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**Men’s role in ending violence against women**

Men play an important role in preventing violence against women. Even though violence is perpetrated by a minority of men, many condone it by excusing it, not taking it seriously, or by failing to speak out against it. We excuse it because the alternative – that hundreds of thousands of Australian men have *chosen* to inflict cruelty on their partners – is almost inconceivable.

Most men don’t practise violence against women and the use of violence is a choice. Perpetrators of violence can control their behaviour with friends and colleagues and men are not intrinsically violent. Men’s behaviour change programs don’t treat perpetrators for anger problems, because anger management doesn’t work. Everyone feels anger at times but most people choose not to use violence. The violence isn’t an overreaction, it’s a tool – one of many that abusers can use to exert control over their partners or ex-partners. Drugs and alcohol can aggravate the violence, but they don’t cause it.

Many men openly say that they denounce violence but they are not actively engaged in preventing violence because they don’t know what to do. We must raise the bar for what it means to be a ‘decent bloke’, a ‘nice guy’. To stop violence against women, well-meaning men must do more than merely avoid perpetrating forms of physical or sexual violence themselves. Men must strive for equitable and respectful relationships and challenge the violence of other men. They must work to undermine the social and cultural supports for violence against women evident in communities throughout Australia – the sexist and violence-supportive norms, the callous behaviours, and the gender inequalities which feed violence against women.

There is a lot men can do as fathers too. A good father is without doubt a non-violent father, but when it comes to prevention, fathers have the opportunity to play an additional key role by addressing the underlying factors that contribute to violence against women. Fathers are ideally positioned, through their relationships with the women and children in their lives, to make a real and significant impact on the range of complex, inter-connected factors which shape the attitudes and behaviours that cause violence against women. Through the very act of fathering, men are engaging with key issues – masculinity and gender equality – that are crucial to understanding and preventing violence against women. Fathers can challenge traditional gender stereotypes with their children and model healthy, respectful relationships.

The recent Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV) heard from men’s behaviour change therapists suggesting that focusing on men’s roles as fathers can be a motivating factor in changing their violent behaviour. Without annulling the impacts of violence on women as partners, increasing men’s awareness about the impacts of violence and abuse on children can be a key driver to them seeking help.

The impacts of domestic violence on children are devastating. The ABS has found that of women who had experienced partner violence, 59% reported that the violence had been witnessed by children. Even if children don’t witness the violence the impacts of hearing it can induce trauma. Pregnancy is also a time of increased risk of family violence and that there is widespread evidence that this can have an impact on the developing foetus.

Children can be adversely affected by family violence in many ways including suffering physical harm, impaired brain development and cognitive functioning, mental health effects including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and mood problems. Learning difficulties, trauma symptoms and behavioural problems can also result from being exposed to family violence. Additionally, their social skills may be affected and they might have difficulty regulating their emotions, trusting others and forming relationships.

Our attitudes to parenthood may have changed but the actions of parents, and of fathers in particular, remain stereotypically gendered. Despite widespread support among both men and women for the idea that housework and parenting should be shared, there is a marked difference between attitudes and actual behaviours. Contemporary fathers experience the tension between the competing expectations of being a good ‘provider’ on the one hand, yet ‘being there’ for their children on the other, although when these two demands are at odds, more often than not. it is the traditional ‘providing’ aspect of fathering that wins out.

Despite the large scale social and economic changes that have occurred over the past few decades, fatherhood has been remarkably resistant to meaningful change with wide ranging impacts that are both serious and long lasting. The Melbourne Research Alliance to end violence against women and their children has found that engaging men as fathers through parenting programs is showing potential in preventing child maltreatment. We need to promote father-inclusive early years’ services that engage men as carers as well as equal and respectful partners at home.

We will only make progress in preventing violence against women if we can change the attitudes, identities, and relations among some men which sustain violence. We need to replace these with norms of consent, sexual respect and gender equality, and we must foster just and respectful gender relations in relationships, families, and communities. While some men are part of the problem, all men are part of the solution.

*If you’re a woman and need help or advice, contact 1800RESPECT on* ***1800 737 732.***

***Men seeking support or advice can contact the Men’s Referral Service on*** 1300 766 491