

At-a-Glance: Fatherhood Programs and Intimate Partner Violence

Nancy Thoennes, PhD | Jessica Pearson, PhD

Fatherhood programs should be concerned with intimate partner violence (IPV) for several reasons:

1. IPV is prevalent, especially in the low-income populations served by fatherhood programs. This makes IPV a logical topic for programs to cover when discussing parental conflict and the negative consequences of IPV on children.
2. Research suggests that men who have engaged in IPV may display hostile-coercive parenting behaviors. Through a greater awareness of IPV, fatherhood programs might be able to address these critical and coercive parenting styles.
3. Fatherhood programs that try to engage mothers to help them see the value of father engagement and improve coparenting need to be aware of IPV before beginning to work with mothers or couples. Programs that collaborate with local domestic violence programs for staff training are more likely to discuss IPV with their own clients.
4. The goal of being a positive, engaged father may motivate men to work on IPV issues. Fatherhood programs can work with IPV treatment programs to help fathers understand how they can be a positive influence on their children.

Screening for IPV

Researchers recommend using instruments that capture information on multiple types of abusive behaviors, severity, frequency, and the level of fear the victim has experienced to identify IPV. Examples of four widely-used screenings that can be readily administered when lengthy screenings are not practical include the Partner Victimization Scale (PVS), HITS (Hurt, Insulted, Threatened with Harm and Screamed at), Woman Abuse Screening Tool (WAST), and the Conflict Tactics Scale 2 Short Form (CTS2S).

Implications for Programs

Fatherhood programs have the potential to reach men and help them avoid incarceration, job loss, and the loss of their children following IPV. Administrators who wish to incorporate IPV education in their programs and/or screen for IPV should reach out to their local domestic violence community for help with staff training.

Fatherhood programs need to adopt effective and practical IPV screening techniques if they wish to engage mothers in programming and the delivery of conjoint services to improve father engagement and coparenting.

Implications for Researchers

Little research has been done on the effectiveness of incorporating IPV education into fatherhood programs, or on the effectiveness of incorporating a focus on fathering into IPV treatment programs. Process evaluations are needed to determine how such collaborations can best be encouraged.

Outcome evaluations are needed to determine if there are changes in attitudes and behaviors when men hear about violence in fatherhood programs and fathering in violence treatment programs.

Research is also needed to assess whether IPV is a barrier to engaging mothers in fatherhood programs and coparenting services and the impact of coparenting interventions on levels of IPV, particularly for low-income and unmarried families.