

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Minutes: 8/14/01

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Minutes by Margaret Langslet and edited by Chris Huffine

Topic: How do providers address clients' parenting skills?

-Men in group

sometimes will quickly go to parenting to parenting issues to get away from having to talk about their past abusive behavior. While some providers are willing to spend time on parenting issues, others do not. One steers away from parenting other than making statements about abused children. One does a large part about children being witnesses to abuse and how damaging it is. Research shows that it leads to cognitive deficits as well as social. Children kept at a fear level have affected brain chemistry. Another provider is willing to discuss parenting, but stays fairly focused- how aware are clients of their abuse towards children? Rarely do clients, in the beginning, admit to child abuse.

-Another provider asks men to look at the power and control tactics they may be using with their children, such as comparing, evaluating, providing conditional love, etc. One provider uses some questions off CAP (Child Abuse Prevention) survey.

-Another area of concern is arguments and abuse and control tactics men use with their partners over parenting issues. Some are not working collaboratively with the other parent. So it is important to look not only at the man's own parenting style, but to what extent is he supportive of his partner's parenting. Is he trying to work with her to provide the children with consistent parental messages? In divorced couples there are other issues concerning communication with the other parent and not undermining that parent.

Many men blame their partners and characterize them as a bad parent. It is easy to start jumping on the bandwagon of how bad a parent the wife is and providers must be careful of that and bring the focus back to the client.

-How do you address the issue of clients who were raised with physical punishment? Many of the clients say they were physically punished. In screening for whether physical punishment was abusive one provider uses two screening questions: 1) was it always clear to the client what he was being punished for and 2) was the amount of physical punishment appropriate for the infraction. It is physical abuse masked as punishment if the answer to either question is no. One provider suggested that many clients think it is appropriate when it is not. A lot of clients think abuse was appropriate and they say 'he beat me, but I never did it again'. Address that the physical punishment is physical abuse and power and control.

-In addressing men's belief systems, such a discussion can also focus on their beliefs as parents. What are their beliefs about being a parent—responsibilities, values, etc.

-It has been suggested that if men need additional parenting education, they be referred to a parenting class. However, parenting classes typically do not very effectively address the underlying power and control issues that may be present. It is important to talk about how to parent in a non-controlling fashion. How can you be a good parent without power and control? This is a discussion that may be more effectively facilitated in batterer intervention groups than parenting classes.

-Some clients feel that their biggest asset is their parenting ability. They may be most committed to being a good father. Their fathering may be one of the few areas they feel good about themselves. One provider discusses with the men whether they are living up to their and their children's expectations of being a good parent. That challenges their belief system that they are a great dad, it gives them a wake-up call about their perceptions. It can also be effective to key into their belief that they are good dad

-Some men have unrealistic expectations of their children which can lead to frustration and abuse. For example, they may have perfectionistic tendencies which spring out of their toxic shame. In turn the children may respond to this by acting out. One provider focuses on detoxification of that shame and the man learning to walk his own path rather than living through his children or wife. That calls for adult cognitive growth. A good book that addresses some of those issues is *I Don't Want to Talk About It* by Terrence Real. One provider uses Bradshaw's material and it turns lights on for some of the men.

-Another challenge for some men are the additional complications and stresses from sorting out his role in a blended family. To what extent is he a parent and to what extent are they his kids as well? Determining that is complicated. For example, how old were the children when the stepparent got involved? The role men take on can vary a great deal from jumping into a father role too quickly (e.g., after only a few months) to never taking on an active role, even after many years. Blended family issues come up a lot in group and homework assignments.

-Issue around respecting children's autonomy. Some men struggle with children being their own person and making their own choices. They struggle to see their children as separate and distinct from themselves. The older they become the more this is true. Increase empathy around children and help them understand why their kids are acting this way. The men are not putting themselves in children's shoes.

-Here are some concrete ways one provider addresses parenting: 1) journals- can be done on parenting issues; 2) through STEP books which men can read as a secondary text- also available in Spanish (website: www.agsnet.com); 3) concrete education- including a handout on non-controlling parenting.

-Is parenting intrinsically controlling? No, parenting is a job and holds certain responsibilities. As long as you are acting within those responsibilities, you are not being controlling and the child knows that you have these responsibilities. Controlling is when you go beyond the realm of your agreed upon role.

-One provider asks parents about errors they've made and what they are good at. How do they track their shortcomings? That would be good in groups and especially in lower functioning groups. By asking you get their belief systems. Tied in with this, men are asked to explore how they were parented as kids. Compartmentalized minds don't see how what happened to them affects what they do now. Help them to talk about how they felt when they were hit, put down and compared with other children. Are they doing these things to their kids? What would they do if someone treated their daughter the way they treat their spouse. Change keeps their daughter from getting into an abusive situation. Many men who vowed never to be like their dads are like their fathers. One reason men give for why they want help becoming nonabusive is because they saw themselves becoming like their fathers. Kivel's "Act Like A Man" exercise taps into this quite powerfully for some men. For some men, hearing about the effects of witnessing abuse is a big turning point. This can be a key motivation for them to stop abuse in family (especially abusive language).

-On the other hand, men who grew up in abusive homes may justify their own abusive behavior via downward comparison. "My dad was very bad, I'm only sort of bad, so I'm not abusive."

-One reason why the children may be acting up is as a consequence of his past abuse and control. Such acting up may continue for some time after the man stops becoming abusive, sometimes even getting worse. One provider uses the metaphor of running up charges on a credit card. Even once a person stops using the charge card, the outstanding balance still needs to be paid off, plus interest.

-Abusive men's world view of power over can lead them to view themselves as being in continued power struggles with their partner as well as their children. They are prone to inaccurately viewing their wife and/or children as doing "power plays" when that is not the case. It is important to confront those views and offer alternative perspectives into the behavior of others, from a non-controlling/noncompetitive perspective.

-Another area is dealing with adult children, which leads to somewhat different issues. For example, ostracizing them, not addressing lingering issues, not acknowledging the issues, etc. Providers should also address the ways that clients may be doing power and control issues with their adult kids.

-When testing for parenting issues one provider gives three hypothetical parenting situations to see what comes up in the man's responses.

-How do you handle a client who is separate and they get child custody. He will think he is the

better parent.

Get away from either/or. Just because she is a bad parent, doesn't make you a good parent. Many clients think that if they get custody that means that they are right in how they handle the children.

-Sometimes parents are fighting the system and how they are dealing with the family. If it is hard for me to negotiate, how hard for clients must it be? Even if the arguments with the system are legitimate,

The focus needs to be on how the client is dealing with that situation and how they are going to react, rather than focusing on the unfairness of the system. These men are quick to put themselves in the victim role and not take responsibility. Most of the time the system works. SCF is one of the most difficult organizations to deal with, but most men are only telling only part of the story. Most of the time with SCF there is a reason they got involved. You have to be skeptical of the men. Get the men to identify what they need to do to get through this and what they did to get involved in the system. The system is a common topic in groups. One client said 'lets get real, we didn't get here from eating a bowl of cheerios'. The system is not always fair, but you are here for a reason and let's look at and work with your part of it and do your part. What are the things you can change, what are things you can't? It's like the serenity prayer. Identify what you can do. You have to get the men out of the victim role. Get back in touch with their own power over themselves.