

Child-focused practice in social work: Beginning the naming journey when family and domestic violence is present

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Key messages

- When a parent is affected by family and domestic violence (FDV), they may describe this violence in different ways to a social worker. These descriptions can minimise the effects on children and mean that they don't receive the support that they need for their social and emotional wellbeing.
- Fathers who use violence may initially minimise their actions by blaming female partners or children, underreporting the seriousness of their actions, or describing their violence as communication or relationship issues.
- Mothers who experience violence may believe that they are complicit or to blame for their partners' actions, or the consequences for their children if they disclose.
- Social workers who help parents name their experience of violence will be much more likely to provide early intervention and prevention support for children's social and emotional wellbeing and safety.

Who is the paper for?

This paper is for social work practitioners and students who work, or will work, with parents affected by FDV. It will examine early engagement with parents – both those who perpetrate violence, and those who are affected by violence. While we acknowledge that violence occurs in families in different ways, given most violence is perpetrated by men, with children and women the victims, this will be the focus of this paper.



Background

In 2019, Flinders Social Work Innovation Research Living Space (SWIRLS) conducted a literature review which highlighted the need for specific child-focused skills for engagement with parents affected by FDV as part of undergraduate social work teaching. This follows contemporary research highlighting the prevalence of parents and children who are affected by violence presenting to generalist services. A South Australian sample of unborn child concern notifications from 2014 showed FDV was present in 70% of families, with the proportion of families with children already known to child protection services at almost 80%.¹

This paper is the first in a series co-authored by Emerging Minds: National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health and SWIRLS, examining social work skills, understandings and competencies crucial for child-focused conversations with parents affected by FDV.

Introduction

Social workers often describe the challenges of first meeting parents affected by FDV. This work can seem especially daunting when fathers minimise or shift the blame for their violence, or where mothers are invested in protecting their partner, or fearful of the consequences of honest disclosure. Generalist social workers can feel anxious about asking too many

1 Arney, F. (2018, April). *EIRD: Findings of the first two case file reviews*. Presentation at the Early Intervention Research Directorate Forum, Adelaide. [Available here](#).

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questions about the violence: family violence work can be viewed as the domain of professional workers. But if generalist social workers do not ask parents questions about violence in the home, then children may never receive the prevention or early intervention services they need.

Understandings about power and control can help generalist social workers to identify when a father² may be behaving in coercive, threatening or abusive ways, and when a mother may be having her parenting choices diminished. These understandings about power and control also have the social worker well placed to enquire about the effects of violence on children living in a culture of fear.

Understandings about power and control can also help social workers to begin a supportive pathway that helps parents to name the violence for what it is. This means that parents become less invested in naming violence as relationship or couples' issues, and instead explicitly name the effects of the violence on their child, their partner and themselves.

The naming journey

The naming journey is the process between a parent and a social worker, which helps the parent to 'call-out' episodes of coercion, control, threats and intimidation for what they are. There are many ways that violence is described by parents in generalist services. Often these descriptions focus on relationship or communication difficulties. While relationship or communication issues are common elements of violence, they do not fully describe the abuses of power that are perpetrated as a result of FDV, and do not adequately analyse the effects on children and women. A respectful, curious and child-focused engagement with a social worker can help parents to move away from descriptions that minimise the effects of violence on children, and help them to more critically analyse these effects, and make plans to support children's safety and wellbeing.

Beginning the naming journey

A father who spends time recounting the flaws of his partner or child, rather than facing up to his use of violence may have many different motivations. He might be genuinely invested in minimising his violence or shifting the blame, but he is also likely to experience a level of shame that is an obstacle to being completely upfront with his social worker. A social worker who does not interrupt a father's complaints about his partner or children, may risk colluding with a version of events that is disrespectful, unhelpful to each member of the family and harmful to the safety and wellbeing of his child.

² The term father may apply to biological parent, stepfather, or any male adult living with children.

There are many opportunities to respectfully interrupt a man's complaints, and move him towards focussing on his own behaviours, actions, words and expressions within the situation he describes. By slowing down his recounting of these events, it is possible to begin the naming journey. This journey supports a father to take responsibility for what is happening, and to name his violence for what it is. Importantly, this naming journey assumes that the father has intentions for safe and respectful relationships, and that his child's social and emotional wellbeing is important to him.

Generalist social workers do not need to be specialist FDV workers to ask questions about the effects of violence on children, and a referral to specialist violence services is often still the goal. However, without the confidence to ask a father questions about the effects of his behaviours, actions, words and expressions on his children, he may never receive the specialist support he needs to act in safer and more respectful ways.

Similarly, a mother who engages with a generalist social worker may be reluctant to disclose the full extent of coercion, threats, intimidation or abuse that is happening at home. A mother may feel worried about the child protection repercussions where she does disclose violence, or about the consequences of her partner finding out what she has said.

A mother who meets with a social worker is often balancing many competing priorities – the safety of her children, her own interests, and loyalty to her partner – and a sense of anxiety about what will happen in the future. A generalist social worker who understands this can form a strong and non-stigmatising relationship with a mother, helping her to describe the effects of violence on her child without being pressured or coerced.

In their bid to ensure safety for children, social workers may inadvertently make it less likely that parents describe how violence is affecting their children. In their work with fathers, social workers may take an immediate position that the father would rather maintain control than make change. This can be the case where he minimises, shifts blame or talks in disrespectful ways about his children and their mother. From the father's point of view, he may become defensive if he expects you to adopt a position of contempt. This may mean he is less willing to join you in a naming journey.

Many mothers who present to social workers have a history of being judged and stigmatised. This may make them wary about sharing their stories with you, particularly if they are worried about child protection involvement. Additionally, they may experience coercion or threats from partners not to disclose safety concerns they have about their children or themselves.

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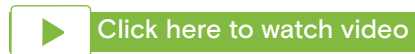
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Video A: Beginning conversations with parents affected by family and domestic violence

Practitioners and academics discuss the importance of beginning the naming journey in child-focused conversations with parents affected by FDV. They also discuss tips and skills that have helped them along the way.



Supporting fathers to begin the naming journey

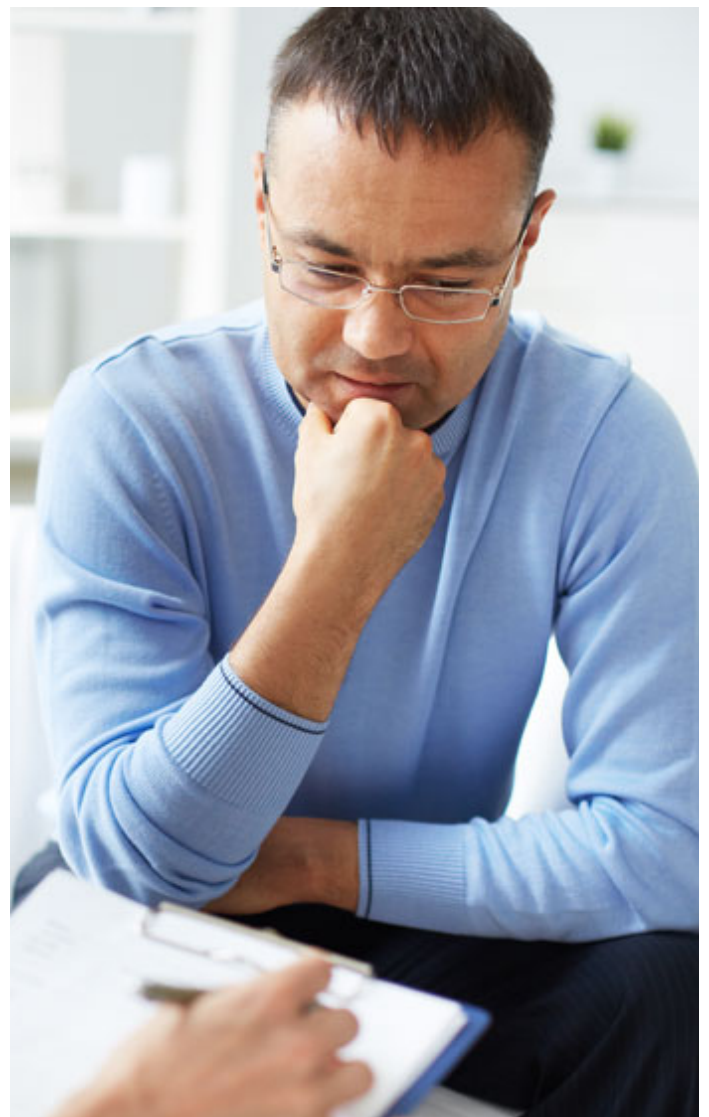
Supporting fathers to begin the naming journey is a critical skill for social workers, enabling them to have respectful conversations and motivating men to take responsibility – and making it much more likely that they might make a plan to address their use of violence, either with you, or through a referral to a specialised family violence service.

When a father who uses violence comes to your service, there may be many ways that he invites you into helping him find faults with his partner or children, or excusing his own behaviour. The capacity for social workers to engage in respectful and engaging ways with fathers, while also declining invitations to explore the ways he thinks his children or partner are to blame, is a crucial part of the naming journey.

How might fathers initially explain their use of violence to you?

1. Portraying themselves as victims of their children or partner's faults and 'bad' behaviours:
 - 'I tell Sue that she can't possibly be a good mother while she's drinking all the time. Jack tells me to stop giving her a hard time about it, but I only have his best interests at heart.'
 - 'Molly is always in Sue's room with the door shut. I know they are talking about me, but they never admit it. It's like I'm a stranger in my own home.'
 - 'I worry about Fred. He's such a timid little boy; cries at the drop of a hat. I'm just trying to teach him to stand on his own two feet, but his mother gives into him all the time. Refuses to let me parent my own child.'
2. Excusing their own violent behaviour as a result of their own victimisation, or being a victim of circumstance:
 - 'My own stepfather was brutal at times, and I turned out OK. She's just way too soft on the kids.'

- 'Until I can find a job, Sharon knows that we can't be spending so much money on the kids. I've told her a thousand times and still she doesn't listen.'
 - 'Kelly doesn't realise what it's like living with her mental illness. It's no wonder I go off at the kids sometimes.'
3. Discussing unhelpful beliefs about women and children:
 - 'Felicity knows I'm stressed after a day at work. The least she could do is have the kids bathed and their rooms tidy when I get home.'
 - 'I tell them all that while they are living under my roof, they need to think about my rules. A little bit of respect never goes astray.'
 - 'We all know how women can be – they have memories like elephants.'



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Reflection

A perpetrator may minimise his responsibility because he feels shameful about his actions and is worried about your reaction.

- How might you as a social worker, motivate him to take responsibility for his use of violence?
- How might you redirect the conversation towards the effects of his violence on children and partners in non-shaming and respectful ways?
- What do you need to know about his children? What would you ask him about his hopes for his relationships with his children?
- How might getting clear about his hopes for his children and for himself change the way he interacts with you? Will this make him more likely to focus on his responsibility? Will it make him less likely to invite you into collusion?
- What might help a father get clear enough about his violence, that he is motivated to seek specialised support to change his behaviour?

Video B: Conversations with fathers about family and domestic violence

Practitioners and academics discuss having child-focused conversations with fathers who initially minimise responsibility for their use of violence.



Examples of some questions you might ask (beginning the naming journey) in response to these explanations of violence

1. 'I tell Sue that she can't possibly be a good mother while she's drinking all the time. Jack tells me to stop giving her a hard time about it, but I only have his best interests at heart.'
- What do you think Jack might be seeing when he asks you to stop giving Sue a hard time? Why might this worry him? What might the worry be like for Jack?
 - What is it about Jack that has him talking to you about the way you treat Sue? Is fairness important to him? Why do you think that is?
 - Are you able to listen to Jack when he asks you to stop giving Sue a hard time? What makes that possible? What gets in the way?

- You mentioned that you have Jack's best interests at heart. Can I ask you more about that? What is important to you about your relationship with Jack? What kind of father would you like to be? What do you think Jack would say?
2. 'My own stepfather was brutal at times, and I turned out OK. She's just way too soft on the kids.'
- What was it about your own stepfather that was brutal? Do you think what he did to you was fair?
 - You said you turned out OK ... but do you think any child should experience the things that you did?
 - Have you made decisions to parent differently to your stepfather? What decisions have you made? Why are these decisions important to you?
 - What are the ways you have parented differently to your stepfather? What do you think helps you to be a different stepfather? What gets in the way?
 - How do the kids know when you are able to parent differently to your stepfather? How do they know?
3. 'Felicity knows I'm stressed after a day at work. The least she could do is have the kids bathed and their rooms tidy when I get home.'
- How does Felicity know you are stressed after a day of work? Is this something that she notices, or do you tell her? Do the children know this? Or is this something they notice too?
 - Are there times of the week where you are less stressed? What kind of relationship with the kids does not being stressed allow for? How does being stressed change this?
 - What do you think might be going on for Felicity and the kids just before you get home? What is going on for you? Are you thinking about what Felicity and the kids should be doing? Does this help with the stress? Or does it make the stress worse?
 - What would it be like not to be so stressed when you get home? Whose responsibility is that? Is it Felicity's and the kids'? Or is it something you would like to be taking responsibility for?

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Supporting mothers to begin the naming journey

As a social worker you may become concerned that a mother has been coerced by her partner in ways that minimise his violence. You might even begin to think that the mother is putting the needs of the perpetrator before the needs of the child. This might mean that you have to work hard to convince the mother of her need to protect her children. You might even begin to argue with the mother about the seriousness of the violence. A mother may become defensive and feel judged during these times – or she may withdraw and let the social worker talk, hoping not to have to use the service again. This may move her further away from being able to name the effects of her partner's violence. She may be worried about the repercussions from her partner if she does disclose the extent of the violence. She may also be concerned about child protection involvement, should she disclose.

Society continues to put the onus upon women experiencing FDV to initiate change. As a social worker, you are not immune from gendered stereotypes which can lead to unrealistic expectations of mothers.³ Social workers can interrupt these discourses by turning the lens upon the male perpetrator as responsible for their violence and the relationship inequality.⁴ The best way for social workers to do this without being confrontational is to stick to the facts and not engage in debates, especially when the discourses come from deep-seated gendered identity and values. It is also important that social workers maintain the focus on the safety and wellbeing of children while refraining from unhelpful judgment.



3 Hine, B. (2017). *Challenging the gendered discourse of domestic violence*. London: Male Psychology Network. [Available here](#).

4 Seymour, K. (2018). "Stand up, speak out and act": A critical reading of Australia's White Ribbon campaign. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 51(2), 293–310. [Available here](#).

How might a mother describe her partner's violence to you?

1. Mothers taking responsibility for their partners' use of violence, or sharing the responsibility with children:
 - 'Frank probably does go over the top sometimes. But it can't be easy living with four women. We can be a handful.'
 - 'I am very close with my son, and that's caused some issues in my new relationship with Victor. He does his best to deal with it, but lately he's become a bit angry.'
 - 'Kevin's ADHD means that I don't have much time for Jack ... and Jack has been getting angrier at Kevin. I just wish Kevin would try a bit harder with his father. They're just so alike, it's scary.'
2. Mothers fearing the consequences of telling you too much:
 - 'Ralf would hate it if he knew we were even talking about this. Loyalty is so important to him. He tells me and the kids that all the time.'
 - 'You social workers think you are helping, but you're not. Nothing you can do will change things, so it's a waste of time bleating about it.'
 - 'Jed is such a passionate guy ... Who knows what he would do if he knew I was talking to you?'
3. Mothers being affected by their partners' version of what is happening:
 - 'Chris is really protective of me: it's one of the first things that drew me to him. Sometimes he worries too much, and that can make things hard. But he really cares about me and the kids. He's got such a big heart.'
 - 'I guess that's what blokes do when they're stressed. Have a few drinks and then let off some steam. It happens in every family.'
 - 'It takes two to tango.'

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Reflection

Women often feel shame to report FDV, or may feel blamed.⁵ This can occur when the social worker places the responsibility for change upon the victim. For example, 'What is she doing to protect herself and her children?' or 'Why hasn't she left?'. The social worker's role is to shift the attention to focus responsibility for behaviours with the perpetrator: this will reduce the potential for blaming the victim. When working with women and children, turning your attention to the effects of trauma – and realistically focusing on the things that are within the mother's control – is a powerful shift, providing much opportunity for engagement.

- How might you gain an understanding of what the mother understands about her experience of violence, and the effects on her children?
- How might you talk to her about confidentiality, so that she can make decisions about how she might share information about the violence?
- What do you need to know about her children and their safety? What would you be curious about regarding the resilience and connection of the mother and the child?
- How might you understand the mother's preferred way of parenting, and the ways in which this is prevented by the perpetration of violence? How might you be curious about the parenting that the mother has maintained, despite the violence?
- How might you have conversations about responsibility which are curious and collaborative, rather than argumentative?
- How might you ask the mother about her partner's tactics, and the effects they have on her and her child? Would you discuss maternal alienation with her, and at what point?

Video C: Supporting mothers in conversations about family and domestic violence

Practitioners and academics discuss having child-focused conversations with mothers who initially minimise responsibility for their use of violence.



[Click here to watch video](#)

5 Wendt. S., Buchanan, F., & Moulding, N., (2015). Mothering and domestic violence: Situating maternal protectiveness in gender. *AFFILIA: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 30(4), 533–545. [Available here.](#)

Examples of some questions you might ask (beginning the naming journey) in response to these explanations of violence

1. 'Frank probably does go over the top sometimes. But it can't be easy living with four women. We can be a handful.'
 - What does going 'over the top' look like? What do you notice yourself thinking and feeling when Frank does this? What do you notice happens for your daughters?
 - Are there times when you can tell that Frank is going to go 'over the top'? What are the signs? Do you think your daughters also notice? Have you spoken to them about what they notice?
 - You've talked about noticing when things get hard for Frank. Why is that important for you? Is it important to look out for Frank? Are there ways that Frank looks after you? Are there ways that Frank looks out for the children? Who is looking out for the children when Frank goes 'over the top'?
2. 'Ralf would hate it if he knew we were even talking about this. Loyalty is so important to him. He tells me and the kids that all the time.'
 - What does loyalty mean in your family? What does loyalty mean to you? Are there times when Ralf's need for loyalty means you have to keep secrets? What's it like for you to keep those secrets?
 - Does it make it hard for you to be here today, knowing what Ralf might say or do? Why was it important to come anyway? Was it important for you to do this because of your kids? Is doing this for them a type of loyalty?
 - Are there other ways that you and your children are loyal to each other? Does Ralf consider these things to be loyal? Do you think Ralf's understanding of loyalty benefits you and the kids, or him?
 - What's it like to balance Ralf's need for loyalty with the needs of your children? How do you make these decisions? How much pressure is there on you to make the right decisions? Do you think Ralf feels the same pressure?
3. 'Chris is really protective of me: it's one of the first things that drew me to him. Sometimes he protects us too much, and that can make things hard. But he really cares about me and the kids. He's got such a big heart.'
 - How do you know when Chris's protection is too much? How does it make it hard for you? How does it make it hard for the kids?

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- Would you call it protection when Chris behaves like that? What does protection mean to you?
- How do you know when Chris is becoming protective in ways that make it hard? Does something happen? What might the kids be noticing? What do you think they might be seeing and hearing?
- What do you think Chris's intentions are when he behaves like that? Is he wanting to protect you? Or are there other motivations?
- You say that it can be hard when he protects you and the kids too much. What does that mean? Are there things that you would normally do that become impossible when he behaves like that? Does that feel like control to you?

Video D: Conversations with parents where family and domestic violence is present – Key messages

Some final words from practitioners and academics about beginning the naming journey with mothers and fathers where FDV is present.



References

Arney, F. (2018, April). *EIRD: Findings of the first two case file reviews*. Presentation at the Early Intervention Research Directorate Forum, Adelaide. [Available here](#).

Hine, B. (2017). *Challenging the gendered discourse of domestic violence*. London: Male Psychology Network. [Available here](#).

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