

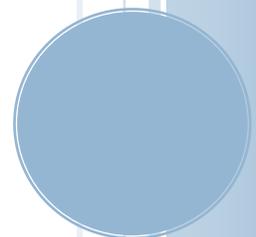


Aisling Discoveries
Child and Family Centre

DADS' CONNECTION PROGRAM

Program Evaluation Results (2007-2013)

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INTRODUCTION

Professionals working in the area of domestic violence acknowledge that although there are a number of programs available to support and treat women and children who are victims of domestic violence, there are few services available to men who are abusers. It is also recognized that many of these men still have an active role in the lives of their children. By failing to offer support and treatment to the perpetrator, we place a greater burden on the mothers and children. In order to break the cycle of violence, men, as well as women and children, need appropriate support, intervention and treatment. *Dads' Connection* is a group intervention program for men who have abused their partners and who also have access to their children. It is a psycho-educational group for fathers with the aim of imparting information on the effects of domestic violence on children. The goals of the program are to enable fathers to:

- Realize the impact of and take responsibility for their actions/behaviours.
- Rebuild trust with their children (primarily) but also with their partners/spouses.
- Break the cycle of violence or abusive behaviour patterns by sharing skills and strategies to deal with communication barriers.

THE PROGRAM

Dads' Connection is a partnership between Child Welfare agencies and Aisling Discoveries Child & Family Centre. It is part of a city-wide Fathering Without Violence initiative targeted at fathers who are involved with Child Welfare due to domestic violence concerns. Aisling Discoveries delivers the program to residents of Toronto (East of Yonge Street).

Aisling Discoveries researched and developed the program's approach, philosophy and content. The resulting program was largely based on the evidence-based program *Caring Dads*, but also incorporated components from the Toronto-area child welfare agencies' *Fathering Without Violence* program. *Dads' Connection* was developed with the understanding that ultimately the child is the client. Content of the sessions include discussions, videos, readings and exercises on themes such as: Examining your own Fathering and Upbringing; Child Centred Fathering; Listening to Children; Power, Control and Partner Abuse; Rebuilding Trust and Healing; The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children; Accountability & Taking Responsibility; and Positive Discipline.

Referrals to the program are made by Child Welfare agencies in Toronto (primarily Children's Aid Society and Catholic Children's Aid Society).

Aisling Discoveries started delivering the *Dads' Connection* program in May of 2007. The sessions are delivered by two co-facilitators, who use a non-judgmental, non-confrontational, welcoming and engaging approach. Participants are offered a meal at each session, as well as a

transportation allowance (TTC bus tickets). Initially, the program lasted 17 weeks, but was reduced to 15 weeks based on feedback from the participants. The program was further shortened in duration to 14 weeks.

EVALUATION

The *Dads' Connection* program was evaluated through the use of participant surveys and/or feedback interviews. The purpose of the evaluation was twofold:

- 1) For the pilot stage (the first two groups): to determine what was working and what could be improved.
- 2) For all groups: to determine whether participants were benefitting from the program.

Surveys

Fathers were given surveys to complete during the last or second-last session. Survey questions asked about the group's characteristics, content, and benefits. Participants rated all questions from 1 ("Not at All") to 5 ("Very Much"), and wrote comments regarding suggestions for improvement and personal benefits. To increase confidentiality, group facilitators left the room to allow fathers to complete the survey and asked participants to place completed surveys into envelopes with the Manager of Research & Evaluation's name on it. Program staff never saw the raw data.

Interviews

For the first two groups, fathers were also given a sheet with their survey that asked whether they'd like to participate in a short telephone interview to discuss their opinions about the *Dads' Connection* group. Those who agreed provided their contact information and were subsequently interviewed over the telephone by the agency's Manager of Research & Evaluation. Interviewees were asked what they liked and did not like about the *Dads' Connection Group*, whether the group helped them to become a better father, and their thoughts on the facilitators. They were also asked if they had suggestions for improving the group or any other thoughts they wanted to share about the group.

RESULTS

Participants

Between May 2007 and July 2013, 12 groups were delivered. Overall, a total of 97 men started the program, and 70 men (72.2%) completed the program. Of the 27 men who did not complete the program across the 12 groups, a majority of them had to leave for "legitimate and valid"

reasons (such as work or injury or moving), rather than program dissatisfaction. Across the 12 groups, 69 participants filled out a survey, which represents a 98.6% response rate. Also, fifteen men were interviewed for this evaluation.

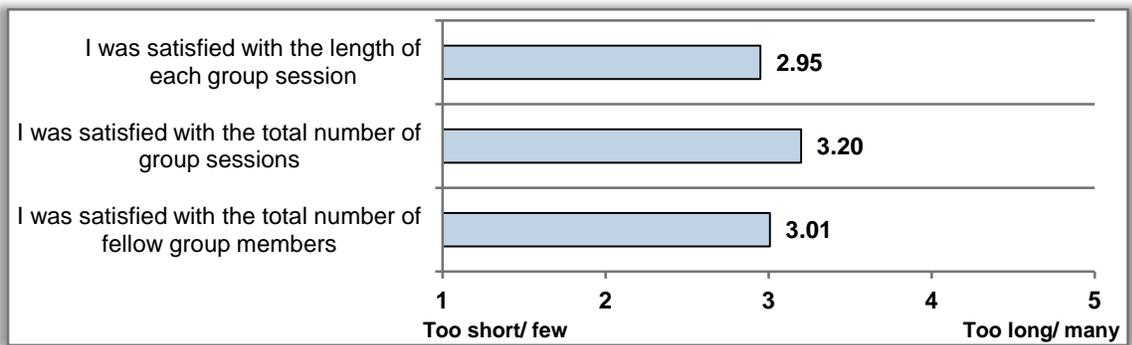
All quotations represent actual statements made by fathers on their surveys or during the interviews.

Group Characteristics

The survey asked participants about their satisfaction regarding group characteristics, including the length of each session, the total number of sessions, and the number of fellow group members. For these three questions, the typical 1 to 5 (smallest to largest) scale was altered so that the middle point was the “most satisfied” point. Thus, a score of 1 indicated that the length of the group was too short, or that the total number of sessions/fellow group members were too few. A score of 5 indicated that the sessions were too long, or that there were too many sessions or group members. And a score of 3 on this scale meant it was “just right.”

Across the 12 groups, the fathers seemed satisfied overall regarding group characteristics. The average responses for the three questions ranged from 2.95 to 3.20, as seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Average of all responses to group characteristic questions



Participants were also asked to write comments regarding how the group characteristics could be improved. Many participants felt the group was great as is. Of fathers who provided suggestions for improvement, over 20% asked for longer sessions to allow participants to discuss the topics in greater detail. This clearly indicates that they were engaged with the content and were not “eager to leave”, despite being “mandated” to attend the group.

Several participants in the first group felt that the number of sessions should be decreased. Based on this feedback, the group length was reduced from 17 weeks down to 14 or 15. Since those modifications, fewer fathers mentioned that they would like the number of sessions to be reduced.

“The length of each session would be more helpful if it’s a bit longer, for discussions.”

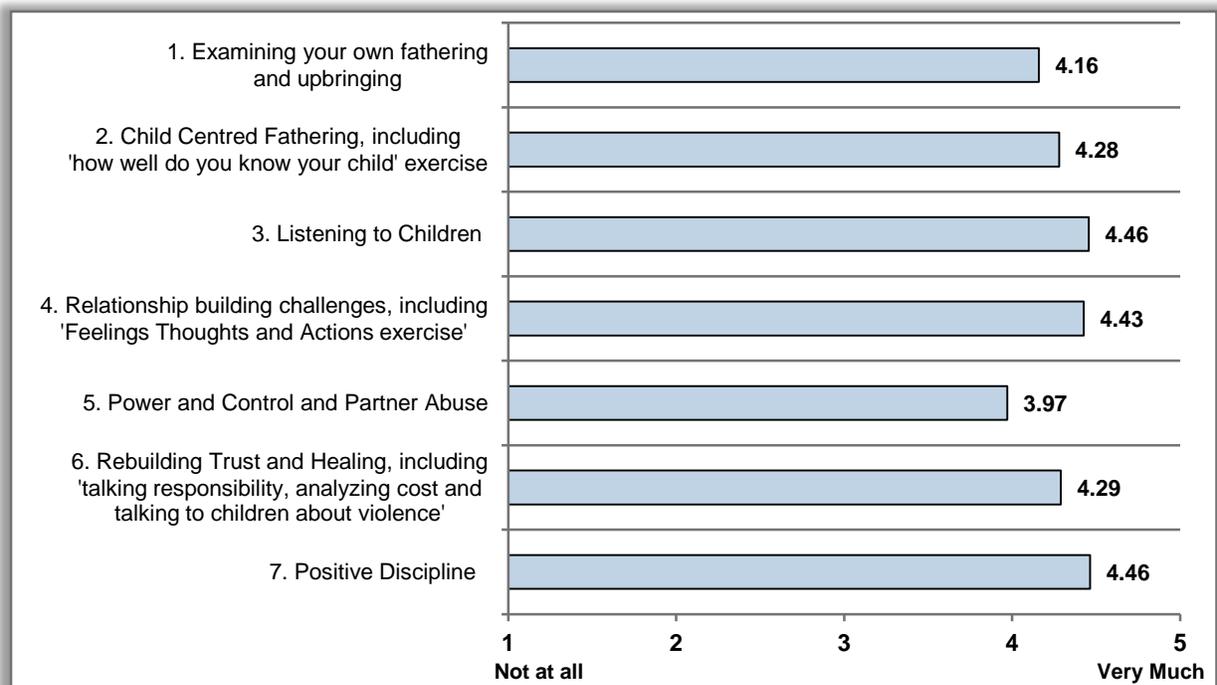
"I thought that the time, number of weeks and number of people were perfect. Everyone got to express their opinion and it wasn't so long that we got bored."

"Extend the time of each session to 120 minutes."

Group Content

Fathers who attended the *Dads' Connection* group were asked to rate whether the topics addressed in the sessions had been useful to them. As seen in Figure 2 below, the average response for each of the seven topic areas ranged from 3.97 to 4.46 out of a possible 5, with higher scores indicating that the topic was "very much" useful to the participants.

Figure 2. Averages for "Please rate the following topics in terms of whether they were useful to you."



Of the seven topics listed in the survey, fathers found "Listening to Children" and "Positive Discipline" to be the most useful topics. Participants thought "Power, Control, and Partner Abuse" was least useful, though it was still rated quite highly.

"I began to understand my child's outward behaviours versus inward thoughts... I shared what I learned often with my spouse and this helped us both understand how to better parent."

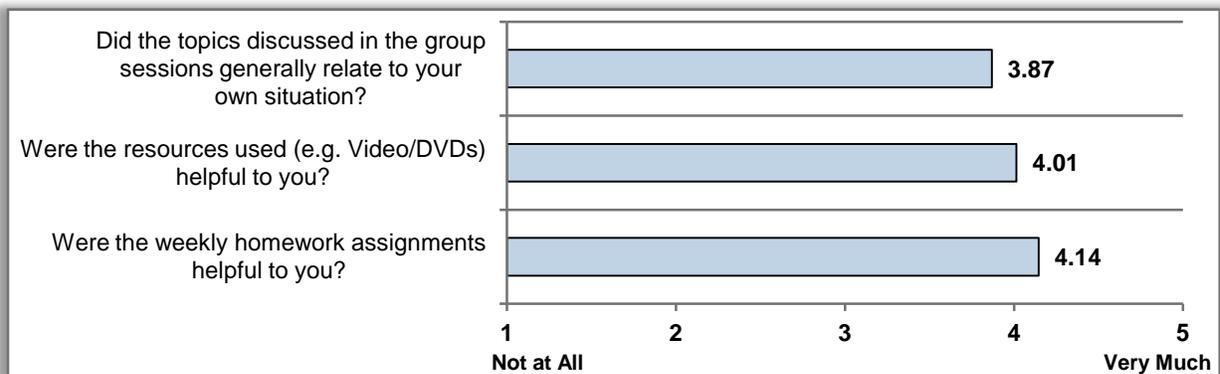
"...there were some very good topics and there was not enough time to take it all in but all and all there was a lot of very important topic that was covered."

“It was good that we touched on all of the above topics. It was an eye opener and made everyone open up and we all can learn from each other experience.”

“I have found that everything we did in the group session was very helpful and practical.”

Participants were also asked for feedback on general content. As can be seen in Figure 3 below, the fathers believed that the topics discussed were relevant to their situation. The average response to that question of the survey was 3.87 out of a possible 5. They also felt that the resources used during sessions (4.01/5) and the weekly homework assignments (4.14/5) were very helpful to them.

Figure 3. Average of all responses to group content questions



“The group was good. I found it very interesting. The resources and what they were teaching were good. I’ve been to other programs, but I found this one more interesting than the other programs I’ve been to.”

“I think the homework was really useful. It kept me thinking. Every week, you have to think at least twice – Once in the group, and once when you do your homework. That really helps. People like me read, but they don’t apply it. So this group helps you remember it.”

“The positive thinking and tools used helps the relationship with my wife and daughter.”

“I liked that it helps you parenting your child. They hand out pamphlets to help understand what they’re teaching. It was really beneficial. I learned a lot from the group about how kids think and operate.”

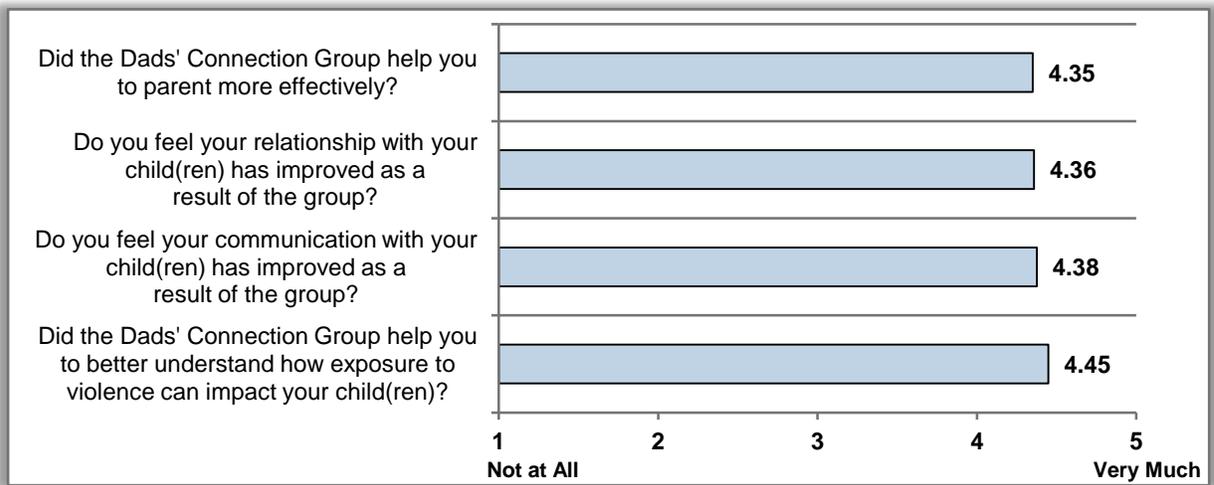
“I thought home work help me a lot to deal with my situation.”

When asked to suggest improvements, many fathers requested more updated videos/resources. Several wanted additional videos and handouts. Some also felt that the homework should be reviewed and discussed more frequently during the sessions.

Personal Benefits

Participants were asked a number of questions about the outcomes of their participation in the *Dads' Connection* group, including whether they were parenting more effectively and if they felt their relationship and communication with their children or children's mother had improved as a result of the program. Overall, participants felt that the group helped them greatly, responding on average from 4.35 to 4.45 (out of 5) on all parenting outcome questions (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Average of all responses to personal benefits questions (parenting)



More specifically, participants of the group felt that *Dads' Connection* helped them to parent more effectively (4.35/5) and that they learned a lot about child development.

“It definitely helped me understand better the different stages that a child goes through and how we needed to change our parenting styles depending on the age group. That was definitely a good topic.”

“I understand more my children’s behaviour and why they behave like that.”

“I put myself in other’s shoes before I do anything. Sometimes when you talk to a kid...you have to go down, actually, because the intellectual level of your mind is higher. You have to match the levels, and you feel what they feel, and that’s how you work out the situation. You can’t yell at your kids for no reason - they’re going to get scared. You can’t bring this attitude to your kids. It’s a big difference down there.”

“It helped me realize how effective ‘giving children praises’ is.”

The fathers also strongly believed that their relationship (4.36/5) and communication (4.38/5) with their child(ren) had improved as a result of attending *Dads' Connection*.

"What I liked the most was the fact that I learned a lot about communicating with your child, ensuring that you commend them all the time - how it helps with the child parent relationship."

"I avoid raising my voice to them. I listen to them more carefully. I think first before I say something. I'm aware of my responsibilities."

"I got a lot out of it. I got closer with my son. I got to know my son better. I never even knew what my son's favourite colour is, or shows, or anything like that. I thought I was doing good - I worked, buy them what they needed and this and that - but I wasn't."

"I am able to sit down and work things out with my kids. Instead of not even thinking about what I was doing. It taught me to view things better."

"I'm communicating with my kids better by listening and understanding them more. Same thing with my relationship with my wife."

In terms of benefits, the group clearly met its goal of teaching fathers the impact of exposure to domestic violence on children. The average response to that question of the survey was 4.45/5 and the fathers mentioned how their views have changed.

"Now I realize that it's not fair to the kids to witness arguments or tension between Mom and Dad in the house and all that. In my case, the problem in terms of fathering would be that I argued with my wife in front of my kids. I didn't realize fully that they heard and that they even felt the tension. It's not good for them. That was my handicap."

"I learn to talk without anger because of this program I am a better person and parent and father."

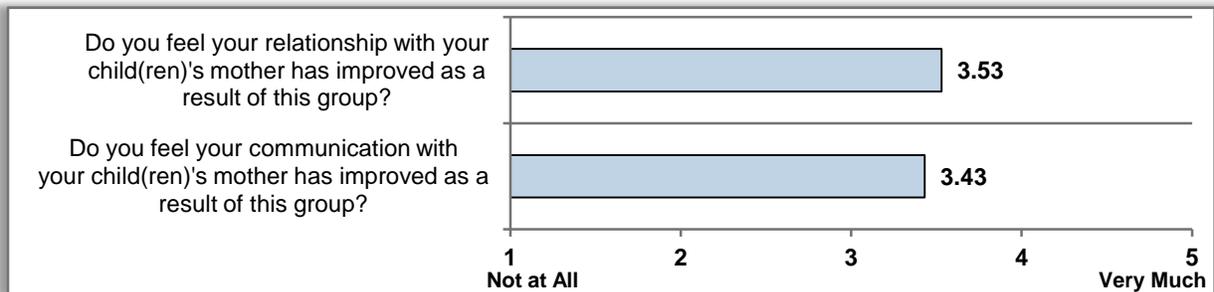
"Obviously, all these men have been brought into these sessions because of some kind of abuse that has happened to the spouse. One of the sessions talked about the responsibilities we have and how we have to take on this responsibility. It definitely made me more aware of that and made me more cautious of how I react and how to avoid having the same kind of reaction."

"It helped in giving me many ideas to improve the relationship with my child, to understand my child and also - not that I didn't know that quarrelling affects them - but it helped me to understand a bit more."

"It has made me more aware that there are consequences to my actions."

To a lesser degree, participants thought that their relationship (3.53/5) and communication (3.43/5) with their child(ren)'s mother had improved, as seen in Figure 5, below¹.

Figure 5. Average of all responses to personal benefits questions (relationship with mother of their child/ren)



The fact that these results are lower than the rest indicates that the groups were appropriately targeting fathering behaviours, and that participants were not just giving high scores to all questions. Nonetheless, many participants mentioned that the program helped their relationship with their partner.

“I am more attentive and considerate to both my wife’s and my kids needs and wants. I am more understanding when listening to their issues and concerns.”

“I can speak to my spouse without losing my cool. And how to deal with my child better when they act up.”

“One of the good things about Dad’s Connection is that they give suggestions on how to improve the father’s side. They help improve the relationship between the father and children, and the father to the spouse.”

*“I learned a lot about Dad Connection. How to talk to my kids, wife, my relation with my family is much better- now I know how to talk. Listening to my family.
I thank you very much. ”*

“My child is bonding very well with me, even after the separation. My child’s mother and I don’t argue. I am much more patient.”

Finally, despite being referred by child welfare to attend this group, in the end, the participants overwhelmingly stated that the group was good and that they would recommend the group to someone else (4.71/5).

“It went fantastic. It was good. I would recommend it to anybody”.

“The patience of the counselors was amazing! They really care about us, and what we had to say.”

¹ Three of the 12 groups received a different survey that did not ask questions about their child(ren)'s mother. Results for these two questions are based on 9 of 12 groups.

"They did a good job and I would recommend it to my brothers who have kids as well."

"It worked for me, it will for others."

CONCLUSION

An evaluation of the *Dads' Connection* program clearly demonstrated that the group enabled fathers to realize the impact that witnessing domestic violence had on their children, and also helped them to develop better relationships with their children. By focusing on how to become a better father, participants referred by Child Welfare were more motivated to take responsibility for their actions/behaviours. Participants admitted that they not only learned a great deal from the group and became better parents, but that they actually enjoyed the weekly meetings.

"I believe the group went very well. I became a better father because of it."

"I learn to talk without anger because of this program I am a better person and parent and father."

"To be honest, I miss the Tuesdays now that I'm not going."