

# Invisible Practices

## Working with fathers who use violence

### PRACTICE GUIDE

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#### WHY WORK WITH FATHERS WHO USE VIOLENCE?

Historically, domestic and family violence (DFV) services have encouraged women to separate from partners who use violence. Child protection (CP) services have also expected women to leave violent partners for the sake of the children, in spite of the potential danger of doing so, and the impoverishment that may result. However, the family law system has a “pro-contact culture” (Humphreys & Campo, 2017, p.5), and frequently rules that fathers should be involved with their children, even when they are known to use DFV. It is therefore not possible to assume that separation will mean that a father is out of the picture.

Engaging with fathers who use violence gives workers the opportunity to gain a detailed understanding of men’s patterns of violent behaviour, which can be valuable to inform risk assessments and safety planning.

When services do not engage with fathers who use violence and control, more focus is placed on mothers. This can result in mothers being held to account for failure to protect their children, rather than fathers being held responsible for exposing their children to harm.

To date, it is generally the criminal justice system and specialist men’s behaviour change programs (MBCPs) which have provided interventions with men who use violence. The received wisdom has been that specialist men-only interventions provide safer practice, with fewer risks to women and children who withstand the worst of violence and abuse (Laing, Humphreys & Cavanagh, 2013). However, only a minority of men who use violence attend MBCPs, and an even smaller number actually complete the program (Miller, Drake & Nafziger, 2013). Notably, too, these types of interventions do not focus on fathering issues.

The Invisible Practices project was grounded in the belief that women and children living with DFV will be better supported by a model of working that involves the whole family (mother, father, and children) (Humphreys & Campo, 2017; Mandel, 2014). Child protection and family services are well-positioned to engage with fathers who use violence. Indeed, such work is already happening, however it is unclear what constitutes good practice, poor practice or dangerous practice. This area is under-developed and undocumented, and practice is therefore largely invisible.

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## ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH  
ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY  
*to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children*

#### Trigger warning

Some people may find parts of this content confronting or distressing.

Recommended support services include:

1800 RESPECT: 1800 737 732

Lifeline: 13 11 14

# The Invisible Practices project

The Invisible Practices project looked at what skills and organisational supports are necessary to allow CP practitioners, specialist DFV practitioners, justice services and family services practitioners to work well with fathers who use violence.

Invisible Practices was an action research project that involved a whole-of-family approach called the [Safe & Together™ Model](#). The project harnessed practice-led knowledge at five geographic sites in Australia. In each area, an interagency community of practice (CoP) was established, and these CoPs were supported by consultants from the Safe & Together Institute. This practice guide is based on the learnings that emerged from the CoPs.

For more information about the project, see the [Invisible Practices project webpage](#).

## SAFE & TOGETHER: A MODEL FOR WORKING WITH FATHERS WHO USE VIOLENCE

The Safe & Together approach is a “field-tested model for good collaborative practice” in situations where DFV requires intervention and prevention (Humphreys & Healey, 2017, p. 33). The model was developed in the US and entails three core principles, of equal importance (see Figure 1):

- Keeping the child safe and together with the non-offending parent.
- Partnering with the non-offending parent as the default position.
- Intervening with the perpetrator to reduce risk and harm to the child.

The model also provides specific and detailed strategies and resources for working in this complex area of practice.

FIGURE 1 The Safe & Together Principles (reproduced with permission)



One of the critical aspects of the model is that close attention be paid to the patterns of abuse that a father uses, in order to better assess risk and inform safety planning. Another key aspect is that the father's parenting practices and capacity be assessed. For most CP, DFV and family support services, this will require a shift in focus. The Safe & Together model describes this shift as "pivoting to the perpetrator".

In working with the Safe & Together Model in CoPs, five themes emerged for practitioners. The practitioner guidance presented here is structured under these five themes:

1. Working with fathers who use violence and control.
2. Partnering with women.
3. Working with children and young people.
4. Working collaboratively.
5. Worker safety.

## PRACTICE GUIDE

# Working with fathers who use violence and control

To guide practice while “pivoting to the perpetrator”, the Safe & Together approach emphasises that the following reflective questions be kept constantly in mind:

### Questions to consider:

- Am I keeping outcomes for women and children at the centre of my practice?
- Am I using the goals of child safety, healing from trauma, and stability and nurturance at the centre of my practice?
- What is the perpetrator expected to do to increase his children’s physical and emotional safety, healing from trauma and a stable and nurturing environment?
- How am I connecting my work with the father to my partnership with the mother?
- What are her hopes and fears for the relationship and her specific concerns about safety and changes she would like to see the perpetrator make?
- How does my/our work with the father change my assessment of the impact of his use of violence on her and the children?
- How am I engaging in a wide range of practices related to intervening with perpetrators as parents?
- Am I identifying the perpetrator’s behaviours and impact on each child and family functioning?
- Am I focusing on interventions with perpetrators as parents that will improve child and family functioning?

## TECHNIQUES FOR “PIVOTING TO THE PERPETRATOR”

Practical strategies for “pivoting to the perpetrator” include:

### **Build confidence in working with men (not just men who use DFV).**

Questions to ask of yourself and your colleagues include:

- What kind of parenting strengths have you seen in men?
- What kinds of conversations are you having in your cases related to working with men?
- Are you talking to women about the men in their lives?
- Are you talking to children about their father’s role in their lives?
- What might you learn about engaging men in non-DFV cases that might help in DFV cases?
- What are men’s hopes and fears for their children.

**Map the different forms of harm posed by the perpetrator.**

Use a structured tool such as Safe & Together's *Mapping Perpetrators' Patterns – Practice Tool* to consider the effect of the perpetrator's behaviour on each child in the family, on each mother-child relationship, and on the functioning of the family as a whole. Even if you are not engaging with the father at all (due to your agency's policies, the scope of your role, or practical considerations), ensure that the perpetrator's behaviours remain in view by discussing them in detail with the woman using a structured tool.

**Focus on parenting.**

Assess a man's parenting against the same standards that you would use to assess a woman's parenting (this means holding fathers to a higher standard than is usual practice). Consider how his patterns of behaviour contribute to or undermine the woman's ability to parent. Questions to reflect on include:

- How are you linking issues of employment, substance misuse, mental health issues and cultural issues to a man's parenting?
- How has the perpetrator's behaviour contributed to the mother's substance use or interfered with her recovery?

## PREPARING TO INTERVIEW A MAN WHO USES VIOLENCE

In preparing for an interview, it is important that you:

**Listen to the woman about when, how and if to engage the perpetrator.**

This is central to good practice, and recognises the woman as the expert in her own safety.

**Prepare by gathering as much information as you can.**

Document what you have learned, ideally using a structured tool such as Safe & Together's *Mapping Perpetrators' Patterns – Practice Tool*. Sources of information might include other organisations as well as members of the perpetrator's family or community, but consider the risk that family and community might alert him to the fact that they have been asked to provide information. Try and establish whether the perpetrator has been violent to people outside the family.

**Consider where will be the safest place to conduct the interview.**

Weigh up the safety of a police station against the level of honesty and openness that can be expected there.

**Consider how many practitioners need to attend.**

Is a security officer or police officer necessary? Should there be one present outside the meeting room?

**Have a clear purpose for each interview**

For example:

- To establish awareness of his behaviours.
- To talk about the impact of his behaviours on his children.
- To talk about his hopes for his children and/or his wish to be a good parent.

**Role play potential scenarios in advance.**

Think about what he might say, and how he might use his patterns of behaviour to deflect the conversation away from its purpose (particularly, how he might shift the conversation towards blaming or describing the behaviour of others – especially the mother).

**Ensure that the woman is aware of when and where the interview will occur, and its purpose.**

Find out her wishes and get her advice so as to protect her safety as well as the safety of the children and yourself. Do not disclose anything she has said if it will endanger her. Check in with her after the interview to help plan for any possible fallout.

**ESTABLISHING RAPPORT,  
BUILDING ENGAGEMENT****Be respectful of the perpetrator.**

Do not argue or debate the facts, but help him to understand that his behaviour has an impact on his children and therefore on his goals as a parent.

**Focus on his responsibility for his actions in all your conversations.****Focus on his strengths.**

Focus on his strengths, but point out the contradictions in his parenting.

**Avoid automatically validating his efforts.**

Avoid automatically validating his efforts, unless they are of direct benefit to the children or the functioning of the family.

**Build rapport.**

Build rapport through discussing his hopes and dreams for his children.

Questions to ask might include:

- What kind of dad do you want to be?
- How did you learn about the pregnancy?
- How did you decide to be a father (or to take on a fathering role)?

- How do other service providers talk to you about being a dad?
- Talk to me about how people treat you as a father.

## AVOIDING COLLUSION WITH THE PERPETRATOR

It takes skill to establish rapport with a perpetrator without colluding with him. Collusion can stem from a number of sources, including your personal fear for your own safety and the safety of the family, or from being unwilling or unable to challenge a perpetrator's male entitlement.

### **Meet with the perpetrator together with other workers.**

When practitioners support each other, it diminishes the perpetrator's capacity to manipulate the meeting or situation. If you prepare well and establish ground rules, then you can avoid having the perpetrator play you off against one another.

### **If you are a male and a female worker meeting together, take care that the male worker supports the female worker without taking over the discussion.**

For example, where there are a female and a male facilitator of men's groups, the male facilitator can come to the "rescue" of a female facilitator by "taking over" and thereby undermining her authority. Alternatively, he may take the approach that "she can handle the situation herself" and disappear from the conversation. Either way, the male facilitator would undermine his colleague by not modelling respectful, professional behaviour to the perpetrators present who are likely to be adept at exercising their superiority as males.

### **If a co-worker colludes, redirect the focus onto the perpetrator's behaviours.**

### **Frame his use of violence as a parenting choice.**

This keeps conversations focused on making behavioural changes to become a better father.

### **Listen to what matters to the perpetrator and at the same time apply a critical lens**

Apply a critical lens to identify if it is highly unreasonable.

### **Never excuse his use of violence, but interact with compassion.**

Be direct but do not shame him.

*"There is a dance between engagement and collusion - a line - that we have to be aware of. Building rapport with him [the perpetrator] is a positive thing, but rapport that cannot contain a conversation about his behaviour is not a functional rapport"*

- Safe & Together  
consultant to a CoP

## REFERRING MEN WHO USE VIOLENCE AND CONTROL TO PROGRAMS

Most parenting programs do not address issues of violence, control and the traumatic impact of these behaviours on women and children. Perpetrators who attend a program that does not address their controlling behaviours can use the fact that they attended to manipulate mothers, especially in the Family Law Court.

**Consider making referrals to programs specifically designed to improve the fathering practices of men who use violence and control.**

e.g. [Caring Dads](#).

**Do not view program completion as a measure of successful intervention.**

Instead, establish whether the mother and children are safer. Real behaviour change requires, at a minimum, admitting he has a problem, stopping blaming her, and acting differently and less harmfully.

## PRACTICE AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF DFV, CULTURE AND COLONIALISM

**Involving community.**

Involving community in holding men who use violence and control to account is a good option with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

**Collaborate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.**

Collaborate to provide a culturally safe service.

**Ensure that female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers.**

Similarly, ensure that male Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers.

**Understand the diversity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.**

This understanding needs to inform practice across diverse families and communities.

**Consider addressing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander father's own experiences of racism.**

Consider addressing racism as part of the healing process, without excusing their use of violence and control within their family and extended kin.

### **Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men can be perpetrators of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.**

In these situations, assess if there is a racial connotation to the violence. Establish whether the perpetrator's attitudes are informed by colonialism and racism or if they stem from ignorance. Recognise the extra power and control that men from a dominant culture can hold over women from a minority culture.

## **ASSESSING BEHAVIOUR CHANGE AND THE THRESHOLD FOR ENGAGEMENT**

### **Assessing behaviour change is an essential part of good practice.**

Assessment can assist in developing appropriate engagement strategies, for example, your strategy for engaging a man who denies his violent behaviours will be different from your strategy for engaging a man who admits to his violence.

#### **Questions to ask to assess behaviour change:**

- Can the perpetrator describe the harmful effects of his behaviour on others?
- Does he accept the consequences of his use of violence?
- Does his behaviour continue to be harmful to the woman and children?

### **Remember that initial resistance to change does not mean resistance forever.**

At the same time, any short-term changes that are observed need to be tested to see if they endure.

### **When practitioners say: “He won’t engage, we can’t work with him”, it is a reflection on them and the system, rather than on the men.**

There is a tension between a service stopping engagement with a perpetrator, and holding him accountable.

### **Remember that the severity of violence is not necessarily correlated with capacity to change.**

It is important to try and meet with the perpetrator at least once, to assess his motivation to change.

*“There were a lot of racial connotations in the violence as well. He had a limited understanding of our people and what had happened in Australia. So I was able to show him some stuff to unpack his responsibilities around being a father of an... [Aboriginal] baby... We talked about, ‘do you think you’re racist or just ignorant to the fact?’... So when he sat down and learnt about the history of this country, tears welled up in his eyes. A lightbulb moment hit. That after he had done all this stuff to mum... it’s a privilege and a responsibility [to parent an Aboriginal child], and... ten weeks later he wanted to share the cultural history with his parents.”*

- Aboriginal child protection  
CoP practitioner

## PRACTICE GUIDANCE

# Partnering with women

The Safe & Together Model highlights six actions for practitioners to undertake in partnering with women:

1. Affirm that neither the woman nor the relationship is the source of violence and abuse; rather it is the perpetrator's behaviour and his choice in using DFV.
2. Ask about the perpetrator's pattern of violent and controlling behaviours, the impact of these behaviours on each child, and the impact on family functioning.
3. Assess the woman's strengths, for example in looking after the children, nurturing and loving the children, and keeping the family going despite DFV.
4. Validate the women's strengths, acknowledging the added challenges she has faced in parenting in the context of DFV.
5. Plan in partnership with the woman. Be guided by her priorities and concerns, her assessment of what is safe, and her sense of what is culturally and socio-economically appropriate for her children and herself.
6. Document her strengths as a parent. Document the perpetrator's negative impact on the children's lives and family functioning. When documentation is focused on the father's behaviours, perpetrator-focused interventions can follow, and there is no space for victim-blaming or "failure to protect" language.

A CoP participant described how partnering with the woman "reframed the thinking" of refuge workers who were going to evict a woman from the refuge because "she had violated a rule...[and] allowed" her partner to enter the front yard of the refuge. The worker was able to discuss the woman's behaviours through the lens of coercive control with her staff and this resulted in a favourable outcome that enhanced rather than decreased the woman's and her children's safety. The participant reported that the manager described how,...

*we have now changed that practice - we used to always blame her. We are changing that. No more. We stop now and look at the protective factors around keeping the children safe. We are now looking at the perpetrator - this is a huge system change in our organisation."*

## TECHNIQUES FOR PARTNERING WITH WOMEN

### **Understand the role of the perpetrator in the woman's life and be compassionate about her desire to be a family.**

Let her work through the ambivalent feelings that she is likely to hold. As recognised by David Mandel, Safe & Together consultant, at one of the project's community of practice meetings: "Acknowledging the presence of love in survivors is not a move away from safety".

### **Keep conversations about her hopes and fears for the relationship focused on whether the perpetrator has demonstrated that he can change.**

Ask curious, non-judgmental questions that allow the woman to judge if the perpetrator is demonstrating real signs of change. For example, you could prompt with: "But you know, he's done this to other women before, he's done this to you before. What now makes it credible when he says he'll change?"

**Hold the same expectations of parenting for both parents.**

Be aware not to overload mothers with parenting responsibilities, while heaping praise upon fathers when they make the occasional contribution. This shift in practice not only holds perpetrators accountable as parents but also helps build rapport with mothers.

**Use a tool to work therapeutically with women.**

Use a tool (such as the *Mapping Perpetrators' Patterns – Practice Tool*) to work therapeutically with women to map the myriad tactics deployed by their current/former partners, even if your service does not engage directly with men at all.

**Discuss with the woman the impact of the perpetrator's behaviour on family functioning (e.g. finances, health, education, housing).**

This keeps the focus on perpetrator behaviours and also makes it clear to the mother that you are not defining the father by his violence.

**Be explicit that it is the perpetrator's behaviour, not hers, not her choices, and not the relationship that is the source of risk and concern about the safety and wellbeing of her and the children.**

Emphasise that his behaviour is a parenting choice – even if it is directed at the mother when the children are not present.

**SAFETY PLANNING****Safety plans need to hold perpetrators accountable.**

Hold perpetrators accountable, rather than focus on what mothers should do.

**Use a strengths-based approach and carefully document the woman's strengths.**

Questions to ask her might include:

- What have you been doing to keep the family safe?
- What change would you like to see in your partner?
- What might he need to do to get there?
- Who can you trust and share plans with?

**Run through scenarios**

Run through scenarios to improve safety planning, for example, how does the mother think the perpetrator would react if she told him she had a job?

**Acknowledge the tensions between partnering with women and engaging with perpetrators, such as:**

- The way mothers can block the work with men, often because they are worried about their safety.

- The need to listen to and prioritise the voices of women, without letting them automatically over-ride the process of attempting to engage with men.
- Women are the experts in their own lives and on their partner's behaviour patterns. If you have an obligation to work with a perpetrator and a woman says not to, then you need to reconcile this tension with her.
- Meet the perpetrator as safely as possible. Meet the woman first, to understand safety issues from her perspective.
- The potential need to raise with the woman the costs of not meeting with the perpetrator. e.g. *"If we don't meet him, all the plans will be focused on you, all the actions focused on you"* or *"We need information from him to do well in court. If we don't we won't get change."*
- Ensure the woman understands that you are not allies with the perpetrator. You are giving her the opportunity to have input that will inform your work with him.
- Recognise the risk that the perpetrator will manipulate the situation to get information about the woman, if your organisation works with men as well as women.

## INCLUDING THE EXTENDED FAMILY NETWORK

**Assess the extended family network carefully, being aware of potential collusion between extended family members and perpetrators.**

Including a broader network may strengthen the support available to a woman, but take care that it does not result in victim-blaming and shaming of the woman.

**Working with extended family can be an opportunity to educate them about DFV.**

*"I'm arranging to meet the grandparents to actually do a session with them around domestic violence dynamics and really to do a proper one-on-one to explain about why mum's doing what she's doing, why it might seem weird but actually she's being really smart; so really educating the family."*

- CP CoP practitioner

## ENGAGING WOMEN WHO APPEAR RELUCTANT TO ENGAGE

**If a woman seems to be siding with the perpetrator rather than the children, consider:**

- What he might be doing that is contributing to her behaviour and reluctance to talk with you?
- Is she fearful of how he will react if he finds out that she has been engaging with a service (particularly child protection)?
- What might make her believe that disclosing anything would make things better for her and for her children?
- How well do you understand her relationship with the perpetrator? Can you offer acknowledgement and validation of her reality?
- Is she concerned about issues of residence status, financial abuse, or ramifications from other family/community members?

- Has calling the police made things better or worse for her in the past?
- How did the perpetrator react when police were called? His pattern of behaviour has implications for risk management.
- What information can you gather – from the woman and from other sources – about what the perpetrator is doing? Are any other services intervening with him? What is the woman's perspective on whether other services might support him to change?

**A focus on the quality of the perpetrator's parenting can help build rapport with the woman.**

You can build trust and confidence through identifying how his behaviours are a parenting choice and how they affect family functioning, *The Mapping Perpetrators' Patterns – Practice Tool* can be useful here.

**Ask the woman about her previous experience of accessing services.**

She may be reluctant to engage due to previous experiences where engagement threatened her safety or was in some way negative.

**Think about whether you have information about the perpetrator that would be useful to the woman.**

Note that in Victoria, [new legislation](#) passed in 2018 allows information to be shared with the woman without the consent of the perpetrator.

# Focusing on children and young people

Most children will have ongoing contact with their father, including after separation.

## CHILDREN'S AMBIVALENCE

**Children often have deeply ambivalent feelings about their fathers, and they need to know that this is OK.**

Questions for practitioners to reflect on include:

- How comfortable are you with the child's ambivalence about their father?
- How well do you handle the child's conflicted feelings?
- How open and receptive are you to hearing the children talk about their father in positive ways?
- How do you speak about the father to the child?

## CO-OCCURRING ISSUES: DFV AND CHILD ABUSE

**It is good practice to work on the assumption that where child abuse or neglect is occurring, DFV is also occurring.**

This encourages an assessment of the father's influence on child and family functioning. Without this, blame may be attributed to the mother, and the father's parenting behaviours (good and bad) can go unrecognised.

Questions to reflect on, identify, practice and/or document:

- Did practitioners meet with both parents separately?
- Did practitioners question each parent about DFV?
- Do practitioners ask if a case of child abuse is being presented in a way which makes the father invisible?
- Do practitioners routinely screen for DFV when they respond to child abuse?
- Do practitioners routinely screen for child abuse when they respond to DFV?

## ENGAGING WITH PERPETRATORS AS FATHERS

**Working with the perpetrator is important to children because they are likely to have ongoing contact with him.**

It could also be seen as important violence prevention work for future relationships and family formations.

**Educate fathers about the harm that DFV causes children (including children in utero).**

Ensure they understand that children can be harmed by controlling behaviours whether these are directed at the mother or at the children.

**If you are working with a father who shows no interest in his children, consider committing to contacting him once a week.**

This demonstrates that even if the father is not taking responsibility, the worker still is. It also allows for some monitoring of his behaviours, demonstrates a level of scrutiny, and provides an opportunity for addressing his violence. However, before deciding to adopt this approach, take into account the woman's perspective on how it might affect her safety.

**Engaging with a perpetrator as a father might involve asking him to take actions such as:**

- Leaving the home.
- Continuing to pay the rent or keep the utilities on.
- Returning the car or car keys so that the mother can drive the children to school.
- Nominating and committing to taking protective actions to ensure the safety of children and their mothers.

**Engaging with a perpetrator as a father might require you to seek involvement from other agencies such as:**

- Asking a court to implement an order of protection.
- Asking probation to make additional sanctions or undertake further monitoring of the father.
- Informing child-specific program practitioners of the perpetrator's patterns of behaviour.
- Ensuring that other services providers who are working with the children make child-focused assessments.
- Ensuring that breaches of protection orders are followed up by police and other justice services.

## PRACTICE GUIDE

# Working collaboratively

Collaborative interagency efforts (commonly involving police, specialist DFV, and child and family services) increase the safety of women and children, and generally support the reunification of children to the care of the non-offending parent.

## USING THE SAFE & TOGETHER MODEL TO FACILITATE AND ENHANCE COLLABORATION

- The Safe & Together Model provided a useful framework and common language for workers from different agencies who participated in the Invisible Practices project communities of practice. This led to increasing trust between agencies and improved practice.
- Collaboration should be conducted in multidisciplinary settings, based on common risk assessment, and include attention to the perpetrator's pattern of control.
- Where possible, meet regularly with practitioners from other agencies to continue to build knowledge and skills in engaging men who use violence and control.

## GATHERING AND SHARING INFORMATION

**To address the challenge of sharing information with other agencies, consider:**

- including in case notes a detailed description of the perpetrator's pattern of behaviours, their impact on each child, and on family functioning;
- encouraging the inclusion of this kind of information in referral documentation;
- using the language of “pivot to the perpetrator” at stakeholder meetings;
- having a single document at stakeholder meetings to which all agencies can add information;
- where multiple agencies are involved with a perpetrator, having regular case conferences/teleconferences to avoid his manipulation of “facts”; and
- developing systematic ways of sharing information about appointments, assessments, and care plans, to keep all agencies focused on the behaviours of the perpetrator and have the opportunity to develop a consistent plan in responding to his behaviour.

## PRACTICE GUIDE

# Worker safety

Worker safety involves both physical safety and psychological/emotional safety.

Worker fear can negatively impact upon practice, for example, it can result in workers making minimal effort to engage with perpetrators because of fear for their own safety or that of the woman and children. Worker fear can also result in victim-blaming, and in under-estimating or over-estimating the level of danger for both women and workers. As the Safe & Together consultant warned, “*We become angry at her for ‘not making the right choices’ so we don’t have to deal with our fear.*”

Maintaining worker safety is primarily an organisational responsibility. Organisational policies e.g. duress alarms, joint home visits can support physical safety, while quality supervision can support psychological/emotional safety. Further policy considerations for ensuring worker safety are given in the [Research to policy and practice paper](#). The following section examines what you as an individual practitioner can do to promote safety.

## IDENTIFYING AND ASSESSING RISK

Identifying and assessing risks to worker safety requires similar strategies to preparing to interview a father who uses violence i.e:

- Undertake a comprehensive assessment including mapping perpetrator behaviours.
- Establish whether the perpetrator has been violent to people outside the family.
- Communicate well, share information, and work in teams.
- Consider where meetings with perpetrators should be held.
- Weigh up the safety of a police station against the level of honesty and openness that can be expected there.
- Consider how many practitioners need to attend. Is a security officer or police officer necessary? Should there be one present outside the meeting room?

The following strategies are also important:

- Have a safe space in which to debrief.
- Note that risk to workers can increase when the perpetrator sees an alliance between child protection services and the mother, or when children are being removed from families. It can be challenging to engage with mothers when a police presence is required to ensure worker safety.
- Knowing what the perpetrator looks like (e.g. having a photo of him) can help to reduce risk.

## ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN YOUR BOUNDARIES

### **Manage boundaries in meetings with perpetrators.**

Develop skills in setting and managing boundaries. Set limits from the start, for example, explain that if he gets angry or abusive then you will be ending the meeting.

Prepare the perpetrator for the meeting by letting him know that *“we’re going to be talking about some tough things”*.

Define in advance the consequences of inappropriate behaviour. e.g. Advise him that *“This is a conversation about you and your behaviour. If you start talking about your partner then we’re going to bring the conversation back to you.”*

# Scenario 1

Child protection (CP) workers have been involved intermittently with Jake's family over the past 9 years. The CP file reports that the mother, who is Aboriginal, experienced "extensive abuse" from her non-Aboriginal partner. Child protection had little understanding of the (non-Aboriginal) father's pattern of controlling and abusive behaviours, which included racial denigration of the mother. Jake was placed in non-Aboriginal foster-care due to "violence in the home" and "the mother's poor mental health and substance use". Jake was reunified with his mother once she left Jake's father.

Jake's father has another son, Jermaine, a three-year old, with another woman. Jake's father continued patterns of violence in the relationship with Jermaine's mother. In Jermaine's case, CP workers mapped the father's behaviours and partnered with Jermaine's mother. Jermaine remained safe with his mother in the house, as his father left to live with his parents. Jermaine now has one hour of contact with his father a week, supervised by a CP worker. Unlike Jake, Jermaine has not spent any time in care.

Child protection workers have been in contact with the father about Jake. They are taking a new approach to their work and are trying to better understand and map the overt and subtle behaviours that violent fathers use to exert power and control over women and children. Caseworkers have identified that since working to return Jake to his mother, his father's abusive and controlling behaviours have been escalating and include racist language and slurs against his former partner, her family and her culture.

It is evident that Jake's father is using the restoration plan as an opportunity to denigrate the mother's parenting, to negatively impact her relationship with Jake, and to manipulate the situation to gain custody of his son. The father's vexatious allegations are that the mother is drinking excessively and using drugs. Jake's father lives with his own parents, both of whom believe that violence arose out of the father's attempts to stop the mother from drinking and taking drugs. They support his position as a victim, wrongly accused, in both cases.

The father tells CP workers that keeping Jake with Jake's mother will condemn Jake to a life of substance use and violence, whereas he and his parents could provide a comfortable home in a quiet middle-class suburb. The father begins to ingratiate himself with CP and uses subtle coercive behaviours with the primary caseworker. Jake's father also uses subtle coercion techniques on Jake's teacher. Jake's teacher has contacted CP as she is concerned that Jake is exhibiting high levels of anxiety, due to Jake's mother sharing her fears with Jake about his father's behaviours. The teacher has tried having conversations with Jake's mother about "not sharing everything that is going on in her head" with Jake.

Child protection workers have made extensive efforts to build a partnership with Jake's mother and Jake. Child protection workers talk to Jake about his reaction

on hearing his mother's fears about his father. Jake tells the CP workers that he does not like school and does not want to go because it means he spends more time away from his mother. The CP workers keep the teacher's perspective in mind but return the focus to Jake's father's behaviours. Child protection tried to engage Jake's father in conversations that challenge his behaviours and the effects on the child, with questions such as, *"How is this supporting your child as an Aboriginal child?" "How is this supporting the cultural identity of your son?" "How is denigrating your child's mother good parenting?"* The father is making few of the changes required of him. He has been telling Jake that he will shortly come to live with him and his parents. He continues to lie to CP workers about the behaviours of the mother.

Child protection workers tell the father that he needs to come to meetings to discuss Jake's return to his mother and try to create a safe and engaging environment so that he will be part of the process. They ask him questions such as *"What are you doing to support your child?"*, and, *"What is your role in the family?"* The caseworker maps and documents the father's behaviours. They highlight his importance as a father by holding him to the standards traditionally expected of mothers and treating him as equally accountable in terms of his parenting and role in family functioning.

The CP worker on Jake's case is working closely with the CP worker assigned to Jermaine's case, so they can do joint mapping exercises related to the father's behaviours. Jermaine and his father had not had contact for a year before starting the supervised sessions. A critical part of the CP worker's case-noting is working with the father to establish what was occurring when contact ceased. The father currently reports struggling to connect with Jermaine, and is blaming the CP worker who is present during the supervised sessions for this. He also blames the abundance of toys in the room for distracting Jermaine. The CP worker makes notes on how Jermaine's father is reacting to the challenge of Jermaine ignoring him. Questions are asked, such as *"What's hard for you about that?"* and *"what do you think Jermaine needs most in these moments?"*

Note: This scenario was developed from a range of sources; any potentially identifying details have been changed.

1. What information would a child and family services' worker need to receive from CP in order to partner with Jake's mother and to support the long-term wellbeing of Jake?
2. If the father in this scenario had multiple children with different mothers, how would this shape your approach to partnering with Jake's mother?
3. What steps do practitioners need to consider to ensure that the perpetrator is kept in view?
4. What strategies or approach might you need to use if both parents were Aboriginal?

Questions  
to guide practice

## Scenario 2

Child protection (CP) workers are working with a teenager, Simon, who has been demonstrating high levels of violence towards other children at his school; towards family members including his young nephew, Travis; and towards the step-mother with whom he lives. A CP worker discusses Simon's use of violence with him, explaining that if these behaviours continue he will be judged too much of a risk to Travis to stay at home and that Simon will be taken into care until his behaviours improve. During the discussion, Simon's phone rings multiple times. All the calls are from his father (Travis's grandfather). The CP worker notes that Simon is getting more distressed with each call, overhearing phrases like "well they were at home when I left" and "it's Tuesday, she will have taken him to the library".

The CP worker learns through multiple sessions meeting with Simon that his father often uses him to keep track of his step-mother. The CP worker also learns that Simon's father has links to criminal drug networks. One day Simon loses his temper with the worker, yelling "It's not fair! Why do I get kicked out of the house? No one makes him leave!" The CP workers then establish that there are safety concerns for Travis, Simon and Travis's grandmother (Simon's step-mother) due to high level domestic violence, including multiple incidents of the following: strangulation, physical assaults, pouring petrol over Travis's grandmother and threatening to set her alight, torturing her with an oxy-torch to the bottom of her feet and threats to kill her. Travis's grandmother has been increasingly concerned about the grandfather's behaviour especially due to the grandfather's first (and recent) threat to kill Travis. She has previously stayed in the homes of close friends with the children, but the grandfather tracked them down. She, Travis and Simon returned home only after Travis's grandfather agreed not to kill her if she did so and that he would not live there.

A CP worker met Travis's grandmother accompanied by a worker from a DFV service linked with police. They arranged to meet outside the home as Travis's grandfather has surveillance cameras in the home. The workers find out the following information about Travis's grandfather from the grandmother: he is a bikie gang member and an enforcer and tracker/surveillance expert for them; he has access to guns; he has made multiple threats to kill Travis's grandmother; and his use of violence at home is escalating. Travis's grandmother tells the workers that there are things she knows about the perpetrator that are too dangerous for her to share. The CP worker continues to work with Simon, but takes a different approach and listens to his fears and concerns, rather than focusing only on Simon's behaviour. The workers initially discuss removing Travis but decide not to as the grandmother tells them this will result in the perpetrator killing her. In exploring with the woman how she has kept Travis safe up to this point, she reveals her strategy of not showing affection or attachment to the boy in the presence of his grandfather so that he will not think to hurt his grandson as a way of hurting her.

Child protection work on various plans with the grandmother to keep her, Travis and Simon safely in the house together, with the grandmother explaining which

options will or will not result in repercussions for her from the criminal gang. The workers want to move the family to the refuge, but the grandmother says this is too dangerous because of his surveillance of the home. She devises a story to tell her partner so that when she and the children leave home the next day, he will think she has left because Travis's mother is trying to get Travis back (something that has occurred before). Simon's phone is removed from him and placed in the CP workers office so that they cannot be tracked while they are outside of the home. This is done with Simon's full permission, as he has talked with CP workers about his father's surveillance of himself and the family through his phone.

While the grandmother and children are out of the house, the perpetrator is arrested. CP workers collaborate with law enforcement colleagues at all levels of their respective organisations to ensure that the perpetrator is held accountable by the legal system. Police, probation and parole share information with CP to ensure that the woman and children are kept informed.

In each step of their planning and implementation of the plan, the workers take the lead from the victim/survivor in order to keep her, the children and themselves safe. Afterwards, the workers involved comment that they have learnt a great deal from the victims/survivors. A worker says that her own level of fear of the grandfather helped her to walk in the grandmother's footsteps and understand the grandmother's experience as a victim/survivor with this man.

Note: This scenario was developed from a range of sources; any potentially identifying details have been changed.

1. What is at the core of DFV-informed practice in this case and which of these strategies are evident in the scenario?
2. If Travis' grandmother had been reluctant to engage with the workers or share information, what approach could the workers have taken to partner with her and how might they document it?
3. How should the safety of Travis' grandmother and that of workers be planned?

## Questions to guide practice

## Scenario 3

Child protection (CP) workers are engaged with a family with four children all less than ten years of age. Concerns were raised over the mother's agitated presentation at the hospital during the birth of Child D. The mother was upset that the father of the youngest two children (Child C and Child D) was not present. The eldest children in the household (Child A and Child B) are from the mother's previous relationship and have limited contact with their biological father.

The mother was physically abused while holding Child D during a recent DFV incident. The workers established a relationship with the mother. They used phrases like *"I'm not here because I'm worried about your parenting; I'm here because I'm worried about his."* A DFV risk assessment was completed, indicating that the father was a serious threat. He had perpetrated physical threats, physical violence, threats to kill, suffocation, strangulation and sexual abuse against the mother and displayed high levels of jealousy. The children have witnessed his violence. The mother provided details of her efforts to protect the children, including that she would always close the bedroom door when she knew the father was going to rape her. He has also physically and verbally abused the children. His behaviour was escalating, and he was exhibiting signs of depression and drug addiction. He showed little interest in children A and B. The father did not let Child C out of his sight and excluded the mother from her care. Following the latest incident, the father spent time in prison and on release was placed on a no-contact DFV order. On their next visit, CP found the father present at the house. The police were notified. When they arrived, the mother informed the police that the father was not present, and the police left without searching the house.

Following the breach of the order, CP reviewed their mapping of the father's pattern of violent and controlling behaviours and considered the mother's protective abilities, including actions she had undertaken and further actions she could take. They spoke to each child, except the youngest. The two oldest expressed concerns for their mother, themselves and each other. Child C was unable to express herself in this initial interview even with child-friendly prompts. CP concluded that the children were unsafe, as there was no one able to hold the father accountable. Police advised it was unsafe to visit the house without police protection and accompanied workers to the house to try and further develop safety plans with the mother.

The mother was concerned when workers attempted to find another family member she and the children could live with. The mother and children A, B and D were present at the house. The father and Child C were not. The police held off arresting the father, as CP were concerned that he would attempt to kidnap Child C if police approached. On his return, the father would only engage with CP across the road from the house, and with no police present. Through negotiation, the father relinquished Child C. He showed no concern for children A, B and D, but showed great concern over who would care for Child C.

The four children were taken into CP care. Child A was highly distressed and required extensive calming and reassurance. CP thought this distress stemmed from fear of leaving the mother to face the violence. Child B was withdrawn, and Child D demonstrated hyper-vigilant behaviour. The father and mother stated they would work with CP, though not the team leader who had received a death threat from the father. There is an ongoing relationship between the worker and mother.

The worker told the mother *"I am not removing your children right now because of you; I'm doing it because of him."* The father is still present in the house. He was charged with a breach of the DFV order but was given bail conditions. Workers continue to be concerned for the mother's safety.

Note: This scenario was developed from a range of sources; any potentially identifying details have been changed.

1. What phrases might workers use to engage the older children in conversation to establish the levels of violence and control they have been exposed to as well as the strengths of the family?
2. What communication channels need to be set up between the children and the child's mother?
3. How will the harm to children be documented in such a way that unsafe child contact arrangements are not made by the court in relation to the father?
4. What further information and from what sources could you glean a deeper understanding of the impact of DFV on the different children?

## Questions to guide practice

## Scenario 4

A worker in a non-statutory organisation prepares for a meeting with a father who has a history of verbally aggressive and demanding behaviour towards workers. He has used and continues to use violence against his partner (mother) as well as bullying and being physically violent towards his son. The mother wants the worker to meet with the father so he can “tell his story”, while the worker’s purpose is to assess the father’s attitude to his use of violent and threatening behaviour.

The worker arranged for the father to come to a meeting on site at her organisation. She arranged for another worker to be in the room with her during the meeting with the father and chose a room that has an exit door to the outside of the building. She has, however, devised a backup plan if the father chooses to leave through the internal exit, which involves a third worker to be outside the room, ready to call the police if need be. Having undertaken a preliminary risk assessment, the worker is aware of the pattern of violent and manipulative behaviour towards the father’s partner and son but also knows that the father has no history of violence towards others outside the family.

In addition, the worker together with her co-worker discuss what limits they will set on the meeting and the father’s behaviour, how to manage any infringement of these boundaries, and how they will talk to him about this. The workers also agree on a code word to be used in the event that one worker feels that things are getting out of hand or becoming unsafe. This involves planning the interview, particularly how to manage the father’s expectations and preparing him for difficult topics to be covered.

At the start of the meeting, the father is verbally aggressive and tries to steer the conversation towards a discussion about his teenage son’s faults. The two workers back each other up by continually bringing the conversation back to the father, his behaviour and his importance as a parent, he begins to realise the meeting is not a “man beating” session and that he is being treated with respect. He then starts to engage.

Note: This scenario was developed from a range of sources; any potentially identifying details have been changed.

1. In making an assessment about the level of safety prior to meeting with the father, what information do workers need to gather and document and from what sources?
2. What sorts of discussions are required with co-workers prior to interviews to avoid collusion?
3. What de-briefing will be required following an interview with a father who uses violence?

Questions  
to guide practice

# Further information

This paper forms part of the ANROWS project *Invisible practices: Intervention with fathers who use violence*. The project was supported by an extensive array of resources from the Safe & Together Institute. Thanks must go to Safe & Together Institute consultants, David Mandel and Kyle Pinto for their generosity in the provision of electronic and other resources relating to the Safe & Together Model.

## Research report:

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## Research to policy and practice paper:

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