

'Positive Partners, Strong Families': a constructive solution

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Epidemiological research, both here in New Zealand and in the USA, indicates that violence occurring between heterosexual couples is frequently mutual, with both men and women initiating and actively participating. However protocols and policies of service providers and governmental institutions are driven by the pro-feminist dogma that violence between partners is predominantly perpetrated by men against women. This is exemplified by the VAWA II bill which equates spouse abuse with wife-bashing. In NZ domestic violence is often defined as psychological and physical abuse of women by male partners. If a child witnesses such an act the man is also guilty of child abuse.

Remedies focus on treatment programmes for male perpetrators (battering men) and female victims (battered women). The primary consideration is the `safety' of women and children, which usually means supporting her to leave her partner, and severely limiting or preventing his access to their children. This is despite the fact that almost every possible social indicator demonstrates that children who are raised by solo mothers, without input from fathers, do worse than co-parented children.

Women's Refuge data indicates that the most dangerous time for a woman is after she leaves, and a man who previously has never been physically violent may become so when he loses his wife, his children and his home. Refuge workers also acknowledge that a client might return to her violent relationship several times, and needs on-going support until she finally separates. Even if her man is attending a perpetrators' treatment programme (which emphasises that he is to blame for any violence in the relationship), women's support services stress that he is unlikely to change. No programmes are offered to couples who wish to stay together to help them deal with their interpersonal conflicts and break their cycle of violence. Indeed, the NZ Domestic Violence Act 1995 specifies that group programmes for domestic violence victims must be presented to one gender only.

In contrast, I subscribe to a pro-family model, based on the knowledge that children do best when looked after by both parents. I believe that many of our social problems will be reduced if children are chosen, loved, wanted and cared for by both their mothers and their fathers.

Clearly there are extreme situations where lives are endangered by physical violence, and separation is the appropriate solution. Where violence and conflict is on a more minor scale however, interventions should aim to assist parents to stay together, or if they do separate, help them share parenting by improving their communication and conflict resolution skills.

My colleagues and I are developing a psychoeducation programme ('Positive Partners, Strong Families') for parents in conflict which uses behavioural/cognitive

techniques to teach communication, negotiation and conflict resolution skills. It does not aim to resolve past problems and grievances. There is no attempt to assess who is right or wrong; who has done what to whom; or who is to blame for any past interpersonal conflicts or violent acts. The focus is on present and future acts. Participants acquire skills and knowledge which enable them to have more choices in their future responses to their partners and to other people in their lives. The focus is on changing interpersonal relationships rather than individuals per se.

As individuals, the two people concerned may have conflicting needs, wishes and goals, and may have developed patterns of behaviour based on competing with each other to get what they want. This sets up a dynamic of win-lose, and may contribute to an escalating situation where both are trying to win, to 'get even' for perceived past losses.

One of our programme's goals is for couples to see their relationship as a partnership. From this perspective, both are 'on the same side' hence their aim is to find solutions to conflicts and problems with a win-win outcome. Parental partnerships have a number of goals such as a happy, secure family life with adequate resources to meet the family's needs. Parents generally wish the best for their children and want them to be healthy and have access to a good education. Our programme aims to equip parents with the knowledge and skills to develop win-win partnerships; to be able to identify their common goals and put into place strategies to achieve these. We want to help families stay together if possible.

Both men and women have equal capacity for good and evil. Whoever the perpetrator, one act of violence does not justify or condone another. All adults have equal rights and responsibilities and women should not be assigned special status in jurisprudence nor in health and social services.

In the same way that policy and legal changes have allowed uncorroborated sexual abuse allegations to be presumed true by the authorities, if VAWA II is enacted, all that women will have to do to win in court is claim that domestic violence has occurred. This may be 'psychological' or 'verbal' abuse rather than physical. Such a gender-biased piece of legislation will further accelerate the breakup of two-parent families and will increase the number of children growing up without their fathers.

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Dr. Goodyear's book "First Do No Harm" is reviewed at
<http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~zohrab/wdonohar.html>