

Paper

Prevention Strategies:
Involving and Engaging
Perpetrators

AVERT
FAMILY VIOLENCE



**Collaborative Responses in
the Family Law System**



Australian Government
Attorney-General's Department

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Prevention strategies: Involving and engaging perpetrators

A note on terminology used in this resource

Because this resource is designed for people working within the family law system, family violence is the chosen term throughout. It is a term that incorporates a broad range of intimate relationships in which abuse might be perpetrated, and it is the preferred term of Indigenous communities. Family violence also makes explicit the relationship between family violence and its implications for children in the family. However, domestic violence is a term that has been widely used in the literature in this field and is therefore used in relevant contexts and quotations. The phrase domestic and family violence is also used as it is the term used in legislation in some states and by some commentators. To highlight that family violence is not always physical, this paper frequently speaks of violence and abuse, together. The terms victim and perpetrator are generally used in this paper, to draw attention to the fact those experiencing family violence are not to blame and to emphasise that family violence can be a criminal offence. The American term ‘batterer’ is used where relevant in quotations.

The focus of this paper

This paper has a particular focus on preventative interventions aimed at educating the whole community and particular groups within it, and tertiary interventions involving programs for those who have already offended. These interventions are located within the context of contemporary Australian policies and strategies about family violence.

Approaches to working with perpetrators of family violence are discussed at both an individual and systemic level. There is a brief discussion of the philosophies and methodologies used in behaviour change programs and an examination of their target goals – goals such as accountability, responsibility, deterrence and rehabilitation. It looks at what we know about perpetrators of family violence and those who participate in perpetrator programs. Long-term, ongoing engagement with perpetrators is seen as a key gap in service delivery.

Some of the tensions and dilemmas involved in engaging perpetrators are discussed, including the debates surrounding the effectiveness of programs, and the allocation of resources. Research findings about the importance of an integrated response are summarised along with what conditions seem to be required for the effectiveness of programs.



Key messages

- A fundamental aspiration of this resource is repair and recovery for those involved in family violence.
- Family violence can be prevented and its impact can be reduced.
- The safety of victims and their children is paramount and can be optimised through a range of interventions, accountability measures and education strategies.
- An understanding of why family violence occurs and the risk factors associated with family violence is crucial for an effective professional response.
- Attitudes and behaviour can be changed – through community education about social norms that perpetuate violence, promotion of positive behaviours and respectful relationships for men and women, and engaging with perpetrators.
- Perpetrators can be assisted to re-define themselves as non-violent with appropriate systemic responses.

Note: It is important to note that key reports referred to in this paper, such as *Time for Action*, are often quite specific in their naming of family violence as primarily involving male perpetrators and female victims. The language they use is, therefore, gender specific, as is much of the research literature and practice guidelines referred to in this paper. Perpetrator programs are currently focused almost exclusively on male offenders, and this is reflected in this paper's discussion of perpetrator programs. As noted in other papers in this resource, this is not intended to suggest that men are never victims or that women are never perpetrators, nor is it to deny that gender norms may be changing. Furthermore, this resource acknowledges that most men do not commit acts of violence against women.



Introduction – the move towards a prevention response

It is increasingly recognised that an effective response to the pervasiveness of domestic and family violence and its devastating impact on its victims, must occur at multiple levels – Commonwealth and State/Territory governments, the criminal and civil justice systems, the non-government and private sector, community organisations and services, and within families and individuals. It is also now acknowledged that approaches must be multi-pronged and that effective responses will be integrated and collaborative.

There is growing consensus that it is possible to prevent, or at least, reduce, violence before it occurs. A 2002 WHO (World Health Organisation) Report summed it up like this:

Violence can be prevented and its impact reduced, in the same way that public health efforts have prevented and reduced pregnancy-related complications, workplace injuries, infectious diseases, and illness resulting from contaminated food and water in many parts of the world. The factors that contribute to violent responses – whether they are factors of attitude and behaviour or related to larger social, economic, political and cultural conditions – can be changed.

Violence can be prevented. This is not an article of faith, but a statement based on evidence. Examples of success can be found around the world, from small-scale individual and community efforts to national policy and legislative initiatives (WHO, 2002, ch.1, p.3).

Three levels of prevention have been identified in the context of domestic and family violence. These are:

1. Primary prevention – preventing violence before it occurs (interventions delivered to the whole population or to particular groups at high risk of experiencing or using violence).
2. Secondary prevention – early interventions aimed at changing behaviours or increasing the skills of individuals or groups (e.g. addressing controlling behaviours before they become established patterns).
3. Tertiary prevention – longer term interventions following violence. This would include social support for victims as well as criminal justice and therapeutic interventions for perpetrators.



Public education

In recent years there have been a number of key national and state policies and plans which have all acknowledged the primacy of ensuring the safety of women and children through a range of primary, secondary and tertiary interventions, and at the same time have concentrated on prevention and the changing of attitudes that support violence.

Over the past years there has been a good deal of interest and research in the area of family violence. This has been at both Commonwealth and State levels as well as from private organisations. There has also been activity at the community level involving awareness campaigns, and prevention programs, including within schools.

There is a growing body of evidence that shows that social marketing and awareness campaigns, school-based programs, regulations on the portrayal of violence in the media, interventions to reduce alcohol misuse, and criminal justice responses, can be effective in preventing family violence or repeat victimisation (Morgan & Chadwick, 2009).

This multi-focal approach is notably evident in *Time for Action*, the National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children's Plan for Action 2009-2021. Commissioned by the Australian Government, this Plan identifies six outcome areas:

1. Communities are safe and free from violence
2. Relationships are respectful
3. Services meet the needs of women and children
4. Responses are just
5. Perpetrators stop their violence
6. Systems work effectively.

It is worth noting that *Time for Action* affirms the move towards prevention through community education about social norms, promoting respectful relationships, and the involvement of men in this enterprise. Three of the National Plan's outcome areas are summarised below.

Outcome 1 – Communities are safe and free from violence – focuses on the critical role of the Australian people in preventing violence against women. It stresses the importance of the community understanding the entrenched social norms that support gendered power imbalances and macho notions of masculinity, which in turn may perpetuate men's controlling attitudes and behaviour towards women.

If the longer term goal is eradication of violence, then society needs to dramatically increase its understanding of why violence occurs in the first place (NCRVWC, 2009a, p.39).



Outcome 2 – Relationships are respectful – also has a significant prevention focus, identifying the importance of building capacity for prevention education, educating children and supporting effective parenting.

Outcome 5 – Perpetrators stop their violence. This Outcome emphasises accountability, which means ‘ensuring that consequences follow if violence against women is perpetrated, and that this occurs at the individual, community and system levels’. Outcome 5 includes amongst its strategies the changing of behaviour through appropriate programs, increasing access to early intervention initiatives, and sustaining behaviour change.

Engaging perpetrators

Why engage perpetrators?

In recent years there has been growing recognition of the need to engage both victims and perpetrators of family violence, to both prevent future violence and to encourage engaging and assisting perpetrators or non-perpetrators who are at risk of carrying out domestic violence (Campbell et al., 2010, p.414). The thinking is that a proactive approach is needed, one which goes to the source of the problem – the perpetrators of abuse.

The reasons for engaging perpetrators can be summarised thus:

- Perpetrator programs are seen as a key intervention, and sustained, long-term engagement with perpetrators is now seen as a key gap in effective service delivery.
- Educating perpetrators about the consequences of their actions, challenging them to accept responsibility, and assisting them to seek help in changing their behaviour, are seen as vitally important strategies to avert further offending.
- All opportunities for engaging with perpetrators must be pursued in the hope that high rates of re-offending may potentially be reduced.
- Recidivism can be influenced not only by policing, sentencing practices and parole monitoring, but also by the quality of interactions and integration between offenders and the community.
- Many perpetrators of family violence deny, rationalise or minimise responsibility for their violence.

Perpetrator programs

Intervention programs offering treatment and education for Family Violence (variously called Perpetrator programs, Violence Intervention Programs, Rehabilitation programs, amongst other names) exist throughout Australia. They aim to prevent violence by changing attitudes and behaviour. They do this through a range of strategies including individual counselling,



case management and group work. Programs can be court mandated or voluntary but in Australia the majority of programs are voluntary.

A range of different approaches and methodologies are employed in perpetrator programs, including goal setting, solution focused approaches, counselling, behaviour change, narrative therapy, and anger management.

One of the mostly widely replicated models is the Duluth model, which focuses heavily on gender equity issues and teaching behaviours to control violence.

Effectiveness and limitations of intervention programs

The value of family violence intervention programs has been the subject of much controversy, and the research evidence in this area is inconclusive. This is partly because of inconsistencies in the research methodologies, study sites, sample sizes and testimony used. It is also because there is a great deal of disagreement about what constitutes the success or otherwise of such programs. Lesley Laing (2003) questions how effectiveness is measured; it does seem evident that despite some promising signs, perpetrator programs remain a highly contested strategy and their availability as either a sentencing or referral option is still limited.

There is no consensus about their effectiveness and much disagreement about how to measure this. Their limitations are related to the following factors:

- Confused and contradictory aims (e.g. confusion about whether to adopt individual or structural explanations for family violence)
- High attrition rates – with participants dropping out or not showing up
- High levels of re-assault among participants
- Low levels of motivation and readiness and high levels of resistance to treatment
- After attending programs, perpetrators may diminish their physical violence but other forms of abuse may worsen
- A focus on men and masculinities can lead to collusion and can disempower women
- Inappropriate psychological/therapeutic approaches
- Cultural explanations of family violence can be simplistic, and there may be cultural and linguistic barriers to accessing programs for some people
- Some programs do not adequately integrate partner contact practice and adjunct services for victims.



What works?

Despite the widespread pessimism about the effectiveness of perpetrator programs and the plethora of limitations which have been identified, it does seem that some small successes have been achieved, and can continue to be achieved, if the correct conditions are met. Some of these conditions will be outside of the control of program facilitators. For example, there is evidence that programs are more likely to succeed where couples want to stay together. Other factors influencing effectiveness will be the reasons that perpetrators have for attending programs. They may be legally mandated to attend or they may be socially mandated, responding to expectations from family and friends. Their motives may include achieving a reduced penalty in court, avoiding gaol, stopping their partner from leaving, or gaining access to their children. Their attendance may have little to do with taking responsibility for their violence (Chung & O'Leary, 2009).

Systemic integrated responses

The most obvious pre-condition for effectiveness is a systemic, integrated response. Mulrone (2003) defines integrated responses as 'coordinated, appropriate, consistent responses aimed at enhancing victim safety, reducing secondary victimisation and holding abusers accountable for their violence' (p.2).

At the same time as he reported the success of some intervention programs in the US a decade ago, Gondolf was adamant that their success depends on their location within a broader intervention system and criminal justice response. He stressed that the effectiveness of 'batterer' programs alone is not readily apparent or is rather weak, and that 'claims of overwhelming success should be regarded with suspicion'. He argues that more attention needs to be given to program context, emphasising that the encompassing intervention system of arrest practices, court procedures, probation monitoring, victim services and other community services, may substantially affect program success (Laing, 2003, p.7). He concludes simply that 'the system matters'.

Many other commentators have also emphasised the need for offender programs to be integrated with a criminal justice system which takes prompt, rigorous and agreed action in cases of a breach of conditions (Mullender, 2000).

Therapeutic alliances

Day et al. (2009a) comment on the critical role of the therapeutic alliance in effective program delivery. This encompasses three different aspects of the relationship between the client and the therapist:

- The collaborative nature of the relationship
- The affective bond between client and therapist
- The client's and therapist's ability to agree on treatment goals and tasks (p.208).



Hellman et al. (2010) urge that attention move from a focus on 'Does treatment work?' to inquiry into 'What factors promote change in men who abuse?' They also emphasise the value of engagement factors such as the therapeutic alliance, and report that engagement and the development of a caring environment can increase attendance, decrease drop out rates and result in lower post-treatment relationship violence and criminal recidivism (p.431).

There is also promising work indicating the positive impact of utilizing self-determined goals in treatment programs, to move clients away from blaming others or themselves and hold them accountable for developing a better, different future. 'Goals also increase the client's awareness of their choices and offer them an opportunity to play an active role in their treatment' (Lee et al. 2007, p.30).

Often programs have to be careful not to be too direct or challenging in naming violent or abusive behaviours. The importance of establishing trust and confidentiality is increasingly being emphasised as a critical factor when predicting the likelihood of perpetrators seeking or receiving help. There is evidence too that participants want a counsellor or friend, who is knowledgeable about family violence and non-judgemental (Campbell et al. 2010).

Better and more inclusive measuring of outcomes

Programs will be more effective if the measurement of their outcomes takes into account how victims may benefit or be adversely affected by their partner's participation in a program, and are not just reliant on self reports (Laing 2003).

Furthermore, perpetrator's attitudinal or behavioural change is only one measure of program effectiveness. An integrated response also enables the provision of support and services to victims and children. For instance, a positive outcome of a man's entry into a program may be that women and children get access to help, or that women get realistic advice on what change may be expected so they do not gain a false sense of hope or security just because their partner has entered a program (Day et al. 2009b, p.233).

Acknowledging diversity and individuality

Perpetrator programs are likely to be more effective if they acknowledge the diversity and individuality of those attending groups. Mullender (2000) advises that provision needs to be made for groups that include isolated and rural areas; mental health issues; prison inmates; language and literacy skills; ethnic minority groups and members of the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual and Transgender) community.

Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia have Indigenous specific perpetrator programs in place (Bartels, 2010, p.8). Additionally, there are community based centres, such as the Northern NSW Men and Family Centre, which have a specific Aboriginal men's group. They actively argue that addressing violence among Indigenous men needs to be done in an holistic context which also addresses racism, dispossession, housing, employment, drug and alcohol etc. (Personal Consultation with Stuart Anderson, March 2010).



There are currently very few language-specific behaviour change programs in Australia, and there is clearly a need for these in order to maximise opportunities for men and women from culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal backgrounds to access services.

Jamieson & Wendt (2008) also provide evidence that in rural Australia concerns about community attitudes and anonymity, may prevent perpetrators attending behaviour change programs in small rural communities.

Day et al. (2009b) conclude their book *Domestic Violence: Working with Men* by emphasising how important individual differences are for effective service delivery – ‘not all offenders will benefit from the same type of program or intervention processes.’ In particular, they suggest that for some offenders interventions for domestic violence may need to be delivered in conjunction with services related to co-existing problems such as alcohol and drug misuse. They also suggest that particular readiness strategies need to be developed for those offenders who ‘appear to be neither interested nor engaged in any process of behaviour change’ (p.234).

At the same time, they also stress that any intervention focussed on individual differences must be careful not to allow offenders to avoid taking responsibility for their behaviour.

Clearly the way in which issues of personal responsibility are approached and the balance struck between the personal histories of offenders and the particular context in which their offences occurred and the broader effects on women and children is likely to be critical to the effectiveness of any intervention. (Day et al. 2009b,p. 234)

Perpetrator programs – What works? Summary points

The following factors are seen as essential for the effectiveness of perpetrator programs:

- Systemic, integrated responses which are co-ordinated, appropriate and consistent and aimed at victim safety, reducing secondary victimisation and holding abusers accountable.
- Therapeutic alliances between client and therapist that are collaborative and have agreement on goals.
- Trust, respect and confidentiality.
- Acceptance of responsibility and accountability to the needs of victims.
- Adequate measurement of outcomes.
- Acknowledgment of diversity and individuality of participants (e.g. ethnicity, class, rural location, sexuality) without allowing offenders to avoid responsibility. Not all offenders will benefit from the same type of program or intervention.
- Cross cultural competency and ability to work with interpreters.



Conclusion

This paper has canvassed some of the many complexities and challenges involved in family violence prevention education, interventions with and involving perpetrators generally in these initiatives. It has also attempted to identify the likely conditions for the effectiveness of prevention measures. There is much still to be done as *Time for Action* notes:

The prevention education field in Australia is in its infancy and currently is a patchwork of approaches across the States and Territories. There are significant differences in terms of: the type and length of programs; theoretical underpinnings; whether diversity is addressed; the focus on knowledge, attitudes and skills; the evaluation of effectiveness; the resources allocated; and the training and support of staff delivering programs. Similarly, the present workforce capacity, in terms of the number of people able to deliver prevention education, is also limited and the numbers are variable between the States and Territories. (NCRVWC, 2009a p.59)

It is evident that a collaborative, integrated and systemic prevention response is needed if the devastating impact of family violence is to be averted. This must occur at multiple levels of government, the criminal justice system, the community, and within families.

Family violence prevention is everyone's business and everyone's responsibility.



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