- Effective family court intervention requires collaboration with community agencies providing services for children and parents living with family violence.
- Communities of practice may be a good model to foster enhanced collaboration.

¹Other jurisdictions may refer to similar behavior as domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and/or child witnessing of violence.

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Robert Nonomura is a part-time Assistant Professor with the Department of Sociology with specializations in critical sociology, gender-based violence, morality, and public sociology. His current research addresses the ethics of trauma- and violence-informed research as well as inter-disciplinary knowledge mobilization on the social-structural dimensions of gender-based violence. He works closely with the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children on the development of learning resources at the Learning Network as well as the recent PHAC-funded project with the Alliance of Canadian Research Centres on Gender-Based Violence, Supporting the Health of Survivors of Family Violence in Family.

Dan Zamfir holds a Master of Education (M.Ed.) from the University of Toronto Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) in counseling and developmental psychology in addition to a Bachelor's degree with Honours in Psychology (B.Sc.) from McMaster University. Dan has a wide range of clinical experience and academic experience, including personality psychology, domestic violence, autism, and stress-related disorders.

Katreena Scott is a Professor and Canada Research Chair in Ending Child Abuse and Family Violence in the Faculty of Education at Western University. She is the Academic Director of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children at Western University. She leads an applied research program aimed at ending violence in family relationships, with specific expertise in addressing violence perpetration in men.

Peter Jaffe is a Psychologist and Professor Emeritus in the Faculty of Education at Western University and the Director Emeritus of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women & Children and for the London Family Court Clinic. Since 1999, Dr. Jaffe has been on faculty for the National Council of Juvenile & Family Court Judges in the US for judicial education programs titled "Enhancing Judicial Skills in Domestic Violence Cases." He was a founding member of Ontario's Chief Coroner's Domestic Violence Death Review Committee. In 2009, he was named an Officer in the Order of Canada by the Governor General for his work preventing domestic violence in the community.

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