

## COVID-19: Fathering, a note on practice

---

1 May 2020

No to Violence has partnered with Kids First, providers of Caring Dads programs in Victoria, to develop a practice note to support practitioners engaging with fathers on their use of family violence during COVID-19. Please note, this guide should be reviewed alongside relevant state and organisational contingency planning and advice on service delivery during COVID-19.

### Introduction

---

Caring Dads is a child-centred group work program designed to reduce men's abuse of their children and children's mother. In response to COVID-19, the majority of services who engage with men/fathers on their use of violence have moved from in-person group work to individual engagement via the phone. This resource outlines the Caring Dads framing of practice advice for individual phone work with fathers during COVID-19.

The main goal of engagement with fathers remains to contribute to the safety of the co-parent and child victims of men's abuse and to provide crisis work that is responsive to the specific risks men pose to women and children in the current COVID-19 context. The phone work with fathers should provide support and increase safety for families in a time of elevated risk, through regular person-centred engagement.

The typical change-work of a MBCP or Caring Dads program is not an appropriate or realistic expectation at the current time. Instead, the individual phone work should focus on engagement through a lens of accountability, empathy building with other members of the family and system collaboration to ensure risk, safety and wellbeing needs are in view. The below section will outline some practice guidance for this approach and culminate in a suggested structure for a call with fathers, to pull all the elements together.

### Engagement and accountability

Maintaining engagement with men/fathers is key, particularly during COVID-19 where other support services he was engaged with might no longer be available. Maintaining engagement ensures changes to risk and safety are kept in view of the service system and professionals can support increasing safety for impacted family members and fathers who use family violence. However, it's crucial that engagement with fathers is done with the lens of accountability. Try these methods of engagement:

- Ask questions to try and understand how COVID-19 is impacting him.
- Ask about recent and current stressors men and their families are facing (for example, change/loss of employment, more time at home, feelings of anxiety or boredom).
- Work with men to understand how these elevated stressors could increase their risk to others.

- Explore prosocial desires such as being a good father, keeping their relationship with their partner and children, avoiding breaching/arrest etc.
- Support men to understand it's their responsibility to be safe with their family and children.
- Clearly message to fathers that it's their responsibility to pick up the phone and connect with services and to commit to regular phone calls.

While achieving large scale and sustained behaviour change is not a realistic expectation of individual phone work in the current context, there is space to build in small moments of accountability. For example, if the child is doing school at home you can ask the father how that is going and how he is proactively supporting the child and their mother with this new arrangement. Next time you speak with the father you can ask him about this particular support again, as a way of encouraging him to take responsibility for actively supporting his family members.

### Empathy building

Asking men to explain how they are being impacted can also lead into discussions of how they think other members of their family are being impacted, which can support empathy building. Fathers might downplay the impact COVID-19 is having on the child and could misinterpret child behaviour (for example, he could interpret a child's behaviour as acting out to annoy the father rather than the behaviour being linked to the child being worried/ missing their friends). Explore with fathers the impacts COVID-19 might be having on their child by asking:

- What are they noticing in their children?
- How might the child be feeling?
- Is the child regressing behaviourally?
- What's actually going on for the child?
- How has the child's world changed?

You can also support fathers to manage expectations of their children, as children and families adjust to new routines and rules. Support fathers in understanding this is the time to expect children to be generally more irritable, dysregulated and non-compliant. Such is the reality of being cooped up all the time, missing friends, lacking regular routines and having to spend all your time with your family.

This is not the time to:

- Have high expectations of children to do as they are told
- To put harsh limits on electronics (which is likely children's only way of connecting with friends)
- Reduce electronics time as punishment
- To get into battles about what foods will and will not be eaten, etc.

Instead, it's important for fathers to be extra tolerant and understanding. Encourage men to support empathy building for the child's mother through a similar exploration of how they are being impacted by COVID-19 and to consider how her world changed.

Be aware of fathers being dismissive of mother's anxiety around COVID-19 and patterns of fathers criticising and undermining their co-parents decisions around supporting family members (this is explored in more depth in Resource A). If the child's mother is working in an essential service there might be changes to access arrangements, or the father might have considerably more responsibility

for the child than usual. Considering the child's education needs again, you can ask fathers how they are supporting the child and be aware of fathers assuming the mothers will solely take care of the child's education needs.

### System collaboration and family safety contact

Services all have a role to play in collaboration, to ensure risk, safety and wellbeing needs for all members of the family are being actively and proactively identified and responded to.

When working with fathers, it's essential that mothers/partners are also being contacted for support. In the context of COVID-19, many services are increasing the frequency of family safety contact to increase the monitoring of dynamic risk factors, review safety plans and support the family's needs. Guidance for working with victim survivors in COVID-19 can be found on this live Family Safety Victoria resource [Resource D].

Sharing relevant information with other services is vital as it's likely that the family will have less involvement with services now due to isolation and social distancing measures. A consequence of this could be less services having 'eyes' on risk, safety and wellbeing needs. As such, you must share relevant information with services that are also engaged with the family to ensure all services have updated and regularly reviewed risk assessment and safety plans.

Consider where collaborative case management is applicable and use your established networks with justice and community services to continue sharing relevant information to promote wellbeing and safety and assess and to respond to risk. If you're working in Victoria, remember the information sharing legislative changes still apply [Resource E].

### Call structure with fathers

Remember: telephone/video conference sessions will need to remain flexible and responsive to client needs. The key steps below are intended as a guide to help practitioners focus on support and risk management rather than change work.

1. First, gauge the physical space he's in – does the father have a private space and the time to talk?
2. Second, explore impact:
  - On himself - discuss the impact of the pandemic on him (e.g. physical & mental health, stress, job loss, changes to custody or access with children, financial stress, feeling confined, bored). Screen for mental health concerns and suicide where appropriate.
  - On children – discuss any changes in children's behaviour, encourage him to consider his children's experience (e.g. loss of contact with grandparents, friends, changes to school, routine, impact of family stress on children) and what they need from him.
  - On his relationship with the mother/other caregivers – discuss how the pandemic is impacting on his relationships with significant people in his children's lives. How is he supporting his children's mother at the moment? • Is it currently safe enough for you and your partner to discuss what her needs might be? Does she feel

comfortable leaving you to look after the children and have regular breaks if/when she needs them?

3. Then focus on safety – normalise stressors while encouraging him to focus on pro-social goals that increase safety, such as avoiding breaches, being a good dad, maintaining a safe relationship with his partner, and using appropriate informal and formal supports to keep himself safe.

Ask if he can tune into signs in his body when feeling anxious/elevated and then remove himself safely from family when feeling this response? Is it possible for him and his partner to discuss 'time out' strategies in advance? Suggest some rules to follow, for example, if he needs to leave to maintain safety he will let her know, and let her know how long he'll be and, finally, come back when he says he will.

4. Explore strengths and support needs – how is he coping with the impacts of the pandemic? Are his usual sources of support and coping strategies available to him? Does he need information or advice about any additional supports or strategies in terms of the pandemic, his mental health and his ability to remain calm and ensure the safety and wellbeing of himself and his family?
5. Offer problem-solving and practical help – are there any specific issues (practical or otherwise) that we can help him with?
6. Arrange a date and time for the next phone contact. Encourage the father to reach out in the interim if needed.

## Resources

- 
- A. **Caring Dads Canada** Harmful, abusive and potentially abusive fathering to listen for (from Kids First)  
[Link](#)
  - B. Emerging minds, communicating with children about COVID-19  
[Link](#)
  - C. **Australian Childhood Foundation** Communicating with children about COVID-19  
[Link](#)
  - D. **Family Safety Victoria** Update: Practice note for minimum response to victim survivors during the coronavirus (COVID-19) isolation and quarantine period  
[Link](#)
  - E. **Family Safety Victoria** Child and Family Violence Information Sharing Schemes  
[Link](#)

### Support services

Coronavirus Hotline – 1800 675 398	Mensline – 1300 789 978
Men’s Referral Service – 1300 766 491	Beyond Blue – 1300 224 636
Lifeline – 13 11 14	Suicide Call Back Service – 1300 659 467
Kids Helpline – 1800 551 800	Family Relationships Advice Line – 1800 050 321
Parentline – 1300 301 300	

### Members’ information

---

No to Violence welcomes hearing from its members. **Pose a question related to the practice issue.**