

Project “Increasing the awareness of child-centered fathering in order to reduce the risk of harm to children and their mothers caused by domestic violence” 2018-1-EE01-KA204-047115

How to get fathers to programs?

Getting men to participate into any kind of social programs is a perennial problem.

In Finland the national mental health resources are used by men in disproportionately low numbers. The men only use 25-33% of the resources depending on what issue is discussed, though the need would be somewhere around 45%, according to Finnish institute for health and welfare. The most used services are those for depression and anxiety and those seeking help are women. At the same time men are three times more likely to commit suicide.

The same goes for violence: more women are seeking help from health services because of violence, but men are treated for broken bones or other severe consequences of violence 4-6 times more likely. In victimization studies the men constitute 76-82% of people who report having been victims of different threatening violence.

These statistics shows how the men are only seeking help as a last resort, if even then.

The problem is twofold: men are not willing to talk about their issues and when they talk about them, they may not be taken seriously. These problems are the ones that must be addressed when trying to get fathers into programs.

How is the process for taking fathers into the program organised?

and the process of taking men into the program

1. First contact
2. Initial interviews with possible cooperation with other instances
3. Participation

The first contact is usually by the fathers themselves or in some cases by those who are working with them or by their families or friends. Of these options the optimal one is that the men themselves are in contact with the program. If someone else makes the initial contact, the program may become tainted by their opinions in the eyes of the man and he may become hostile towards the program. This is harmful for the participation and trust that is needed. In these cases, the program should contact the man themselves, or even better have the man himself make the secondary contact.

First contacts can happen via telephone, email, web forms, chats, or men just walking into the offices of the program. No matter what method they use, they should be talked to as soon as possible. They may have contacted the program when agitated or in distress. If their determination to participate is not used to get them into the program, it may simmer down, and they will decline to participate. Because of this they should be met, their problems acknowledged, and an agreement made with them to meet them as soon as possible.

The initial interviews are a place to get information from the father, inform him and form a bond between him and the program. This step may be part of the program itself or a separate pre-participation interview. Both have worked and there is no clearly better way to conduct this part of the process.

If there is information about the man that he wants to give the program or that officials give to the program, this information should be part of the process as soon as possible. This way the information will not disrupt the process later.

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After the first contact and initial interviews the father should be ready for participation. The first stages have given him enough information that he knows what he will be participating in, what he can get from the program, what is expected of him. Most importantly the initial stages should engage the participant in his own change process and give him a clear roadmap on how he can accomplish the changes he wants to accomplish in himself and his conduct.

Initial interviews and agreements on goals

The initial interviews that Finnish programs conduct state only a few common goals. These goals are all aimed towards creating the groundwork that establishes basic facts about the program and the

1. Giving information about how the program works
2. Getting information about the situation and what help the participant thinks is needed
3. Stating the ethical boundaries of the program
4. Creating a human connection
5. Making an agreement about goals

Giving information and stating the ethical boundaries work towards making the boundaries and goals of the program clear. They establish what can be expected from the program and how the participant can benefit from it.

Getting information from the participants about participants and creating a connection work towards assessing the eligibility of the participant for working with the program. They may have other issues that make them ineligible for participation or their problems may be such that they would benefit more from some other program.

Data gathering is usually part of the interview and can be used as part of the initial interviews where information and assessment of needed help is made.

Every step, but especially stating the ethical boundaries and creating a human connection work toward establishing trust with the participant. This trust is the cornerstone for a successful participation.

The Finnish programs and the ones found in research literature all have some sort of program specific guidelines for initial interviews. These should be followed, but many programs add that there may be need for concentrating on some part of interview in the first place. If for example the participant is in dire distress, they may not be able to fill in various questionnaires properly, but they may need

Some parts of these initial procedures may have to be repeated. If for example the participant has his first talks with the program in a drunk tank, he may not remember all the agreements that were made. In these instances, they may be gently brought into discussions when proper participation can at some later time begin.

What kinds of boundaries are there for participation?

The boundaries for participation in different kinds of violence prevention programs are tailored to each program, but all programs have at least some boundaries. The restrictions set by legislation are bound by the laws of each country, but usually contain at least boundaries on how much of a threat the participant can be those around them without having their participation terminated and officials notified of the risks.

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The most common boundaries set by the programs themselves are about restricting the issues that the program deals with and safety issues.

Program can not help with all issues

No program can or should even try to help with all the problems that the participants can have. These restrictions can be based on ethical guidelines, funding, the skillsets of the workforce or management of work-related stress. All of these are valid reasons and the program should have a clear guideline for what it will handle and what it will not deal with.

Substance abuse

Perhaps the most common reason to decline service for someone for programs in Finland is substance abuse. Using various drugs and especially showing up into meetings under the influence is considered grounds for terminating the participation or at least the meeting.

The reasons behind this thinking are that those who are using drugs are not able to commit to the violence prevention programs wholeheartedly and clear-mindedly. The substances can break the progress at some point of the program. Because of the high percentage of people with substance abuse problems not going through the whole program, keeping them on can be detrimental to other people in the program if there is group work and demoralizing for the whole program.

On the other hand, substance abuse can be one way of dealing with a tough life situation. This is especially true for men. Because of this the substance abuse is not automatic cause for non-participation for all programs, as long as it can be kept under control and the participant never shows up to meetings while under the influence.

Sexual violence

Sexual violence is an issue that can be hard to grasp and endure for even seasoned professionals. Whether the sexual violence has been against spouses, children or someone else, it can be a reason for declining services.

Treating sexual violence takes a different skillset compared to the physical and psychological violence. The mental coping mechanisms needed to do the work are different. The laws concerning sexual violence are usually different, as are the cooperative networks. If sexual violence would be part of the program, the workforce must agree to this and have suitable training.

One issue to be considered for non-participation of sexual offenders can be the reaction of other participants of the program, especially if they are men. If the groups contain sexual offenders or even if the program has a policy of treating sexual offenders, the other men may avoid it. This is to avoid being stigmatized as having done similar violence. In group environment the men may also become hostile towards the sexual offenders, which will not help anyone's processes.

Mental health issues

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If the participant has severe mental health issues, their place may not be in a violence-reduction program. The mental health issues can be just too overwhelming for the participants to handle, or their perception of reality may be such that the program does not work.

What is considered severe mental health issue is not the same for all the programs. Most will decline participants with delusions or hallucinations. Most will take in participants with ADD and ADHD. Depression is usually not a hindrance, unless severe. Whether to work with people with other personality disorders is up to each program, but the goals of the program as well as the skills and experience of the workforce should be accounted for when considering it.

Fortunately, most mental health patients are not violent. Because of this, these considerations are rare for the programs in their everyday operations. If there is something that has been considered, it would be how to react to declining mental health of the participant. Most programs seem to have some sort of plan for discussing the situation with the participant, maybe reporting their situation to authorities if there is an element of danger and guiding them to other services while still maintaining some kind of connection to them.

If the participant is just told about other services and then left to sort out the situation on their they probably will not use those services. It may not be included in every program’s procedures, but the ethical way to handle these situations is to keep contact with the participant until they are being cared for. Sometimes it may even be the most ethical thing the program can do to take the participant into appropriate care. This should especially be done if they have a breakdown during their session or inside the premises.

Violent behaviour during sessions is not tolerable

Violent behaviour during the meetings is usually not tolerated and will put an end to the whole process. But what kind of behaviour is considered violent varies from program to program. Some programs consider raising the voice while standing up to be threatening, especially during work involving couples or groups. Some other programs may consider this kind of behaviour par for the course when handling difficult subjects.

All programs seem to agree that distinct threats, physical violence and prolonged verbal abuse that doesn’t stop are grounds for terminating the process.

Fortunately, all the programs seem to agree, that as long as the boundaries are set early, the participants can work within these boundaries. Very few men have to be forced out of the programs during the program as long as there are no surprises for the men. The men that can’t abide them leave early and the rest work well with them.

The boundaries are not data-driven

There is no clear consensus and no research done in Finland on what kind of boundaries are the most effective ones or which ones cause more dropping out of programs. Because of this all these guidelines are more or less based on ethical guidelines and therapeutic practices of different programs and organisations they are part of.

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As there is no clear data on what guidelines are the most effective ones, the line should mainly draw between what is clearly unacceptable and

What kind of messages are effective and work best with men?

The messages that get men into the program are targeted to men specifically. They need to give a reason for participation and label the programs in a way that seem approachable to men. The main message needs to be that there is a way forward and the participants gain something for themselves by participating in the program.

Fatherhood

Fatherhood is one of the main messages used in getting men into programs. Most fathers want to be good fathers and have a good relationship with their children. This is used by many Finnish men’s programs as a leverage when marketing the program. The promises of new fatherhood skills and the positive outcomes they make possible frame the future of the participant in a positive light and make attending the groups appealing to them

When your target audience is unisex, you get women to participate

Finnish experience has been that programs should be targeted strictly to men or the information about getting into program should mention that the program is suitable for both men and women. This lowers the boundaries for men, who for some reason seem to assume that programs that are unisex are mainly for women.

The programs that have both men and women as participants succeed in getting customers, but 80-95% of these customers in Finland are women. For example, in the shelters for domestic violence in Finland only six percent of customers are men, and men only comprise 13% of callers for Nollalinja phone service for victims of domestic violence.

Some programs in Finland have found out, that when they began to take men in, there appeared a need for similar work for women. In some instances, the program has begun to take in women as customers at this point. This has brought in women, but at the same time the number of men who participate has begun to decline rapidly.

The same can not be said of female participation. When women have been the target audience and the men are allowed into the groups, the men have not participated in great numbers. The perennial example for this in Finland are post-natal care work. The work in maternity clinics has historically been oriented towards ensuring the well-being of child and supporting motherhood. For decades there has been a movement to change this. Different projects have been working to get fathers to participate in postnatal care meetings and groups, but this has only been partially successful: when men have been brought into groups that are predominantly comprised on women, they are unwilling to participate. The unisex groups have only brought in the most interested fathers, who probably have had the least need for the participation in the first place.

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When programs target only men, they succeed

Both prenatal and natal care groups that have been only for men have been successful in many experiments in Finland. The men who are the most willing to participate are then not the only ones coming in and these groups have found fathers that have been more in need of them than those who would have come into unisex groups.

Unfortunately, these groups have also made the same mistakes again and again throughout Finland. They begin as men’s groups and go on for a while. As the fathers get more involved in different parts of the system their groups are considered as less and less important, as the men are already participating. As the resources are scarce the groups are brought down and men brought into unisex groups. After this, the number of men participating dwindles. Later, when this is noticed, the need for groups for just men is again acknowledged and the cycle starts again. In some cities these cycles go around in 5-7 years in which work with men is

Target groups

Men are not all similar in what medias they use and how they like to be approached. In Finland variables like age, class, region, religious affiliation and education can affect how different messages reach men and how they perceive the message.

Young fathers have different medias that they follow. They use YouTube, are savvy in what social medias are used at the time – these medias can reach them. But for middle-aged father’s television, newspapers, radio and Facebook work better in getting the message through.

Educational background and social class can make a difference in what kinds of marketing will be perceived as inviting. There are no clear guidelines, but the more highly educated fathers from higher socioeconomic classes may want more information and they may also be able to read texts that contain more professional information. Such information does not work as well with youngest fathers from lowest educational backgrounds.

Having the messages tailored to local customs and dialects can make the program seem local and inviting to fathers. In Finland this has been perceived as important, because the fathers may think that professionals coming from outside their own communities may be unable to see their point of view and work with them. This would be a handicap, because the fathers who think that they are in charge of their own positive change are most likely to participate in the program and the program is most likely to work on them.

Creating the message that will not offend the religious group is a basic requirement for any program. Religious imagery should be avoided altogether if the program is not solely working with members of one religious group.

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