

## The Parenting Patterns of Men Who Batter

Lundy Bancroft

Jay G. Silverman, PhD

The lives of women and children can be torn apart by the violent and intimidating behavior of men who batter. Three million or more children are exposed to acts of domestic violence each year (Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999). The great majority of children who live with a batterer see or hear one or more acts of violence (Kolbo, Blakely, & Engleman, 1996), and a substantial number witness sexual assaults against their mother (Wolak & Finkelhor, 1998). These children show higher rates of aggression and other behavioral and adjustment problems (Graham-Bermann, 1998), including hyperactivity, anxiety, withdrawal, and learning difficulties (Gleason, 1995).

However, efforts to intervene on behalf of children of battered women must be well considered and nuanced because actions by social workers and court personnel can have unintended and harmful consequences (Whitney & Davis, 1999). The need for increased sophistication in the professional response to children who witness battering has been underlined by recent federal and state court rulings in New York, which forbid child protective services to punish mothers for the behavior of their violent partners and which demand that social workers offer appropriate support and services to battered mothers (Kaufman, 2004).

One critical route to improved interventions is increased knowledge and training on the parenting dynamics of men who batter, including the profile and tactics of the perpetrators, their impact on the parenting of battered women, and the unhealthy family dynamics they can engender. This knowledge base needs also to include an understanding of how batterers create entrapment for battered women, and how batterers can sometimes continue to endanger children even in cases where the mother is fully cooperative and takes all the steps demanded of her by public institutions (Bancroft, 2004; Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

### The Batterer Profile: Implications for Their Children

Prevalent attitudes and interpersonal dynamics of men who batter can have profound significance for their children's emotional experience, physical and sexual safety, and healthy development. Learning to recognize these dynamics and to assess their impact on family functioning can make the difference between a failed intervention and a successful one. Some typical characteristics of batterers include the following:

**Control:** Coerciveness is a primary characteristic of men who batter (Lloyd & Emery, 2000), and parenting is one sphere of the battered woman's life that is subject to heavy control by the batterer. The batterer may overrule her parenting decisions and may physically assault her if she does not cede to his directives regarding the

children (Ptacek, 1999). It is not surprising that battered women are far more likely than other women to feel obligated to alter their parenting styles when their partners are present (Holden & Ritchie, 1991). Evaluators must be cautious when assessing the parenting of a battered mother, since she may be using a style imposed upon her by the batterer's violence and threats.

**Entitlement:** Batterers typically believe they are entitled to use violence toward female partners when they deem it necessary (Silverman & Williamson, 1997), and they tend to claim a superior status in this relationship, expecting catering and deference (Edleson & Tolman, 1992). The batterer may, for example, demand that the mother neglect the children's needs in order to focus on his, and he may treat the mother like a servant in front of the children, which can condition them to disrespect and defy her, resulting in her appearing to be an inept parent.

**Manipulation:** It is common for batterers to be manipulative of family members and of professionals, using such tactics as dishonesty, false promises, and creating divisiveness to increase power and to escape accountability (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Batterers also tend to project a public image of generosity and kindness in order to escape accountability (Bancroft, 2002). In this context, children may blame themselves or their mothers for the violence, and they may make contradictory or victim-blaming statements to professionals due to their confusion.

**Possessiveness:** It is common for men who batter to perceive their partners as owned objects (Bancroft, 2002), an outlook that often extends to their children. For example, batterers have been found to seek custody of their children after separation at higher rates than do nonbattering fathers (APA, 1996). Parents who perceive their children as possessions show increased rates of child abuse (Ayoub, Grace, Paradise, & Newberger, 1991), including incest perpetration (Hanson, Gizzarelli, & Scott, 1994).

### Batterers and Child Abuse

Various published studies of physical abuse of children by batterers indicate that roughly half of batterers repeatedly assault children in the home, a rate about 700% that of nonbattering men (e.g., Straus, 1990; Suh & Abel, 1990). A substantial body of research finds batterers to be four to six times more likely than other men to sexually abuse children. Exposure to domestic violence is one of the top risk factors for incest victimization (e.g., McCloskey, Figueredo, & Koss, 1995; Paveza, 1988; Sirls & Franke, 1989). The literature on incest perpetrators describes a profile that is consistent with the profile of batterers including the following: the need for high levels

cont'd on page 12

**One critical route to improved interventions is increased knowledge and training on the parenting dynamics of men who batter, including the profile and tactics of the perpetrators, their impact on the parenting of battered women, and the unhealthy family dynamics they can engender.**

of control, feelings of entitlement, manipulateness, cultivation of a positive public image, and a tendency to view children as owned objects (e.g., Leberg, 1997; Salter, 1995). Batterers tend to use authoritarian and verbally abusive approaches to child rearing and, at the same time, to be neglectful and irresponsible parents (Margolin, John, Ghosh, & Gordis, 1996). Therefore, any time professionals become aware that children in a home are being abused or neglected, an assessment should be made for the possibility that their mother is also being battered by her partner.

## The Batterer as a Role Model

Boys who are exposed to domestic violence show dramatically elevated rates of battering their own partners as adolescents or adults (Silverman & Williamson, 1997). Research suggests that this connection is a product of the values and attitudes that boys learn from witnessing battering behavior (Markowitz, 2001; Silverman & Williamson, 1997). Daughters of battered women show increased difficulty in escaping partner abuse in their adult relationships (Doyno et al., 1999). Both boys and girls have been observed to adopt various aspects of the batterer's belief-system (Hurley & Jaffe, 1990), including the view that victims of violence are to blame, that males are superior to females, and that the use of violence against women by men is justifiable (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Unfortunately, the batterer's influence as a role model is rarely taken into account in professional interventions, particularly those affecting custody and visitation plans.

## Impact on Family Dynamics

A batterer's actions provide a model of aggressive behavior and contempt for women that can contribute to increased rates of violence in children and disobedience toward their mothers (Jaffe & Geffner, 1998). These destructive behaviors by children are aggravated in many cases by the batterer's deliberate weakening of the mother's ability to set limits (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002), which may be accompanied by violence toward her regarding issues about the children (Ptacek, 1999).

Many other commonly observed behaviors in batterers can distort family functioning. Examples include the following:

**Undermining the mother's authority:** Domestic violence inherently undermines maternal authority because the batterer's conduct demonstrates to children that verbal abuse, disrespect, and ignoring the mother's wishes are appropriate behaviors. In addition, a substantial portion of men who batter deliberately undercut the mother's position by overruling her, engaging the children in activities that she forbids, and rewarding the children for defying their mother. These tactics may become more pronounced in the postseparation context, as the abuser feels his power over the woman slipping and seeks to regain it (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

**Interfering with the mother's parenting:** Many battered women report being prevented by their partners from picking up a crying infant, assisting a frightened or injured child, feeding children when they are hungry, or taking children to medical appointments (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). The trauma the mother experiences

as a result of domestic violence can also make it more difficult for her to be fully attentive to her children (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2000).

**Creating divisions within the family:** Batterers commonly use favoritism in their parenting. The favored child is likely to be a boy, and the batterer may bond with him partly through encouraging a sense of superiority to females (Johnston & Campbell, 1993). Batterers may also sow divisions through the deliberate creation or support of familial tensions. High rates of intersibling conflict and violence are present in families where battering of the mother occurs (Hurley & Jaffe, 1990). We have also observed that some batterers try to drive children away from their mothers by shaming them for being close to her.

**Use of the children as weapons:** Many batterers use children as a vehicle to harm or control the mother (Erickson & Henderson, 1998) through such tactics as destroying the children's belongings to punish the mother, requiring the children to report on their mother's activities, or threatening to kidnap or take custody of the children. During postseparation, many batterers use unsupervised visitation as an opportunity to abuse the mother through the children by alienating them from the mother, encouraging them to behave in destructive or defiant ways when they return home, or by returning them dirty, unfed, or sleep-deprived (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

Retaliation for the mother's efforts to protect the children: A mother may be assaulted or intimidated if she attempts to prevent the batterer from mistreating the children, or she may find that he retaliates by harming them even more

**A mother may be assaulted or intimidated if she attempts to prevent the batterer from mistreating the children, or she may find that he retaliates by harming them even more severely (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).**

severely (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Cruelty or intimidation of this kind can force a mother to stop intervening on her children's behalf, which can result in her appearing to be an irresponsible parent.

These various forms of disruption to family functioning need to be taken into account in assessing the parenting of a battered mother, as she may appear to have poorer parenting abilities than she actually does. The repressive and controlling environment may prevent her from demonstrating her parenting strengths and can concurrently weaken her relationships with her children.

**Postseparation Implications**

Child protective services personnel sometimes believe that children's interests and safety are best promoted by pressuring mothers to leave their battering partners. Yet, batterers are at their greatest risk of committing homicide during and after the break-up of the relationship with the mother (Websdale, 1999). There are many other ways in which the behavior of batterers creates worse rather than better conditions after separation, through stalking the family, kidnapping children, exposing the children to severe assaults against the mother, causing homelessness, or obtaining unsupervised contact with the children through a family court order (Bancroft, 2004).

# PARENTING PATTERNS OF MEN WHO BATTER

It is therefore essential for professionals to strategize for long-term empowerment and safety for families, rather than to seek simple solutions, which may actually increase the danger to the children.

Professionals involved with custody and visitation determinations need to be aware of the destructive parenting behaviors exhibited by many batterers and the ways in which many batterers use custody litigation as a form of ongoing abuse of mothers and children (APA, 1996; Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Batterers commonly use their postseparation contact with children to damage mother-child and sibling relationships, yet those relationships have been found to be critical to children's healing from exposure to battering (Heller, Larrieu, D'Imperio, & Boris, 1998; Graham-Bermann, 1998). Children's level of attachment to their battering fathers may be due at least in part to traumatic bonding (see James, 1994). Some factors that can help identify a batterer who may be a high risk to children during visitation include a history of using the children as a weapon against the mother, the batterer's belief that his children are his personal possessions, his excessive control and feelings of entitlement, his history of boundary violations toward the children, and the escalation of his violence or cruelty toward the mother. Common errors in custody visitation assessment include dismissing domestic violence allegations without proper investigation, or inappropriately attributing children's anxieties about visitation to their mother's influence.

Children's safety and healing postseparation can be fostered by expanding the use of professionally supervised visitation, keeping any unsupervised visits relatively short in duration, and in most cases, avoiding the use of overnight stays. Additionally, family courts should increase their use of state-certified batterer intervention programs as a condition of visitation for men who batter, given recent research showing that such programs are more effective than was previously believed (Gondolf, 2001).



## Conclusion

Children who are exposed to domestic violence may experience multiple types of emotional and physical injury as a result of the batterer's behavior, well beyond the trauma from simply witnessing assaults on the mother. Further, an abused mother faces many obstacles in attempting to protect her children from a batterer. Professionals can increase the quality of their interventions on behalf of children by deepening their understanding of the common patterns of parenting of men who batter, including ways in which a batterer may damage mother-child and sibling relationships and make it difficult for a mother to parent her children. A focus on fostering maternal and child safety, and on empowerment of the battered mother, shows the most promise for positive results in the long term (Bancroft, 2004; Whitney & Davis, 1999).

## NOTE:

A detailed guide to performing custody and visitation evaluations in the context of domestic violence allegations can be found in *The Batterer as Parent* by Lundy Bancroft and Jay G. Silverman, published by Sage in 2002. This article is a synopsis of this book, which was a winner of the 2004 Pro Humanitate Literary Award.

## About the Authors

Lundy Bancroft is an author, trainer, counselor, and activist on issues of abuse and recovery. His current work focuses particularly on men who abuse women and the impact those men have on the lives of both women and children.

Jay G. Silverman, PhD, is Assistant Professor of the Harvard School of Public Health and Director of Violence Prevention Programs for the school's Division of Public Health Practice. He has authored numerous publications related to intimate partner violence, the dynamics of battering, and risks to children in domestic violence situations.



cont'd on page 14

# PARENTING PATTERNS OF MEN WHO BATTER

## References

- American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family. (1996). *Violence and the family*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Ayoub, C., Grace, P., Paradise, J., & Newberger, E. (1991). Alleging psychological impairment of the accuser to defend oneself against a child abuse allegation: A manifestation of wife battering and false accusation. In M. Robin (Ed.), *Assessing child maltreatment reports: The problem of false allegations* (pp. 191-207). New York: Haworth.
- Bancroft, L. (2004). *When Dad hurts Mom: Helping your children heal the wounds of witnessing abuse*. New York: Putnam.
- Bancroft, L. (2002). *Why does he do that: Inside the minds of angry and controlling men*. New York: G.P. Putnam.
- Bancroft, L., & Silverman, J. (2002). *The batterer as parent: Addressing the impact of domestic violence on family dynamics*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Doyne, S., Bowermaster, J., Meloy, R., Dutton, D., Jaffe, P., Temko, S., & Mones, P. (1999). Custody disputes involving domestic violence: Making children's needs a priority. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 50(2), 1-12.
- Edleson, J., & Tolman, R. (1992). *Intervention for men who batter: An ecological approach*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Erickson, J., & Henderson, A. (1998). Diverging realities: Abused women and their children. In J. Campbell (Ed.), *Empowering survivors of abuse: Health care for battered women and their children* (pp. 138-155). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fantuzzo, J., & Mohr, W. (1999). Prevalence and effects of child exposure to domestic violence. *The future of children*, 9(2), 21-32.
- Gleason, W. (1995). Children of battered women: Developmental delays and behavioral dysfunction. *Violence and Victims* 10(2), 153-160.
- Gondolf, E. (2001). *Batterer intervention systems*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Graham-Bermann, S. (1998). The impact of woman abuse on children's social development: Research and theoretical perspectives. In G. Holden, R. Geffner, & E. Jouriles (Eds.), *Children exposed to marital violence: Theory, research, and applied issues* (pp. 21-54). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Hanson, R. K., Gizzarelli, R., & Scott, H. (1994). The attitudes of incest offenders: Sexual entitlement and acceptance of sex with children. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 21(2), 187-202.
- Heller, S., Larriue, J., D'Imperio, R., & Boris, N. (1998). Research on resilience to child maltreatment: Empirical considerations. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 23(4) 321-338.
- Holden, G., & Ritchie, K. (1991). Linking extreme marital discord, child rearing, and child behavior problems: Evidence from battered women. *Child Development*, 62, 311-327.
- Hurley, D. J., & Jaffe, P. (1990). Children's observations of violence: II. Clinical implications for children's mental health professionals. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 35(6), 471-476.
- Jaffe, P., & Geffner, R. (1998). Child custody disputes and domestic violence: Critical issues for mental health, social service, and legal professionals. In G. Holden, R. Geffner, & E. Jouriles (Eds.), *Children exposed to marital violence: Theory, research, and applied issues* (pp. 371-408). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- James, B. (1994). *Handbook for treatment of attachment-trauma problems in children*. New York: Free Press.
- Johnston, J., & Campbell, L. (1993). Parent-child relationships in domestic violence families disputing custody. *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, 31(3), 282-298.
- Kaufman, L. (2004, October 27). Court limits removing child when mother is abuse victim. *New York Times*, A1, B9.
- Kolbo, J., Blakely, E., & Engleman, D. (1996). Children who witness domestic violence: A review of empirical literature. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 11(2), 281-293.
- Leberg, E. (1997). *Understanding child molesters: Taking charge*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Levendosky, A., & Graham-Bermann, S. (2000). Trauma and parenting: An addition to an ecological model of parenting. In R. Geffner, P. Jaffe, & M. Sudermann (Eds.), *Children exposed to domestic violence* (pp. 25-36). New York: Haworth Maltreatment and Trauma Press.
- Lloyd, S., & Emery, B. (2000). *The dark side of courtship: Physical and sexual aggression*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mahoney, P., & Williams, L. (1998). Sexual assault in marriage: Prevalence, consequences, and treatment of wife rape. In J. Jasinski & L. Williams (Eds.), *Partner violence: A comprehensive review of 20 years of research* (pp. 113-157). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Markowitz, F. (2001). Attitudes and family violence: Linking intergenerational and cultural theories. *Journal of Family Violence*, 16(2), 205-218.
- McCloskey, L. A., Figueredo, A. J., & Koss, M. (1995). The effect of systemic family violence on children's mental health. *Child Development*, 66, 1239-1261.
- Paveza, G. (1988). Risk factors in father-daughter child sexual abuse. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 3(3), 290-306.
- Pracek, J. (1999). *Battered women in the courtroom: The power of judicial responses*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Salter, A. (1995). *Transforming trauma: A guide to understanding and treating adult survivors of child sexual abuse*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Silverman, J., & Williamson, G. (1997). Social ecology and entitlements involved in battering by heterosexual college males: Contributions of family and peers. *Violence and Victims*, 12(2), 147-164.
- Sirles, E., & Franke, P. (1989) Factors influencing mothers' reactions to intrafamily sexual abuse. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 13, 131-139.
- Straus, M. (1990). Ordinary violence, child abuse, and wife-beating: What do they have in common? In M. Straus & R. Gelles (Eds.), *Physical Violence in American Families* (pp. 403-424). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Suh, E., & Abel, E. M. (1990). The impact of spousal violence on the children of the abused. *Journal of Independent Social Work*, 4(4), 27-34.
- Websdale, N. (1999). *Understanding domestic homicide*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Whitney, P., & Davis, L. (1999). Child abuse and domestic violence in Massachusetts: Can practice be integrated in a public child welfare setting? *Child Maltreatment*, 4(2), 158-166.
- Wolak, J., & Finkelhor, D. (1998). Children exposed to partner violence. In J. Jasinski & L. Williams (Eds.), *Partner violence: A comprehensive review of 20 years of research* (pp. 73-111). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

