

## TIPSHEET #2 ON ADDRESSING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: EVIDENCE-INFORMED STRATEGIES FOR RFG FACILITATORS<sup>1</sup>

Responsible Fatherhood Group (RFG) facilitators and the Domestic Violence (DV) advocates they collaborate with have developed a range of thoughtful, effective practices to engage fathers in conversations and reflections about DV. These practices coalesced into six sets of strategies:

1

**Harness men's desire to be a good father.** Men's deep commitment to be a good father is the primary motivating force behind participation in an RFG and engaging in self-transformation. Connecting the topic of DV to fatherhood cultivates buy-in by acknowledging fathers' strengths and appealing to their healthy self-interest. Facilitators should stress to fathers that learning and reflecting about DV is ultimately in the best interest of their children, and that a father's concern about the impact of witnessing DV or other abusive and controlling behaviors will enhance his parenting capacity.

2

**Keep children at the center of domestic violence education.** Fathers are often resistant to talking about DV, for fear of being judged or referred to the criminal justice system. Rooting the conversation in children's wellbeing and development can help fathers see that the purpose is to help them enhance their parenting. It is important to help fathers learn and 'practice' skills for responding to difficult situations. Some of these skills are protective: how to respond if the mother is abusive to the children? What if she has a new partner and he is abusive? How can he avoid escalation? What situations should he watch out for? It is important to help fathers accept that learning about DV and reflecting on their own behaviors is also in *their* own best interest.

3

**Combine cognitive and emotional strategies in domestic violence education.** Programs should use a blend of cognitive and affective learning activities. *Cognitive learning* is key to expanding fathers' understanding of DV. It blends short didactic presentations, (e.g. on non-physical forms of abuse) with opportunities for reflection, discussion, and skill development (e.g., anger management strategies). Emotional or affective learning takes two forms. First, *personalizing DV victimization* builds empathy for women who experience DV. The second, *doing deep work*, engages fathers in activities that help them unpack their lifetime exposure to DV, and feelings that have shaped their thinking and behavior, including traumatic childhood memories. This helps fathers understand and take responsibility for their abusive behaviors and the impact of their conduct on their children.

4

**Embrace a framework of empathy and accountability.** Balancing empathy and accountability is essential. Concentrating only on accountability and responsibility for harmful behavior will shut fathers down; focusing on empathy and understanding alone risks giving the message of condoning or forgiving harmful conduct—as if in certain circumstances abusive behavior is acceptable or unavoidable. Acknowledging low-income fathers' stress and the enormous systemic challenges they face is critical and provides a non-critical starting point for asking, how can you respond to challenging moments in your family without crossing the line into abuse?

---

<sup>1</sup> See: Thomas, K.A., & Mederos, F. FRPN Grantee Report. Responsible Fatherhood Groups and Domestic Violence Education: An Exploratory Study of Current Practices, Barriers, and Opportunities. January 2020.

5

**Provide a safe space for domestic violence discussion and self-reflection.** Fathers will not speak candidly about their thoughts and experiences of DV without a climate of trust and safety. Building trust increases fathers' willingness to share with one another, have conversations about DV with their families and seek out other supportive services. Facilitators should avoid terms like "perpetrator", "batterer" and "abuser" which many fathers view as part of the negative labels that systems place on them. In addition, avoiding simplistic gender dualities ('women are victims, and men are abusers') creates trust and allows fathers who are adult victims of DV to seek help.

6

**Engage in reflective and appropriate use of self.** RFG facilitators and DV advocates who share their experiences of DV (victimization and perpetration) can intensify the impact of DV education on fathers by providing fathers with examples of vulnerability, transformation, and self-forgiveness. If RFG facilitators and DV advocates reflect the fathers' community in terms of race, class, and ethnicity, it creates a strong common bond about the importance of addressing DV in their communities and families. RFG facilitators need support and training to ensure their success.