

Fact Sheet 3 Perpetrator characteristics¹

Perpetrators of family and domestic violence can vary in age and be from any socio-economic demographic, cultural background, ethnicity or religion. They can occupy any profession or live in any geographic region. Perpetrators can be any gender, however, the vast majority are male (Bagshaw & Chung 2000).

Risk assessment and risk management must be underpinned by an understanding of common perpetrator behaviours.

Tactics

To effectively respond to family and domestic violence, it is important to understand the tactics used by perpetrators including those adopted to hurt and/or frighten victims (coercion) and those designed to isolate and/or regulate them (control). Perpetrators of family and domestic violence are very much in control of these behaviours and are ultimately the only ones that have the capacity to change the situation (No to Violence 2005).

Perpetrators can be good at hiding the violence, publicly presenting as kind, loving, charming and likeable, but behave in cruel, violent, undermining and manipulative ways in private.

Some of the common tactics used by perpetrators to coerce and control victims are shown in the following table.

Table 1: Tactics used by perpetrators to control victims

Tactics	Examples
Intimidation and threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• causing fear through threats;• glares;• destroying property; and• hurting pets.
Undermining confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• damaging self-esteem through humiliation, ridicule, and shaming; and• intentional behaviours that make the victim doubt herself.
Using the children	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• telling the victim she is a bad mother;• using access to harass or assault her;• threatening to take the children away;• coercing the victim to get pregnant;• threatening to harm the children or engaging in risky behaviour with them; and• making the child watch or participate in the abuse.

¹ Adapted from: *Perpetrator accountability in Child Protection Practice – A resource for child protection workers about engaging and responding to men who perpetrate family and domestic violence*, Department for Child Protection, Government of Western Australia, 2013.

Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preventing the victim from working; • cutting her off from her friends or family; and • physically preventing her from leaving the house.
Minimisation and denial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • saying it was 'only' a slap or that the victim is overreacting; • blaming alcohol/ stress/unemployment; • mitigating behaviour by downplaying the damage and injury; • providing inconsistent accounts; and • using loss of control as an excuse.
Recasting the behaviour as non-violent or acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • excusing behaviour as self-defence, rough play or an accident; and • by using language like 'incident' or 'fight' to make the violence appear mutual.
Victim blaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • telling the victim that she asked for it or she provoked him; • avoiding or attempting to divide responsibility for violence; • accusing the victim of a different form of violence for example emotional abuse; and • focusing attention on her 'inability to cope' and 'neglect of her children' when women have reverted to substance abuse or have developed anxiety-based disorders as a result of this violence.
Use of male privilege	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • expecting sex on demand; • demanding that the victim does all the cooking and housework; • controlling all the money; • making all the 'big decisions'; and • excusing excessive jealousy and violence.
Sexual abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sexually assaulting or raping the victim; • keeping the victim pregnant; and • blackmailing the victim with intimate knowledge or photographs.
Post-separation abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • threatening to hurt or kill adult or child victims; • crying and emotional blackmail; • stalking the victim; • threatening to kill himself; and • threatening to make reports to Centrelink, Immigration and Child Protection if the victim ends the relationship or reports the abuse.

Choice and intent

Perpetrators of family and domestic violence are responsible for, and make decisions about their use of violence. This is demonstrated in the fact that perpetrators are rarely indiscriminately violent. Many perpetrators are not violent in their workplaces, social networks or communities but choose when, where and how they use violence.

Further examples include:

- The perpetrator might suddenly change his behaviour from violent to pleasant in the middle of an abusive episode if someone comes to the door or the phone rings, but then resume it again afterwards.
- The perpetrator threatens future violence if the victim does not do what he wants her to.
- The perpetrator makes purposeful decisions about the type, amount, and where to inflict the abuse, for example, only injuring the victim in areas of her body that can be covered by clothing.
- The perpetrator is selective about when and where he will be abusive. For example, a perpetrator will choose whether to wait and attack the victim privately at home, or to humiliate her in front of friends or family.

Understanding and identifying that perpetrators use deliberate and planned violence is paramount when attempting to engage them and hold them accountable.

Perpetrators as fathers

Parenting by men who perpetrate family and domestic violence is associated with particular characteristics. They are likely to use controlling behaviours and physical discipline, to display more anger with their children, to have unrealistic expectations and poor developmental understandings of appropriate child behaviour at different ages and stages. Many of these parenting characteristics are underpinned by a sense of entitlement.

The role of father can be central to these men's identity and a significant motivator for change, however, the identity of fatherhood among men who perpetrate violence should not be idealised. Entitlement thinking prevails in their attitudes and they often see their child as their investment or possession, or as someone who should love them unconditionally.

It is uncommon for men who use violence to recognise that their violence toward their (ex) partner is also abuse of their child; this in turn prevents them from seeing or understanding its impact on the child. While a perpetrator of violence might express love for his child, it is important not to mistake this for empathy for his child's needs and experiences.

Just as these men prioritise their own needs when relating to their (ex) partners, they have similar ways of relating to their children. They can feel justified in neglecting basic care and using violence against their children when they fail to comply with their expectations.

Disregard for children's needs often continues after separation, when fathers who have perpetrated violence often privilege their 'right' for contact over the traumatic harm that this might cause the child. In this way, as in many others, these fathers put their own needs and wants ahead of those of the child.

A note about perpetrator accountability

Engagement with perpetrators should include reinforcing that he is solely responsible for his choice to use violence, informing him about the consequences and impacts of his actions, challenging him to accept responsibility, and assisting him to seek help to change his behaviour.

Working in an integrated way with other services to hold the perpetrator accountable can assist with supplementing risk assessment and obtaining information relevant to risk management and victim safety.

The Department for Child Protection and Family Support resource, *Perpetrator Accountability in Child Protection Practice – A resource for child protection workers about engaging and responding to men who perpetrate family and domestic violence* provides a range of information and practice tips to guide working with men perpetrating family and domestic violence.

References

Bagshaw D & Chung D 2000, *Women, Men and Domestic Violence*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

No to Violence 2005, *Men's Behaviour Change group work: A Manual for quality practice*, No to Violence, Melbourne.

Department for Child Protection 2013, *Perpetrator accountability in Child Protection Practice – A resource for child protection workers about engaging and responding to men who perpetrate family and domestic violence*, Government of Western Australia, Perth.