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Family Violence, Fathers, and Restoring Personhood*

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Abstract

Restorative justice holds those who abuse as morally responsible and, thus, capable of acknowledging wrongdoing, changing how they relate to others, and rebuilding their sense of personhood. Applying restorative practices in situations of family violence, however, may endanger the participants unless they are prepared for the deliberations and sufficient safeguards are in place. A starting place for engaging some men who abuse in restorative processes is through their role as fathers. Strong Fathers was a group program for men who had committed domestic violence and were referred by child welfare. The men who persevered with the program were pulled by their desire to be close to their children and pushed by their sense of what it means to be a man and a father. The often painful process restored rather than punished the participants, and the results point to how to interface treatment programs and restorative practices.

Keywords: family violence, fatherhood, retention, restorative justice, batterer intervention

Family Violence, Fathers, and Restoring Personhood

1.0 Introduction

Restorative justice, as South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu (2009) explains, seeks ‘to do justice to the suffering without perpetuating the hatred aroused’ and focuses on ‘restoring the personhood that is damaged or lost.’ In situations of family violence, this restorative process requires identifying the suffering that men cause, but simply condemning the men only perpetuates hatred and fails to rebuild their sense of personhood and that of their children or partners to whom they are attached. Reconstructing the personhood of the fathers is so very crucial if families are to heal from trauma, reforge their bonds, and forestall the intergenerational transmission of violence.

Commonly, restorative practices such as conferencing and circles are conceived as dialogue that includes offenders, survivors, and their informal and formal networks. Such inclusive approaches can reduce the anxiety of victims and increase their sense of being fairly treated (Strang, 2012), affirm the capacity of offenders to make amends, and benefit families by widening their circles of supports and connecting them to needed services. Adopting restorative practices to resolve family violence, however, is particularly challenging because those who are violated and those who violate remain connected over the long term (Ptacek, 2010). Even when partners separate, their children keep them linked. Restorative forums may be misused to insist that abused mothers forgive and reconcile with their abusers, thus, reinforcing coercive control and further isolating and intimidating survivors. Attention needs to be paid to the type and context of the gendered violence with primacy given to the wishes and safety of survivors (Daly, 2012). The forums should not proceed unless necessary safety measures are set in place before, during, and after the deliberations (Pennell, 2006).

The restorative process, though, can take multiple forms and what is crucial, as articulated by Archbishop Tutu, is that the process transforms ‘the personhood that is damaged or lost.’ In addressing family violence, the restorative process can start with groups that engage the men who abuse in reassessing their actions and changing their ways of relating. Groups known as batterer intervention programs have precisely these aims. Such groups can serve as

restorative pathways that acknowledge the wrongdoing, offer tools for setting matters right, and prepare the men to participate safely and effectively in restorative forums.

Batterer intervention programs, however, have reported mixed results in stopping further abuse (Feder, Wilson, & Austin, 2008), with findings reflecting difficulties in program administration and evaluation (Gondolf, 2010). Measuring effectiveness is hamstrung by high attrition rates, averaging half of the enrolled men (Bent-Goodley, Rice, Williams, & Pope, 2011). Nevertheless, if the men finish the batterer intervention program, they are significantly less likely to commit further partner violence, and this effect increases over time (Gondolf, 2002).

The high attrition rates of batterer intervention programs point to the necessity of figuring out ways to retain the participants. A promising route is engaging men who batter through their role as fathers (Edleson & Williams, 2007). The majority of men in batterer intervention programs have some form of fathering relationship to children (Salisbury, Henning, & Holdford, 2009). As fathers, men may be able to acknowledge the impact on their children of being exposed to domestic violence and then may become more open to learning new ways of relating to the mothers of their children (Mederos, 2004).

This article examines the process of men becoming responsible fathers and partners in a program called *Strong Fathers*. Eligible men had committed domestic violence, and their families were in receipt of child welfare services. The Strong Fathers program was developed, and continues to be tested, in North Carolina, a state in the southeastern United States. Child welfare in North Carolina had adopted a model of involving families in decision making called child and family team meetings, and if family violence had occurred, workers applied safety protocols such as staggering the participation of survivors and perpetrators (Pennell & Kim, 2010; Pennell & Koss, 2011). As the case elsewhere (Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012), child welfare in general struggled to engage fathers, especially those with a history of domestic violence, and this led to the state funding the Strong Fathers program and its evaluation. The preliminary outcome findings do not indicate that children and their mothers were endangered by the men's participation in the program (Pennell, 2012b).

The authors begin by identifying the prevalence and consequences of family violence and the importance of supporting men in becoming responsible fathers. They then review factors leading to attrition from batterer intervention programs. Grounding the interpretation on the words of the Strong Fathers participants, the authors identify the stages of the men's decision to stay with the group. They place these decisions within the context of the men's backgrounds, self-assessments of their parenting, and responses to the often sensitive subject matter covered in the curriculum. The conclusions identify the contributions that responsible fathering programs can make in restoring the sense of personhood of men who have abused and engaging them in rebuilding relationships with their children and the mothers of their children. The conclusions also reflect on how treatment programs such as Strong Fathers and restorative justice interventions can interface and be mutually supportive.

2.0 Family Violence and Responsible Fatherhood

Family violence encompasses abuse against partners, children, and older family members. Family violence is the systematic violation of trust by family members against other family members, undermining their safety, health, and dignity. International research shows that male violence against female partners is widespread, considerable variation by setting indicates that women abuse is not inevitable (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2005), but the consequences are severe. Violence against women along with psychological aggression results in fear, concerns for safety, symptoms of post-traumatic-stress disorder, injuries, and absences from work or school (Black et al., 2011). The emotional and physical effects of intimate partner violence make it more difficult for mothers to protect and nurture their children.

In various cultural settings, children exposed to domestic violence are at heightened risk of maltreatment (Chan, 2011) as well as fatality (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002; US DHHS, 2012). Men seeking to control their current or former intimate partners often expose children to acts of violence against their mothers, sabotage the mother-child relationship, endanger the safety of their children, or separate children from their mothers by abduction or court action, especially if women try to leave or leave their abusers (Bancroft, Silverman, & Ritchie, 2012). The consequences of the co-occurrence of women abuse and child maltreatment

include children internalizing behaviours such as depression and externalizing behaviours such as aggression (Herrenkohl, Sousa, Tajima, Herrenkohl, & Moylan, 2008). Exposure of boys to violence against their mothers increases the probability that they will perpetuate partner abuse as adults (Murrell, Christoff, & Henning, 2007). These life trajectories, however, can be redirected through advancing responsible fathering.

Children benefit emotionally, cognitively, socially, academically, and economically from having caring, involved fathers (Lamb, 2010). Besides directly promoting healthy child development, supportive fathers enhance the capacity of mothers to parent (Lee, Bellamy, & Guterman, 2009). Good fathering helps men grow by seeing themselves as ‘persons in relation’ to other persons (Macmurray, 1961) and by offering a sense of ‘generativity’ that they matter to their families and to future generations (Erikson, 1959/1980, p. 103; Pleck, 2010).

What it means to be a responsible father, though, has shifted over the years and varies by cultural groups. Among Anglo Americans, norms about the primary role of fathers have transitioned from moral authority during colonization to breadwinner at the time of industrialization to masculine sex role model with the economic downturn of the Great Depression making stable provider out of the reach of many men (Lamb, 2010). Today, men from diverse cultural backgrounds are expected to fulfil these historic functions as well as that of nurturer involved in their children’s lives.

3.0 Program Attrition and Retention

Engaging fathers who have abused their partners is crucial given that the most consistent predictor of men not reoffending is their completing a batterer intervention program. In part, this result is a function of the men’s individual profiles and situations that tie them into societal norms. A meta-analysis reported that program completers compared to program non-completers were significantly more likely to have the following characteristics: employed, older, higher income, married, Euro American, more education, court mandated into the program, first-time domestic violence offense, no prior criminal history, not using drugs, and not using alcohol (Jewell & Wormith, 2010). The inverse of these program-completion variables reflects lifestyle

instability and predicts recidivism for domestic violence and offending in general. Likely because of limited available studies, the findings are mixed as to the impact on attrition of the men's childhood exposure to domestic violence and their maltreatment as a child (Jewell & Wormith).

Individual characteristics, however, did not alone explain retention. System coordination and programmatic features also affected attendance. Batterer intervention programs began in the late 1970s as voluntary programs with an underlying sociological and feminist theory of battering as a learned behaviour, reinforced by societal norms of male control over female victims (Adams, 2009). By the 1980s, programs began to be certified by state agencies and became largely court-mandated services, incorporating educational and treatment approaches into their anti-violence models. Evaluations identified factors leading to attrition among an involuntary clientele prone to dropping out before entering the program or early in the group.

Programmatic factors included that African American men in groups with a preponderance of Euro American men had higher non-completion rates (Gondolf, 2008), older men were less likely to complete programs that were longer in length, and less educated men were more likely to drop out of feminist psychoeducational programs focusing on male power and control than cognitive behavioural programs focusing on learned responses (Jewell & Wormith, 2010). Particularly for low-income men, dropout was related to transportation difficulties and program fees. Men were more likely to stay in the program if they viewed the program as valuable and if they acknowledged their violence at intake (Aldarondo, 2010).

Effective retention strategies incorporated system and program accountability measures for safeguarding families and respecting cultural diversity. These included judicial monitoring of the men and quick sanctioning of non-compliance with court referrals, connecting men to community resources such as for substance use, offering culturally-focused curricula to African American men who identified highly with their racial group (Gondolf, 2008), and adopting a motivational interviewing framework emphasizing the men's responsibility for change rather than for their past offending and encouraging them to set and achieve their own goals (Adams, 2009). Especially for men from racial/ethnic minority populations, attendance was increased by

forming a collaborative relationship and applying motivational techniques, such as personal outreach when men did not arrive at sessions (Taft, Murphy, Elliott, & Morrel, 2001).

Fathering programs for men who abuse were more recently initiated and designed with an understanding of the dynamics of parenting in the context of domestic violence. Some were community programs, others were based in state agencies, and yet others were incorporated into batterer intervention groups (Areán & Davis, 2007). The curriculum for a Canadian community-based program called 'Caring Dads' focused in the beginning sessions on the men's overly controlling and self-centred behaviours and on building trusting relationships between them and their children and intimate partners; only later sessions in the curriculum covered child-management techniques (Scott & Crooks, 2004). This 17-week, manualised group intervention incorporated psycho-educational, cognitive-behavioural, and collaborative case-management strategies. The group facilitators successfully used motivational interviewing methods to obtain a 75% completion rate among men who typically entered the program reluctantly to fulfil requirements of child welfare, probation, or parole (Scott & Crooks, 2007). Programs in the United States used the Caring Dads program (Adams, 2009) or designed their own curriculum. For instance, Fathering After Violence emphasised developing men's empathy toward their children and using culturally appropriate exercises (Areán & Davis, 2007).

In North Carolina, the Strong Fathers program built upon existing fathering programs for men who abuse. Men were usually referred to the community-based program by their child protection workers rather than being ordered by a judge to attend. Given the quasi-voluntary nature of the program, the Strong Fathers program faced issues with attrition and developed a series of strategies to increase completion rates. Accordingly, this article addresses the following research questions: (1) What contexts engaged the men in the program? and (2) How did the men decide to stay with the group? Answers to these questions point to how restorative processes occur in treatment programs and how restorative practices and treatment programs can work together.

4.0 Strong Fathers Program

The goal of the Strong Fathers program was to help men learn how to relate in safe and caring ways with their children, partners, former partners, and other family members. Over the course of the group, men assessed the impact of domestic violence on their children and relearned how to parent their children and how to co-parent with the mothers of their children. Embedded in the curriculum were methods for the men to document their own progress. The focus of the program was on fathers or male caretakers who had committed domestic violence and whose families received child welfare services. Workers referred men whom they thought would benefit from the program. Men were ineligible for the group if they had committed child sexual abuse and/or had a court order prohibiting contact with their children. The referral did not divert the men from court or from child protection services, and instead the program offered a 'voluntary' service to families in need. The men could refuse to attend, but their refusal could have repercussions such as workers not permitting child visitation or workers keeping children in care for their safety.

The program was 20 sessions in length, somewhat shorter than the typical batterer intervention program which averaged 26 weeks but could range from 16 to 52 weeks in the United States (Bent-Goodley et al., 2011). The Strong Fathers curriculum (Ake, Bauman, Briggs, & Staroneck, 2009) was organised to introduce participants to knowledge, attitude, and skill areas in earlier sessions and to return to these topics in subsequent sessions in order to practice, reinforce, and extend competencies. Attention was given throughout to the parenting needs of children of different ages who have experienced trauma. Although some adjustments to the curriculum were made, the sessions generally were organised into the following sequence: introducing the men to the program (session 1); reflecting on relationships with their fathers or other male role models and with their own children (sessions 2-3); reviewing normative child development for different age groups (sessions 4-5), developing parenting skills including using praise, giving good directions, and applying positive attention and active ignoring (sessions 6, 9, 12, 14, & 18); examining the impact of violence on children and parents (sessions 7-8); seeking support from family, friends, and community organizations (session 10); developing collaborative co-parenting with the children's mother (session 11); building trust and talking to children about violence (session 13), serving as a positive role model (session 15), examining power and control in intimate partner relationships (session 16), managing stress (session 17);

planning for the future (session 19); and evaluating progress and graduation (session 20). In the fall of 2012, additional changes were made to the curriculum particularly to give a greater emphasis to domestic violence earlier in the sessions. This article reports on findings before the fall 2012 revisions.

The curriculum for the men's group was developed by the Center for Child and Family Health, a non-profit organisation and university consortium in Durham, North Carolina. The curricular developers provided training to the group facilitators to familiarise them with the activities in each session. The program was evaluated by the Center for Family and Community Engagement at North Carolina State University. Consistent funding for the program and its evaluation was provided by the North Carolina Division of Social Services, which viewed father involvement as integral to protecting children along with careful attention to safety assessment and planning (NC DHHS, 2008).

The first organisation to deliver the Strong Fathers program was Family Services, Inc. (FSI), a non-profit organization based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Although this city was the site of significant desegregation during the 1960s civil rights movement, prejudicial views against African Americans persisted into the 21st century among Euro Americans (Opoku-Dapaah, 2007). FSI had extensive experience with domestic violence interventions for survivors, children, and men who batter; and its intake staff could make informed decisions on whether to admit men to Strong Fathers or redirect them to a batterer intervention program. The first Strong Fathers group was initiated in 2009, and by the fall of 2012, six groups were completed with further groups planned. Every group had two facilitators, one woman and one man, permitting modelling of gender relations; and the pairs of facilitators were either two African Americans or one African American and one Euro American, offering a more inclusive context for African American participants.

To encourage referrals, FSI held meetings with child protection workers and provided them with flyers to distribute to clients. To support attendance, FSI contacted men who missed more than one session, and FSI provided the men with gas money, food at the two-hour meetings which were held in the evening when men were leaving work, and family incentives such as a

pass to the local zoo. In addition, FSI notified the referring workers of the men's attendance so that the workers could reinforce the importance of attending, but to preserve the men's privacy and to encourage group discussion, FSI did not relay to the workers what the men said in the group sessions. The exception, if it had become necessary, was mandatory reporting of child maltreatment. To increase completion rates, FSI worked with men on an individual basis to make up work from missed sessions. For the first three groups, FSI used a closed group format in which participants had set dates for entering and graduating from the program. Then, in response to feedback from child welfare and community groups, FSI adopted an open enrolment approach so that men could start the group at different points. The intent was to alleviate lengthy delays from referral to starting the group that could discourage participation.

Beginning in 2012, a second program site in Durham began delivery of the program. This article only reports findings from the groups facilitated by FSI. The first project site permitted observation over time of programmatic aspects supporting men's decisions to complete the group.

5.0 Methodology

An interpretive approach was used to address the two research questions concerning what contexts engaged men in the program and how the men decided to stay with the group. The study considered how the men made sense of their participation in Strong Fathers within the context of the men's backgrounds and situations and the program's curriculum. The quantitative data were analysed to examine the men's characteristics that according to the literature could affect retention. Survival plots mapped at which points in the group's curriculum some members dropped out of the group. Turning to how the members chose to continue with the group, the men's written materials were used to conceptualise the stages of the men's decisions to complete the group and to identify the contexts supporting their choices. Discernment of these stages was grounded on quotations from the men. Two researchers coded the text and conferred about their developing interpretations. The exchanges among the research team and with the program developers and implementers enriched the interpretation.

Textual Source. The primary source of text was the men's written reflections concerning their progress, referred to as the Weekly Parenting Logs (adapted with permission from the Caring Dads workbook). After each group session, the men were asked to relate the topics covered to their home life or to practice parenting skills with their children. At the next session, the men recorded and assessed their accomplishment of this work. The group facilitators handed out the one-page Weekly Parenting Log at the beginning of sessions 2 through 20. In their logs, men reflected on the prior week and completed the statements: 'This week, the one thing I felt best about as a father was' and 'This week, my biggest struggle as a father was.' The logs asked additional items depending upon the subject matter covered in the prior session. For instance, the sixth session had a learning module on praise, and at the seventh session, the men were asked to identify 'the three ways that I praised my child or children this week.' At the bottom of every log, the men were asked to give a quantitative assessment of their parenting. The instructions read, 'Circle the number on the scale to rate how you felt about your parenting this past week,' and then below was a line separated by five evenly spaced points with 1 *I did not feel good at all about my parenting decisions* and 5 *I felt great about my parenting decisions*.

Except on two occasions, all participants attending a session completed a log. The men varied greatly in their writing skills, and at times the group facilitators assisted the men in recording their thoughts. The self-rating scale did not pose the same challenges to the men with limited writing skills. Demonstrating the men's diligence in completing the logs, a total of 441 logs were collected with a total word count of 15,664. On the logs the men recorded at least one comment, and they completed the self-rating (only omitted on eight logs).

This study was part of a larger program evaluation that included additional data sources and methods of data collection (Pennell, 2012b). It should be noted that the checklist and notes completed by the group facilitators at the end of each session indicated high fidelity to delivering the curricular modules for each session. Atlas.ti, version 6.2, was used with text, and SPSS, version 19, was used with quantitative data. Protocols were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research at North Carolina State University.

6.0 Contexts of Participation

The study examined the men's demographic characteristics and situational factors that according to the previously reviewed research on batterer intervention groups were likely to influence program completion rates. An analysis of the men's continuation in the group was juxtaposed against the sessions and the men's self-ratings on their logs. Below quotations are italicised and when necessary to clarify meaning, words or letters at times are placed in brackets. For some men struggling to express their thoughts in writing, the group facilitators assisted by inserting comments.

Completion Rates. The six groups held by Family Services, Inc. had a total of 43 participants who were screened into the program during intake interviews. One man attended two groups and, thus, is counted twice. He did not complete the program on either occasion. Program completion was defined as attending or doing make-up work for at least 65% of the sessions (13 of the 20 sessions). Of the pool of enrolled participants, 6 (14%) never attended a session (called the 'non-completers'), 13 (30%) attended less than 65% of the sessions (called the 'partial completers'), and 24 (56%) attended at least 65% of the sessions (called the 'completers'). Thus, the overall completion rate was similar to those generally reported for batterer intervention programs. Nevertheless, the percentages of men completing the groups increased over time. Changing to an open format after the third group appears to have increased completion rates. For the three closed groups, 43% completed the program in contrast to the three open groups that had 68% completing.

Demographic Characteristics. Table 1 below displays the demographic characteristics that the three groups of men reported on their intake assessment form. The three groups were relatively similar in terms of their number of children, averaging around two. As expected from prior research (Jewell & Wormith, 2010), the completers ($M=36$ years) were somewhat older than the non-completers ($M=31$) and the partial completers ($M=33$). In line with the literature, the completers were more likely to be employed (67%) than those who did not complete the group (47%). Contrary to the literature, the completers overall were not better educated than those not completing the group: 21% of the completers had some college compared to 32% of

those who did not complete the program. Among the 40 men for whom race/ethnicity was known, Euro Americans had only somewhat higher completion rates at 65% than the 52% for those who were not Euro American. The retention of non-Euro Americans may have been a function of their being in a definite minority in only one of the six groups.

[Place Table 1 approximately here.]

Economic Factors. For the Strong Fathers participants, completion rates cannot be explained simply on the basis of the men's economic situations which remained relatively constant. On their weekly logs, the men repeatedly recorded barriers to their fulfilling the role of family provider, and for the most part, these difficulties did not lessen over the course of the group. A simple count revealed that 'bill,' 'bills,' or 'money' were cited a total of 49 times. In response to his greatest challenge in the past week, one father wrote in session 18, 'Always my bills.' Fathers frequently worried about being unemployed or underemployed, losing their housing or electricity, or being turned down for job applications. Their financial difficulties made them feel inadequate as a father. The men grieved that they lacked the funds to fulfil their children's wishes for their birthdays or to pay for their participation in trips or programs.

Fathers who experienced economic hardships were more likely to make goals to increase their capacity to provide for their families. For example, when asked about the three things he had accomplished that week to try to attain his program goals, a father experiencing economic instability wrote *continue going to classes, maintain housing, look 4 job*. Fathers who did not face these economic challenges made goals directly related to nurturing their children's development. . When asked the same question, another father replied, *1. Listened 2. was there for them 3. did not lose my temper*.

Attrition. Figure 1 below displays when the thirteen partial completers dropped out of the group (the non-completers are not shown because they never attended the group). Dropping out is defined as having missed two consecutive sessions and not returning afterwards at all or returning only on a sporadic basis. The downward lines show the number of men exiting the group at the different sessions. The session number is provided in a circle to differentiate it from

the number of men dropping out which is provided lower in the figure. For example, the first downward line indicates that one man is counted as leaving at session 4 because he missed the third and fourth sessions and then not returning to complete the group. As seen in the figure, other men stopped attending beginning at session 5 and through to session 15. After session 15, no one is counted as dropping out before graduation in session 20. It is possible that the partial completers found the group to be overly lengthy. It is likely, though, that the men were also affected by the topics discussed in the sessions and by their ratings of their own parenting.

[Place Figure 1 approximately here.]

Session Topics. The one man who dropped out after session 2 may have found the group just too painful. On his parenting log, a father acknowledged that he needed to control his anger in order to see his children and wrote in response to the ‘thing that will be hardest about this program for me is:’ *admitting how wrong I was and have been.* Another four men exited the group after sessions 4 or 5 which concerned child development. Two men left after session 8 devoted to the impact of violence on children and developing greater empathy toward their children. Another two men left after session 9 possibly because of the attention given to active ignoring to reduce children’s inappropriate behavior. This skill, the group facilitators reported, was particularly hard for the men to accept and possibly culturally incompatible. Of the remaining four partial completers, they dropped out respectively after one of the sessions 11-14. These sessions focused on co-parenting, parenting skills, and building trust and talking with children about violence. In other words, the men left the group after sessions that in all likelihood evoked strong feelings about their relationships with their children.

Overall Self-Ratings. Figure 1 also relates the men’s attendance to their self-ratings of their parenting over the past week. The darker jagged, horizontal line provides the average parental rating for all participants at each session, and the lighter line provides the same for just the men completing the program. As can be seen, the average ratings by the completers remained relatively close to those by all the men at each session. A further analysis showed that the self-ratings by the partial completers had limited impact on the overall average self-rating. Thus, their dropping out does not explain the overall average ratings.

Another explanation is the sessions' topics. On the five-point scale, the men's average rating in session two when they completed their first log was above 3.5, dipped after sessions 2 and 3 when they examined the impact of the parenting they received as children, and then rose again after session 4 focused on early child development. Subsequent to session 5, the overall ratings gradually declined to a low of approximately 3.25 in sessions eleven and twelve. During this period the men were introduced to parenting skills, considered the impact of violence on their children, strategised on asking for help, and reflected on their relationship with their children's mother. Following session 12, the self-ratings generally rose as the men continued to hone their new parenting skills, developed different ways of relating to their children and the children's mothers, adopted stress management techniques, and planned for the future after the end of the group.

The men's age and employment and the program's topics related to whether the men continued with Strong Fathers. The men, however, were not just influenced but also made choices about their participation. A close reading of the men's logs offers insights into the stages through which the men progressed in their decisions to persevere with the program.

7.0 Decisions of Participation

In deciding to stay with Strong Fathers, the men who completed the program were both drawn by their yearning for their children and pushed by their sense of what it means to be a man and a father. Among the 13 partial completers, 3 (23%) men relayed in their logs concerns about not being with their children. In contrast, among the 24 completers, 14 (58%) recorded this same concern. Spending time with their children was especially a challenge to the men living in separate residences. The men expressed the desire to spend more time with their children but were thwarted by their work schedules, transportation problems, child welfare interventions, or criminal histories. A man who partially completed the program recorded with relief during the fifth session, *[I] was telling all my kids that I might [be] in jail for Christmas, but as you see I'm here [at the group]*. A man who completed the group wrote in his log during session 16, *The lack of time I have with my son, doesn't seem natural to me, not to be in the same household*. Another

man completing the program repeatedly referred to his sorrow at *not being around for my daughter that is in foster care right now*. Despite setbacks, the men strove to complete the group.

The men who completed the group evinced four stages in their struggles to stay the course. As recorded in their logs, they moved through these stages at different rates. Overall, though, the men entered the first stage in sessions 1-4 as they acknowledged their lack of patience, moved into the second stage in sessions 4-8 as they forced themselves to change, transitioned into the third stage in sessions 9-14 as they exerted greater self-control especially toward their children, and integrated all this learning in sessions 15-20 as they demonstrated how to be a whole person with their children and partners. The quotations below are from men who graduated from Strong Fathers and are in response to specific questions on the parenting logs.

7.1 Stage 1: *Be patient Be patient Be patient*

A father in the fourth session responded to the question about the three things he needed to try in order to realise his program goals. Rather than enumerating separate steps, he simply wrote, *Be patient Be patient Be patient*. Over the first set of sessions he recorded his struggle to reframe Strong Fathers as a *blessing* as opposed to a burden and to compel himself to achieve seemingly incompatible goals. On the one hand, he averred that no matter the provocation he would be *silent, letting my wife . . . do most of the talking*, and, on the other hand, he exclaimed that he must remain *available to my wife and kids no matter what!* His willingness to try was reinforced by the validation he felt from his young son's reporting that in school he told his teacher that when he grew up, he wanted to *be a father like his daddy*.

Other men also identified the necessity of being willing to learn from Strong Fathers and to exert greater patience and self-control. A young father wrote that the hardest thing about the program will be *coming to class with an open-mind and heart to accept improvement*. He admitted that his biggest struggles was *not becoming irritable quickly* at his small daughter who was a *daddy's girl and always want[ing] to be in my personal space*. At the same time, he was proud of himself for taking his daughter to the park and playing blocks with her.

The men recognised the impact on their parenting of their childhood experiences. One father iterated that the hardest thing about this program for him was *thinking about my past, my childhood. Facing what I do now*. A second father wrote that he did not want to pass on to his children *my lack of patience and tolerance*, and he was proud that *I helped my son to understand that spitting on people is disrespectful*. A third father emphasised that he did not want to pass on his own learning as a child of *being short tempered or critical*. On the log, the facilitator further noted that the father realised that his tension rose when he bottled up his emotions. Yet a fourth father wanted to break the intergenerational transmission of *temper* and *drink at a young age*.

7.2 Stage 2: *What don't kill me make me stronger*

The participants knew they needed to change but were unsure whether they would survive the struggle to change. In a telling self-reflection in his session 8 log, one African American father wrote, *what don't kill me make me stronger*. This father recorded over the sessions about his having to *grow up too fast* and his now needing to learn what it means to be a child. He recognised the necessity of persistence in *trying to be a good person and father*, took pride in becoming *more patient* and *taking care of two kids, while their mother got better* [from a physical illness], and tested out new parenting skills such as praising his children. At the same time, he acknowledged that his biggest struggle as a father was *telling myself I can do this and will be o.k.* Undergirding his perseverance was his profound belief in God: *Knowing that God is blessing me to continue his will to get my son back. When things get tough he keeps me strong*. His struggle as a father resonates with those of African Americans in a southern state with a long history of slavery and segregation. His admonition *what don't kill me make me stronger* is one repeated in many North Carolinian households, African American and Euro American, who have struggled to survive poverty and oppression. And this self-admonition parallels the famous words of the escaped slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1857: 22), 'If there is no struggle there is no progress.'

Not succumbing was the life script of a second African American father who wanted to pass on to his children his early learning to be *accountable and responsible*. He recognised that his biggest struggle as a father was *Becoming mentally tough. Not letting negativity be consume*

my mind. Grine and beart [grin and bear it] when people . . . trying to get me to react. The struggle to be strong was evident in a third African American father's refusal to accept that he was struggling: I will never struggle as a not father, because if I say it hard it will be hard. Congruent with this self-message, he responded to the question about his biggest struggle as a father, I have no struggle as a father.

Euro American fathers had their struggles too, and these seemed to be more specifically targeted, especially on the child welfare system, something on which the African American men largely remained silent. For instance, one Euro American father wrote that his biggest struggle was *continuing to struggle with the court system in the battle to get my daughter out of foster care*. Likewise another Euro American father identified *DSS [Department of Social Services]* as keeping him from seeing his daughter. Yet another Euro American father struggled with *Dealing with DSS and them trying to return my oldest daughter to [her biological] real dad who hasnt seen or spoken to her in 4 years*. In quite explicit terms, still another Euro American father identified his biggest struggle as *Meeting with dss that was bullshit*.

Whatever their racial identity, the men confronted with unease the potential impact of domestic violence on their children. They identified domestic violence as harming their children by creating *fear, pain, confusion, and misunderstanding*. As a result, according to the men, their children were *unsure of how I might react and don't know which way to turn or who to turn to*. They worried about the intergenerational transmission of violence: *They see it happ[en] and they think it all right, teaches them how to be violence, could grow up . . . an[d] be involve[d] in the same situation, and could make her find herself with a man like I was!*

Pushing themselves to change began to pay dividends to the men in their growing closeness to their children. A father who became more self-controlled with his daughter observed, *Our bond is getting tighter*, and expressed deep satisfaction in finding that *My daughter listens to me better, without me having to yell or threat her*. This father, though, continued to struggle with *talking to my daughter's mother only about our daughter*. As they began to practice parenting skills that they had not experienced as children, they were amazed by

the results. *Praise!*, a father exclaimed, *I took last weeks session to heart. I praised my little girl for every little thing. I also praised just for being good! I've never seen a kid smile so much!*

7.3 Stage 3: *I stayed quiet*

A stepfather reported week after week about failing to communicate with his stepson. Finally, in the tenth session log, he congratulated himself on his use of active ignoring, a parenting skill that many of the men resisted learning. Sitting with his stepson during a career interview, the father recorded, *I stayed quiet*, rather than correcting his son for needing to *more than slow down, listen, follow directions*. On this same log, though, the stepfather recognised that he was *still struggling with some impulses*. In earlier sessions, he had acknowledged the impact of his own child experiences and did not want to pass on to his children *Temper Alcohol Abuse*. By the eleventh session, he documented how he was learning to reach out for help: *Talked with my sister about struggles to keep a positive outlook 2. Asked my wife no to argue over our difference of opinions 3. during a family gathering we discussed our situation.*

During this stage, other men also grew more confident in their capacity to exercise control over their own actions. One father identified that he was building trust with his children by *delivering on promises* and visiting or telephoning them on a regular basis. The relationship with their mother was fraught with tension, but following session 11 that focused on seeking support, he praised himself that he *Remained calm, remained calm* in working with her on co-parenting their children. At this time, he also reached out for support as did many of the other men. In their logs, the men recorded that they sought help from family, friends, and professionals. Enumerating his supports, one father reported, *Ask my mom to be in court with me when I go. Ask my sister if she would help me by taking me to this class. Ask my counselor to help me get in other abulance [substance] abuse classes.*

7.4 Stage 4: *Shown my boys how to be a good person*

In the fifteenth session, the men were asked to identify three things they did to be a role model to their children in the past week. One father responded, *shown my boys how to be a good*

person 2. to woke [work] together 3. show importance of respect of a woman. On the log, the facilitator wrote a clarifying note that the father *realizes he has been selfish and he wants to change*. Over the course of the program, this father identified that he did not wish to pass on to his sons his childhood experience of *domestic violence in my house and drugs*. Early in the program, he felt best about himself as a father *that I remove myself from a fight on Friday*. But he also knew that his biggest struggle as a father was to know *that I can change*. Nevertheless, he compelled himself to *spend more time with my boys at home and school work*, praised his sons for helping *their mom clean up the house*, and began *working around the house with my wife*. As he changed his ways, he also came to recognise that domestic violence harmed his family *because it show them no love*. By the end of group, he *told son they should not fight period, especially [girls, inserted by a group facilitator]*.

Other men by this point had learned how to rebuild their relationships with their children and the mothers of their children and redefined their sense of masculinity. A father wrote with pride about *Spending time with my girls, and to let them know that daddy is around in their life and becoming a real man around little girls*. Another father knew that he had practiced good parenting by *Talking to my child calmly and giving her reason why, building a better relationship with my baby mama, and listening more to my child*. The men also deepened their understanding of domestic violence. For instance one father replied to the question of what he did not realise or accept before about domestic violence: *1. Minimizing 2. Yelling at the kids 3. Arguing with my wife in front of the kids*. To help them sustain their progress, the men consciously sought to manage their stress. For one father, this meant, *To be positive, read my bible, ex[er]cise*.

The men wanted to serve not just a role example to their children but also as a leader based on their positive example and moral authority. In reflecting on how he was a role model, one father wrote, *To be a leader and not a controller. To practice what I preache. To be postive even when face with negtive*. A recurring refrain of a deeply religious father was: *This is every week everyday. I pray to my heavenly savior to make me a/become a better father a better leader in my son life*. Reclaiming his heritage, a father in the very last session concluded that he

wanted to pass on to his children his learning as a child to be *repsectful towards everyone no one is beneath you*.

8.0 Restorative Justice and Personhood

Staying with Strong Fathers was a difficult course as the men fully recognised. The program placed the onus on the men, not their families, to change. The program did not cast the men as irrevocably inhuman and, thus, incapable of change, but instead held the men ‘morally responsible’ to acknowledge the truth, admit their wrongdoing, and rebuild their personhood (Tutu, 2011, p. 43). Participating in Strong Fathers helped to recreate the men’s sense of self as ‘persons in relation’ to other persons (Macmurray, 1961) and their sense of generativity as mattering now and in the future. Making this transition took great determination on the part of the men. The men who completed the Strong Fathers program were pulled by their desire to be with their children and pushed by their demands on themselves to be better fathers and men. Over the program, they struggled through four stages.

The first stage was encapsulated by one father’s message to himself, *Be patient Be patient Be patient*. Their lack of self-control and their tempers, the men acknowledged, estranged them from their children and partners. They entered the second stage, typified by a common expression in African American and Euro America households facing deprivation and discrimination, *What don’t kill me make me stronger*. This meant that they were to struggle onward no matter the cost to themselves. The catalyst to struggle for the African American men was survival without regard to the conditions of their lives while for the Euro American men the spur was their rage against the child welfare system for interfering in the lives of their families. By the third stage, *I stayed quiet*, the men refrained from coercing their children, accepted the necessity of reaching out for support, and reworked their sense of what it meant to be a strong father. In the fourth stage, *Shown my boys how to be a good person*, the men integrated all their learning into a renewed sense of being a whole person. They sought to interact in a non-confrontational manner with their children and the children’s mothers and redefined masculinity as a moral role model and a responsible leader in their families.

The men's determination to change was supported by the Strong Fathers' curriculum which paced the learning so that the men could practice new skills and assess their own progress along with other men facing similar challenges. The racial/ethnic make-up of the groups helped to foster an inclusive context that retained African Americans who were clearly in the minority of participants in only one of the six groups. Their retention was further supported by having at least one African American group facilitator. Co-facilitation by a man and a woman modelled cross-gender interactions. As staff at Family Services, Inc. increased their familiarity with facilitating Strong Fathers, the retention rate rose from 43% in the first three groups to 68% in the second set of three.

Connecting the men who have abused more closely to their children and the children's mothers could have jeopardised the safety of their families. The available findings to date indicate otherwise (Pennell, 2012b), but further study is certainly needed. Potential risks were likely offset by the protective service and legal context. Attending Strong Fathers did not divert the men and their families from the courts or child protection. Child welfare was the source of the referrals to Strong Fathers; social workers screened out men whom they saw as too high a risk; and as the men were aware, this protective agency could be called upon to intervene as necessary. In addition, the Strong Fathers program was based in a community agency, Family Services, Inc., with extensive resources to prevent or stop family violence. Intake workers assessed whether the referred men should enter the Strong Fathers program or be redirected to the agency's batterer intervention program. The Strong Father groups were conducted by facilitators well versed in the dynamics of abuse. The semi-voluntary nature of Strong Fathers also meant that men who really did not want to take part could, and did, dropout.

In examining the benefits of restorative practices, research has documented how participation in itself can be healing for survivors and offenders as well as family and community members. Attention has been paid to how the resulting plans are not only as a means of reparation but also as a means of linking participants to needed services. Quite rightly close monitoring is needed of whether restorative practices are sidetracked from addressing the harm caused by the offense to meeting the rehabilitation needs of offenders (Vanfraechem, Lauwaert,

& Decocq, 2012). The Strong Fathers program offers another angle on the relationship between restorative justice and treatment programs for family violence.

Strong Fathers focused primarily on how the men who had abused could become responsible fathers attending to the needs of their children and other family members rather than emphasizing their own needs. By increasing the men's self-understanding and their capacity to communicate, Strong Fathers may prepare the men for taking part in restorative forums. According to one child protection worker, this is the case. She reported that a father who attended Strong Fathers developed the capacity to participate responsibly in child and family team meetings with his family and other involved services (Pennell, 2012a).

It is likely that the impact of Strong Fathers on the men is enhanced by intersecting with restorative forums that encourage the men's participation in the program and monitor the safety of their families. At the same time, Strong Fathers does not require the participation of survivors who may need for their emotional and physical safety to disconnect from the men. Strong Fathers is a starting place for reinforcing responsible fathering, resolving the harms of family violence and its underlying causes, and restoring a sense of personhood.

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**Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Strong Father Participants
(N=44)***

	Non-Completer n=6	Partial Completer n=13	Completer n=24
Age			
20-29	2	3	6
30-39	1	7	8
40-49	1	2	7
50+	0	0	1
Unknown	2	1	2
Mean Age	31	33	36
Number of Children			
1	3	2	8
2	2	6	8
3	1	3	3
4	0	2	4
Unknown	0	0	1
Mean Number of Children	1.7	2.38	2.1
Race/Ethnicity			
White	0	6	11
Non-White	4	7	12
Unknown	2	0	1
Employment Status			

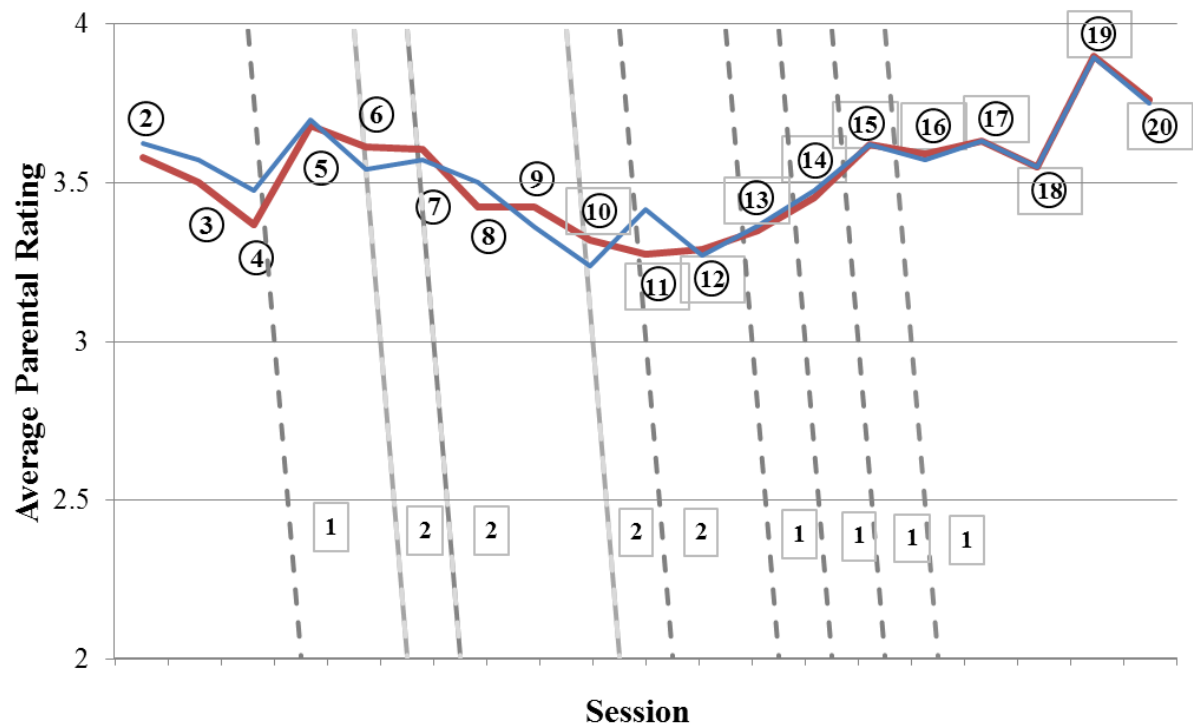
Employed	4	5	16
Unemployed	2	8	7
Unknown	0	0	1

Educational Attainment

Less Than High School Diploma	0	4	6
High School Diploma/GED	4	4	11
1 or More Years of College	1	5	5
Unknown	1	0	2

*Source: Strong Fathers Assessments. The group facilitators provided race/ethnicity data of four of the seven men for whom this information was missing on the assessments.

Figure 1: Average Parental Rating & Survival Plots for Strong Fathers Participants



*Note: The men's dropout lines occur after they missed two consecutive sessions and did not return to complete the group. Overall attendee N = 37, Completer N = 24, Partial Completer N = 13.

— Overall Parental Rating
— Completers