



What about the fathers? Engaging men to protect children

Susan Strega

School of Social Work

University of Victoria

Basis of presentation

- **Practice**

- Child protection
- VAW
- Centre for Response-based Practice

- **Research**

- “The case of the missing perpetrator”
 - Analysis of legislation & policy
 - Interviews with mothers
 - Interviews with CP social workers
- “Fathering and child welfare”
 - Quantitative study – child protection files
 - Interviews with fathers, CP workers & agency workers
 - Review of Canadian BSW curricula & parenting literature

Why see violent fathers?

- **Likely to remain in their children's lives**
 - Almost 80% of men convicted of partner assault had a fathering role
 - 50% expected this to continue after release
- **May go on to establish new families**
 - Most not concerned about effects of their violence on children (but some are)
- **Danger to mothers and children**

Gaps in education & training

- **Survey of Canadian undergraduate BSW programs & parenting literature**
 - Less than 5% included content on men/fathers
 - Language = parents, Content = mothers
- **Stereotypes & biases**
 - Definitions of “good fathering”
 - Internalized ideas about racialized or underclass men
- **Support/lack of support in workplace**
 - Team leaders/supervisors set the tone
 - Team members reinforce each others’ biases

Barriers within us

- **Myth of reduced workload**

- *Most of them walk away and go off to find new families. There's lots of times I meet the mom and she'll say he did the same thing to his last family. She'll even have a copy of the restraining order that he brought with him from the other relationship. (Research participant)*
- *Often he's not only causing trouble in a new family, he's still causing trouble in the old one. (Research participant)*

- **Fear**

- Dangerous, volatile, unpredictable
- Influence of our own experiences
- Cultural prohibition on naming men's violence
- Cultural insistence on women's responsibility



Facilitators of engagement

- **Re-frame**
 - Fathers as “core business” in CW
 - Many men are looking for support in ending their violence
 - This is an opportunity for engaging with men on a variety of family issues
- **Knowledge, education, training & support**
 - Training resources exist (CREVAWC, CRBP)
 - Resources for violent fathers
- **Fear reduction**

Knowledge, education, training & support

- **Appreciate the complexities**

“...some may pose risks, some may be assets and some may incorporate aspects of both”

- Ability to accurately assess & manage risk-asset balance

- **Response-based approaches**

- From confrontation to engagement and collaboration

- Language awareness essential

- Elicit specific and detailed accounts

- Excuses and externalizing responsibility = invitations to engagement

- **Find supports for new practices**

- Creative ways of making contact

Fear Reduction

- **Assess dangerousness thoroughly**
 - Use many information sources
 - Note “trigger events” & contextual contributors
- **Be safe**
 - Interview separately
 - Interview safely (preparation, location)
- **Consult**
- **De-escalation strategies**

Principles and practice strategies

- **Principle**

Fathers are responsible for their children



- **Practice Strategy**

Provide support to enable fathers to take responsibility



Principles and practice strategies

- **Principle**

Violence does not necessarily eliminate men from being involved as fathers, but it must be taken up directly with them

- **Practice Strategy**

Respectful engagement with violent fathers requires a structure that ensures safety, respect & accountability



Principles and practice strategies

- Principle

Understand there are many different ways to be a father

- Practice Strategy

Be strengths-focused



Principle: Violence is never OK

Voluntary strategies are preferred

- Leave the home until he can guarantee safe conduct within it
- Seek out & attend programs specific to violent fathers
- Enroll in an anti-violence program
- Voluntary agreement to a no-contact order.

Use legislation and policy when necessary

- No-contact orders
- Protective intervention orders
- Supervision orders
- Information-sharing with mothers.

Principles and practice strategies

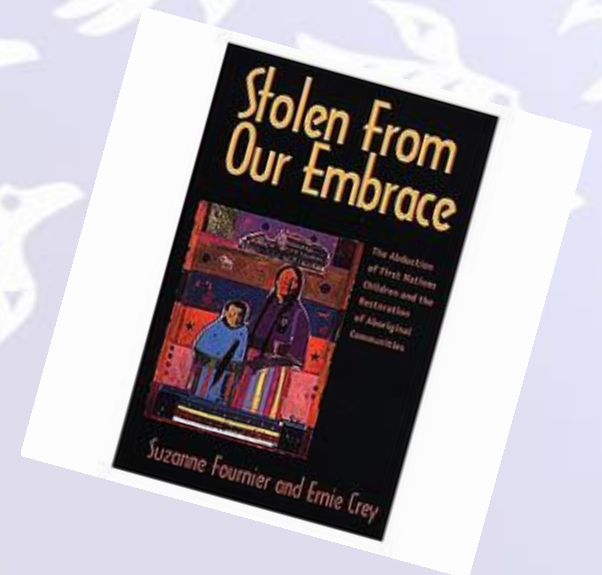
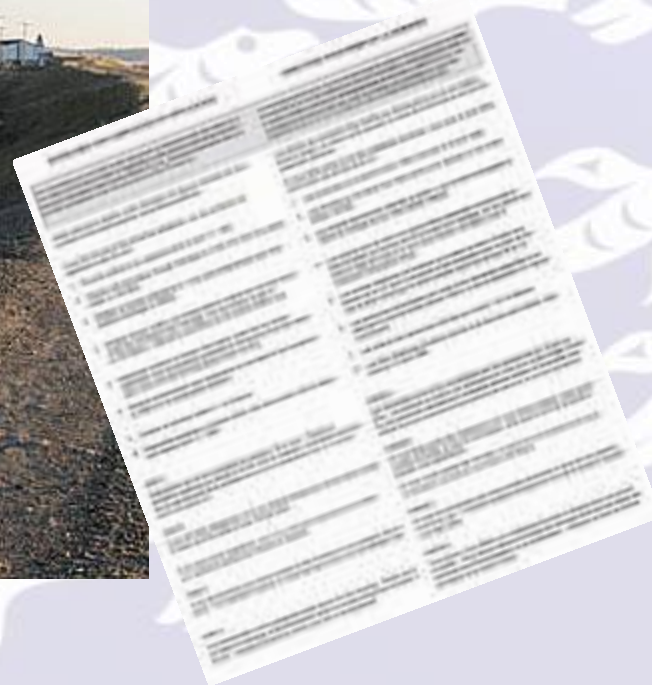
- **Principle**

Understand the context of fathers' lives



- **Practice Strategy**

Be knowledgeable about structural contexts and how these impact father involvement



Choosing invisibility

I'm scared that these people will take my kids away forever if they know that sometimes I'm around, I'm visiting them, that I'm loving my children. I'm scared that they're going to say, well he's no good. Look what's going on. You know if they look at my (child in care) file. Oh, this and that, and oh, he's garbage.

(Research participant)



What violent fathers say

- **Work with me, not at me.**



“They’re helping me ... they’re not against me. So that’s what helped me to become this.”

“She takes one baby, maybe I take one baby to sort of make it easier and stuff like that.”



“I’ve had a lot of support to become a different, a better parent.”

“Sit on that couch until [child welfare] gets here!”

A father's plea to workers

...instead of letting the willow bend you know, you don't have to snap the damn thing in half. You can let it bend and let it go back and it'll swing on forever. You don't have to snap the damn thing to make it work.

