Are We in This Together? Post-Separation Co-Parenting of Fathers With and Without a History of Domestic Violence

by

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Abstract

This paper explored features of post-separation co-parenting from men’s perspectives, in groups with and without a history of domestic violence (DV) perpetration. Thematic analysis was used to examine interviews of 20 fathers, half with a documented history of DV. The results showed substantial differences between groups. Among fathers with no history of DV, three themes were created: (1) I value my ex-partner’s involvement with our child, (2) We’re good as co-parents, and (3) How we co-parent impacts our child. Two themes were created for DV fathers: (1) My ex-partner is a bad mother and (2) She’s responsible for our difficulties co-parenting. Results indicate the need for policy and practice to reflect that the end of an abusive romantic relationship does not necessarily predict functional co-parenting or end child exposure to conflict. Furthermore, particular features may belie distressed co-parenting and could be useful to identify when assessing risk for post-separation DV.
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Appendix A

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes for DV Fathers

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes for Community Fathers
1. Introduction

In Canada, child exposure to domestic violence accounts for 34% of all substantiated cases of child maltreatment each year (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010). Similar levels of child exposure to domestic violence (DV) are also reported in other English speaking countries (Harrison, 2008; Kaye, Stubbs, & Tolmie, 2003; Rhoades & Boyd, 2004; Rosen & Sullivan, 2005). Mothers who end the romantic relationship with DV perpetrating fathers may continue to be concerned about contact with the violent father both on her own and on her child’s behalf (Hardesty, Khaw, Chung, & Martin, 2008; Harrison, 2008; Holt, 2015). Simultaneously, she may feel pressured to co-parent with, and facilitate contact between, the children and their father (Harrison, 2008). This pressure arises in large part from simultaneous movements in community consciousness and public policy toward increasing father involvement in the post-separation context (Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2009; Featherstone, 2004; Harrison, 2008; O’Sullivan, 2004; Terrisse, Roberts, Palacia-Quintin, & MacDonald, 1998; Lamb 2004). Seemingly fortifying these movements is research demonstrating that children benefit from father involvement in a range of ways and are disadvantaged when fathers are not involved (Barns, Farrell, & Dintcheff, 2006; Boyce et al. 2006; Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Chang, Halpern, & Kaufman, 2007; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Lamb, 1997; Lamb, 2004; Sobolewski & King, 2005; Wilson, 2008). These societal and policy pressures are creating situations in which mothers are increasingly often in a situation of co-parenting with their domestically violent ex-partner (Harrison, 2008; Holt, 2015). For many women, this a situation fraught with continuing concerns about safety for themselves and for their children (Harrison, 2008).

Contributing to this problematic situation is the failure of family courts to adequately recognize, assess, and take into account domestic violence when making decisions about custody and access (Morrison, 2015). For example, studies have found that court-based decisions and mediation processes around contact disputes often minimize or fail to consider the importance of domestic violence in the decision-making process (Johnson, Saccuzzo, & Koen, 2005; Rivera, Zeoli, & Sullivan, 2012; Trinder, Firth, & Jenks, 2009). Better training of judges, lawyers, and other members of the family court system is commonly recommended so that a couple’s history of DV in terms of prevalence, pattern, severity, and prior impact on the child, is better taken into account (e.g., Brinig, Frederick, & Drozd, 2014; Rivera et al., 2012).
In addition to better assessment at the “front end” around the history of abuse, greater consideration should also be given to patterns of co-parenting after separation. Some level of conflict is to be expected at the end of virtually all romantic partnerships, particularly as former couples reorganize their relationship as co-parents (King & Heard, 1999). However, not all conflict can be conceptualized in the same way, and there are important and poorly understood differences between qualitatively different types of conflict. The question is, when is ongoing conflict part of a normal relationship dissolution process and when might it be an indicator of potentially long-term problems or a continuation of domestic violence post-separation? There is little research available to guide judgments on this issue. Studies have explored the experience of post-separation father-perpetrated violence from the perspective of mothers and children; however, there is a lack of research on men’s perspectives on this issue. What is also rare in previous research is a comparison of the post-separation experiences of men (or women) who were in domestically violent relationships to the experiences of those who were in non-violent relationships.

The purpose of this study was to address these particular gaps in the research. Specifically, we asked the question: What are the features of co-parenting after separation from men’s perspective, in fathers with and without a history of DV perpetration? We did not assume that all men with a history of DV were engaged in post-separation violence; nor did we assume that all relationships were healthy. Rather, we sought to understand whether the conflict in the co-parenting relationship described by DV men post-separation differed in intensity, content, or quality from those without a history of DV perpetration. It was our hope that such differences could potentially help researchers and social service professionals to clarify the differences between ongoing conflict that may be part of a pattern of post-separation violence that is unlikely to resolve without intervention, from a pattern of conflict that is more typical and may be more likely to resolve on its own.

1.1 The Importance of Co-Parenting for Child Development

Co-parenting may be defined as the aspect of the parents’ relationship that pertains to parenthood and child-rearing (Weissman & Cohen, 1985). Generally speaking, a healthy co-parenting relationship can be conceptualized as one in which the parents are invested in the parenting of their child, value each other’s involvement with their child, desire to communicate
with each other about the raising of their child, and respect the other parent’s judgment regarding the parenting of their child (Weissman & Cohen, 1985). Because co-parenting is separate from the parental romantic relationship, it can continue after separation as the parents share the ongoing responsibility of raising their child.

The quality of the co-parenting relationship has been shown to be vital to children’s development. There are well-established links between difficulties in the co-parenting relationship and compromised child outcomes, with disrupted co-parenting relationships related to both child internalizing and externalizing behaviours (Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; Katz & Low, 2004; McHale, Juersten, & Lauretti, 1996; Schoppe-Sullivan, Claire-Cook, Davis, & Buckley, 2009; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010) at all ages, from infancy (LeRoy, Mahoney, Pargament, & Demaris, 2013) through to adolescence (Feinberg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007). Research has also demonstrated a strong relationship between co-parenting difficulties and problems in the relationship of the parent-child dyad (Bonds & Gondoli, 2007; Feinberg & Kan, 2008; Floyd, Gilliom, & Costigan, 1998). Individual parenting practices have been shown to be disrupted when the co-parenting relationship is strained, meaning that a distressed co-parenting relationship can also exert a negative influence on child development by compromising the individual parenting practice of each parent (Abidin & Konold, 1999; Feinberg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007).

Notably, the co-parenting relationship has been shown to be more consistently associated with child outcomes and with individual parenting practices than other elements of the interparental relationship (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Floyd et al., 1998, Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001). For example, Feinberg et al.’s longitudinal study showed that co-parenting conflict accounted for as much or more of the variance in adolescent adjustment as combined levels of marital quality and disagreement (Feinberg et al., 2007). The importance of co-parenting relative to other parenting and marital variables was recently borne out by a meta-analysis that considered 59 cross-sectional and longitudinal studies investigating the relationship between co-parenting and child and adolescent adjustment. This meta-analysis concluded that the impact of co-parenting was significant, even after controlling for individual parenting practices (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Fathers’ perspectives on their co-parenting relationship may be particularly important to consider: Some research suggests that fathers’ self-reported perception of the co-parenting relationship quality contributes more to their own co-parenting practices and fathering than
mothers’ perceptions contribute to their co-parenting and mothering (Ippolito-Morrill, Hines, Mahmood, & Cordova, 2010).

1.2 Co-Parenting in the Context of Domestic Violence

The wealth of research on the impact of co-parenting on children indicates that co-parenting is crucial to consider in terms of child development in the context of domestic violence. Blanket pro-father involvement movements appear to make the assumption that when the abusive romantic relationship ends, so does the violence, and from there parents are able to create functional post-separation co-parenting relationships that benefit the child. In contrast to this assumption, research on co-parenting in the context of DV indicates the likelihood that these ex-partners may struggle to establish healthy co-parenting relationships. For example, studies have found that domestic violence impacts the ability of parents to co-parent while they are still romantically involved, suggesting that one of the characteristics that may make it difficult for a father to be a ‘good enough’ co-parent post-separation is his history of DV perpetration. One study showed that DV predicted the quality of co-parenting in the transition to parenthood (Kan, Feinberg, & Solmeyer, 2012). In this longitudinal study, both mothers and fathers reported on levels of violence and the co-parenting relationship prenatally, a few months after their first child’s birth, and again 13 months after birth. The results showed that mothers’ and fathers’ reported prenatal violence predicted their perceptions of the co-parenting relationship one year after birth. Two other studies demonstrated similar results. The first showed that couples with self-reported marital violence were more conflictual and disengaged in their co-parenting attempts (Katz & Low, 2004). The second study showed that domestically violent fathers with concurrent substance abuse reported co-parenting relationships that were significantly poorer than those of the comparison community sample (Stover, Easton & McMahon, 2013).

Research also shows that the quality of co-parenting post-separation is related to the level of hostility present in other aspects of the interparental relationship. Research on marital hostility and co-parenting has demonstrated a relationship between the two, in which marital hostility predicts hostility in the co-parenting relationship (Katz & Gottman, 1996). The relationship between interparental conflict and co-parenting conflict has also been shown to continue after separation. Longitudinal research has shown that prior father- and mother-reported levels of hostility in the parental relationship predicted co-parenting conflict post-separation (Maccoby,
Depner, & Mnookin, 1990; Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993). Research also demonstrates that when there is conflict during the period of separation (e.g., through contentious litigation of divorce proceedings) the post-separation co-parenting relationship is likely to be more distressed (Baum, 2003; Sbarra & Emery, 2008). In the post-separation context, research has shown that as co-parenting conflict increases, so does the likelihood that the child will feel involved in that conflict, which in turn is strongly related to child maladjustment (Maccoby et al., 1993). This finding is particularly worrisome in light of research demonstrating that children are usually aware of interparental conflict (Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000; McIntosh & Long, 2005).

These findings on post-separation difficulties align with research indicating that the post-separation period following a domestically violent relationship is particularly dangerous for ex-partners and children, who remain at risk for continued and/or increasing violence (Brown, 2006; Hester & Radford, 1996; Hotton, 2001; Humphreys & Thiara, 2002; Kelly, 1999; Radford, Sayer, & AMICA, 1999; Saunders, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2002; Wilson & Daly, 2002). Other longitudinal research has demonstrated that for some post-separation, high-conflict parents, the post-separation conflict does not abate over time; instead, it remains at a high level for years following separation (Drapeau, Gagné, Saint-Jacques, Lépine, Ivers, 2009).

Although there is scant research on the co-parenting relationship post-separation for parents with a history of father-perpetrated DV, what little does exist indicates that the co-parenting relationship remains distressed. Some studies have examined co-parenting post-separation from mothers’ perspective. In these studies, mothers reported distressed co-parenting relationships, in which the father was using co-parenting as a means to continue to exert control over the mother (Hardesty et al., 2008; Silverstein, 1993). This trend can also be seen in the work of Hardesty and Ganong (2006) who interviewed mothers from a court-mandated post-divorce parent education program that included all divorcing parents in an American state. Mothers with abusive ex-partners were asked to speak about their management of the co-parenting relationship. In some cases, mothers reported that the father maltreated their children in retaliation to her refusal to comply with his demands, and most women feared that their ex-partner might attempt to punish her through hurting or kidnapping their child. One mother reported that during the separation period, the father took their child and moved without telling the mother to where, leaving the mother without contact with her daughter for a month. The
mothers reported that the conflict continued to affect their children, and indicated that the children recognized their father’s coercive behaviour and were afraid of him. Mothers of older children reported that their children took it upon themselves to tell their father not to include them in conflict with their mother, and some mothers indicated that the older children had sought a reduction of their father’s legal access to them (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006).

Morrison’s (2015) research with mothers and children about their post-separation contact experiences with domestically violent fathers had similar results. In this study, children of post-separation parents continued to be exposed to and be distressed by their father’s physical and verbal abuse of their mother. Fathers denigrated the mothers to their children when the mother was absent. The fathers also demonstrated a pattern of controlling behaviour: They prevented children from contacting their mothers, and in some cases, they prevented children from even speaking about their mother during father-child contact. Although the co-parenting relationship was not an express focus of this research, the results showed that the co-parenting relationship had fundamentally broken down: There was rarely communication about parenting decisions or about issues that affected their children. When communication did occur, the parents frequently used the child as a messenger. The messages themselves included practicalities about contact, but also threats from fathers to mothers, disputes over finance, and bids for information about mothers’ new relationships.

There has been one prior study that encompassed a larger range of respondents beyond only mothers’ perspective. Holt (2015) investigated the perspectives of children, mothers, fathers, and professionals on domestically violent father’s post-separation parenting. As with the studies by Hardesty and Ganong (2006) and Morrison (2015), Holt found that children and mothers reported fathers were controlling and abusive. Children reported their fathers would not allow them to contact their mother, even when the children were distressed. Children also reported fathers’ continuing verbal abuse and denigration of their mother, both in her presence and in her absence. The children described feeling distressed and powerless when they attempted to stop the denigration but were unable to do so. Although co-parenting was not a stated focus of Holt’s study, some fathers did report on their co-parenting relationship. Fathers expressed frustration with their ex-partner, seeing her co-parenting efforts as a means of controlling his own parenting. Any attempts by the mother to limit contact were perceived as personally vindictive and revengeful acts, rather than as mothering acts born out of concern for the children due to the
father’s previous dangerous behaviour. Fathers also demonstrated limited insight into the impact of their violent behaviour on their children; notably, one father incarcerated for holding his family hostage at knifepoint indicated that of the two of them, his ex-partner was the ‘bad parent’ who needed parenting help.

1.3 The Current Study: Fathers’ Perspectives

The results of these studies indicate common themes of continued control and abusive behaviour. They denote the likelihood that despite separation, children will continue to be exposed to parental conflict, and that the co-parenting relationship is likely to be distressed or completely broken down.

To expand and build on this foundation of work, the current study concentrated on the narratives of fathers. The absence of fathers’ voices is a commonly-cited limitation when research in the area of DV and parenting is conducted primarily with mothers (Hardesty et al., 2008, Strega, Brown, & Callahan, 2009). It is a limitation noted by researchers who argue that the ability of professionals to engage and intervene with fathers is hampered by the lack of understanding of their experiences and perspectives (Cameron, Coady, & Hoy, 2014). We included a comparison group so that we could examine narratives of co-parenting among separated fathers with and without a history of DV perpetration. On the basis of past literature, we expected that fathers with a history of DV would report more conflict than those without; however, we were also interested in whether the themes of this conflict would differ. In other words, are there potential markers in the content or quality of men’s narratives that might help distinguish between post-separation violence that is a continuation of abusive patterns (and that might be long-lasting), from that which is more normatively conflictual and potentially resolvable over time?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

Participants were ten fathers with no history of DV (“community fathers”) and ten fathers with a history of perpetrating DV (“DV fathers”) who were all separated from their children’s mother (N=20). All fathers were drawn randomly from a larger study investigating the impact of fathers’ domestic violence and anti-social behaviours on their children’s development. To be
potentially included in the subsample of fathers examined for this study, men had to report that
they were no longer romantically involved with the mother of the target child, and that they
were still in contact with their ex-partner because they were both involved in raising their child.

Fathers in the DV group all had officially verified histories of DV perpetration. They were
recruited from the Partner Assault Response (PAR) program, which is a component of Ontario’s
Domestic Violence Court program accessible only to men who have pleaded or been found
guilty of a domestic-violence related offence. Three of the DV fathers (30%) also reported that
Children’s Aid Services had been or were currently involved with their family. Fathers in the
DV sample ranged in age from 23 to 51 years old ($M_{age}$=33.70, $SD$=8.45), with target children
aged 2.5 to 13 years old ($M_{age}$=6.90, $SD$=3.36). Three of the DV fathers (30%) described
themselves as European-Canadian (White), three (30%) as African/Caribbean-Canadian (Black),
two (20%) as Asian-Canadian, with the remaining two unspecified (20%).

Fathers in the community group were recruited from the community via online ads, newspaper
ads, and university campus posters. The advertisements were designed to recruit as broad a
range of eligible fathers as possible. In light of this intent, the only requirements stated in the
ads were that fathers were “currently parenting a child who is 4-16 years of age” and that “you
don’t need to be living with your child(ren) but do need to be having regular contact with them.”
Fathers who met these requirements were included only if they reported that they had no history
of domestic violence charges and no prior involvement with Children’s Aid Services. In the
community group, fathers ranged in age from 27 to 50 years old ($M_{age}$=38.30, $SD$=8.99) with
target children aged 4 to 9 years old ($M_{age}$=5.70, $SD$=1.70). Four (40%) of the comparison group
fathers described themselves as European-Canadian (White), three (30%) as African/Caribbean-
Canadian (Black), and three (30%) as Asian-Canadian.

In the larger study from which this subsample of participants was drawn, the DV and the
community fathers did not differ significantly in their levels of education or income. Of the
subsample of participants included in this analysis, most fathers in both groups reported having
education at the trade certificate, university, or graduate school level. Income level for most
fathers was between $30,000 and $59,999 per annum. A few fathers in both groups reported
earning more than $60,000 per annum, and a few in both groups indicated that they earned less
than $19,000 per annum.
Fathers in both groups were asked to report on the level of in-person and indirect (e.g., phone, email) contact they had with their children. Fathers in both groups reported similar amounts of contact with the target child, with only one father (in the community group) indicating that he lived full-time with the target child. Many of the fathers reported spending two or more whole weekends with their child in a month. Those who did not spend whole weekends usually reported seeing their child around two to three times in week.

2.2 Procedure and Measures

Participants came to the research lab at the University of Toronto individually, and were taken through the larger study’s three-hour assessment protocol by two research assistants (RAs). All participants read and signed the informed-consent form, and it was clearly communicated that their participation or lack thereof would in no way impact any involvement they might have either with the justice system or Children’s Aid Services.

This paper analyzes fathers’ responses to two-open ended interview questions that were posed to the father towards the beginning of the assessment process. Fathers spoke for two minutes in response to each of the interview questions: (1) “I’d like you to describe your child’s other parent in your own words. When I ask you to begin, I’d like you to speak for two minutes, telling me what she is like as a parent. How would you describe her parenting?” and (2) “Now that I have a sense of what [name] is like as a parent, let’s talk about the way you parent together.” RAs were trained not to interrupt fathers or ask questions during the two minutes in which they were responding to the question; however, if the father stopped speaking and was silent for at least 10 seconds, RAs were instructed to provide the father with the prompt “Can you tell me more about what [name] is like as a parent?” for the first question and “Can you tell me more about how you parent together?” for the second question. All interview responses were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

2.3 Analysis

Interview transcriptions were analyzed using the inductive thematic analysis procedure described by Hayes (2000) and Braun & Clarke (2006). In order to conduct the analysis, the audio-recordings were separated into two data groups representing the DV sample and
community sample of fathers. For the purposes of the analysis, fathers’ responses to the two interview questions were considered together. The analysis described below was performed on each group separately, but simultaneously, such that considerations and discussions about emerging results from each group were conducted separately but within the context of working with both groups concurrently. Therefore, each step detailed below was undertaken twice: once with the DV group, and once with the community group.

First, the audio-recorded interview responses were carefully transcribed, and each transcription was re-read several times to facilitate familiarization with the entire data set. Towards the end of this phase, initial ideas with respect to potential codes and themes relevant to the research topic were noted. Second, initial codes were created. A code was any meaningful facet of the fathers’ perspective towards co-parenting. After a list of initial codes was generated, each code was systematically applied to all transcriptions within its data group, such that all units of information relevant to that code were collated. At the end of this process, any codes did not capture enough depth or breadth of information from the whole data group were excluded from the future stages of analysis. Third, themes were created by grouping individual codes together into meaningful clusters of subthemes, and then again into themes. Different combinations of code clusters were created and reviewed until the clusters formed subthemes and themes that were conceptually coherent and representative of the fathers’ narratives. Fourth, themes were reviewed individually, in order to ensure that all content captured within the theme related conceptually to that theme and was not better represented by some other theme. Fifth, the entire data group of transcriptions was re-read to confirm that the developed themes sufficiently captured the depth and breadth of issues expressed by fathers in the interviews, and did not exclude key components of the fathers’ responses. This inductive thematic analysis resulted in nine subthemes for the DV group, formed in to two themes. For the community group, the inductive analysis resulted in eleven subthemes, which formed three themes (see Appendix for tables of themes and subthemes). Although it is not a requirement of this methodological approach to use multiple raters in order to quantify the reliability of codes and themes (Braun & Clark, 2006), trustworthiness of codes and themes is an important consideration. Therefore the following approach was taken in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis. In each phase of the analysis, the paper’s first author created, reviewed, and refined initial codes and themes. Following this, the paper’s second author reviewed the codes and themes. Any
disagreements regarding code content, grouping of codes in to themes, and meaningful labels for codes and themes were discussed collaboratively until a consensus was reached. For ease of reading, the excerpts provided below have been altered from their original transcription only so as to remove non-lexical utterances such as “um” or “uh”, to replace names, or to add clarification for the reader. All other changes made by the authors are contained within square brackets. In parentheses directly following each quote is a unique identification code that indicates which participant the excerpt is drawn from. The numbers 1 through 10 represent the ten fathers with a history of DV perpetration; the letters A through J correspond to the ten community fathers with no history of DV perpetration.

3. Results
Results are presented first for analysis of responses from the subset of fathers with a history of domestic violence perpetration. Results for the subsample of community fathers without a history of domestic violence are presented afterwards. For both groups, general impressions are presented first, followed by results of thematic coding.

3.1 Fathers with a History of Perpetrating Domestic Violence
When read as a whole, most of the fathers with a history of domestic violence perpetration described co-parenting relationships that were in distress. These fathers were overwhelmingly negative in their evaluation of their ex-partner as a person and as a mother. The fathers either made many specific negative statements about their ex-partner, or focused on one negative aspect for most of their response. When they praised an aspect of their ex-partner or her parenting, it was within this context of predominantly negative statements. The fathers placed the responsibility for co-parenting difficulties on their ex-partner. However, there is an exception to this general pattern of results. Two of the ten DV fathers, participants 4 and 8, gave responses that were qualitatively different to the other DV fathers. Due to the extent of the differences between these two fathers and the rest of the DV group, the results of the analysis of their responses are presented separately.

With these two fathers excluded, analysis of the eight remaining DV fathers’ responses to the two open-ended interview questions regarding their perspective on their ex-partner as a mother
and their co-parenting relationship generated two themes: (1) My ex-partner is a bad mother and (2) My ex-partner is responsible for our difficulties co-parenting.

3.1.1. Theme: My ex-partner is a bad mother

Under the umbrella of the main theme “My ex-partner is a bad mother”, three subthemes were created: (1) She’s a bad mother in these specific ways, (2) She’s not a great person, and (3) I have only limited positive opinions about her as a mother.

3.1.1.1 She’s a bad mother in these specific ways

Narratives from all eight of the DV fathers contained multiple examples of fathers’ criticisms of their ex-partner’s parenting. A few fathers criticized aspects of their ex-partner’s parenting that would typically be viewed as negative. For example, one father described his perception that this ex-partner yelled frequently at their children: “[She is] constantly yelling at my son if he doesn’t want to listen. I try to tell her there is no need to yell at a child because the more you yell at him, the more he’s gonna want to keep doing it and doing it […]” (3), and his belief that his ex-partner should pay more attention to and be better able to discipline their child: “[…] pay more attention to him. Know what he’s doing, not just you in one room, he’s in the back and you are wondering what’s going on […]. He does what he wants and she has to obey him basically […].” (3) Another father described that “[…] she yells a lot at the kids, stresses them out […] she just screams a lot for I don’t know what it is. And swears a lot at the kids.” (7)

Notably, in both these cases, the fathers also indicated that they had either tried to correct the mother, or to step in where they perceived she was lacking. For example, the first father indicated that “I’ve told her […] that she has to change some of the ways of how she is a parent […]. I try and be the backbone for her, to stand up for herself and try to basically show him that you, have to show him that you’re mom, you own the house, he has to obey you and listen.” (3) For another father, the criticism was about her short temper and using their son as a go-between:

“[…] she takes it upon herself to tell [our son] to tell me what’s going on and I mean for a seven year old child it’s not really fair because he forgets all the time, so I mean I don’t think you should give him that kind of responsibility at that age […]. Her lack of patience. Like I mean, like I think it’s pretty obvious it’s imperative to have a lot of patience when dealing with children […].” (5)
Other fathers expressed criticism of aspects of their ex-partner’s parenting that were less obviously negative. For one father, the criticism was that he felt his ex-partner prioritized spending time with the children and fulfilling their wants above all else:

We, well she spends most of the time whatever she can, she basically forgoes everything else and she tries to accommodate every single wish and desire of the children, which I find to be to be, to be wrong, in many cases […]. Well, perhaps stop accommodating every single wish, stop giving everything the children want. And, I mean I understand the children number one, but there are things in life that should perhaps come before they have to go to a zoo, or whatever else, right, so there are obligations in life that you have to fill in before you can accommodate for some leisurely activities with the children. (1)

For another father, the focus of his criticism was about his ex-partner allowing their child to watch (any) television:

I don’t like, first of all, I don’t like the, the amount of television watching that goes on in the house. Even when I was there I didn’t like that shit, and I know it even goes on worse now, know what I mean. I do not like television watching because it influences these kids, to behave, corrupt their behavior man, you know what I mean? And, and, and, they start to rebel, and against their parents, and get lost and follow a bunch of foolishness. And I’m not down with the media, and images they they put on this television. I don’t think television is for any human being in this planet, and that especially kids. (6)

The strength of language used and the amount of time that these fathers gave to these criticisms gives the impression that the fathers felt that such behaviours, prioritizing children and allowing television, were reprehensible.

3.1.1.2 She’s not a great person

It was not only their ex-partner’s parenting that the DV fathers criticized. In several cases, fathers also criticized their ex-partner as a person. For one father, this criticism was used as an explanation for not spending time together as a family “[…] ’cause she’s just a cranky, cranky woman […]. I just get out, I take the kids and just leave ’cause I don’t want to hear her screaming.” (7) Another father commented on his ex-partner’s lack of patience, “[…] when we had our son, I found that she, just you know, a little demanding, she might have been a little, I guess for a lack of a term where […] not as much patience […].” (10)
3.1.1.3 I have only limited positive opinions about her as a mother
Although fathers made many negative statements about children’s mothers, they also almost all made at least one positive comment. However, fathers immediately preceded or followed praise with a negative statement that served to mitigate the positive appraisal, such as, “She’s a good mother when she wants to be a good mother.” (7) In other cases, the only praise fathers provided was an acknowledgment that his ex-partner loved their children. Like the other forms of praise, however, this acknowledgement was immediately mitigated:

[… she perhaps does something at work [with children] and she sometimes brings it back home, the same kind of approach to, to, to parenting which sometimes I simply don’t understand…As a parent, I would say that she’s definitely a reliable parent, she’s, she’s a loving parent, but whether or not it’s the right approach, I don’t know […]. (1)

Yes […] as a mother, she, she, she has, she gives the kids the proper love they need, I would say ’cause when I pick them up, they’re happy, you know. But [laughs] a lot of things that go on, the way she parents, I don’t agree with man. (6)

These examples show demonstrate the DV fathers were unwilling to allow praise of their ex-partner stand alone without lessening its impact by immediately preceding or following it with a qualification or criticism of her parenting.

3.1.2 Theme: She’s responsible for our difficulties co-parenting
The theme “She’s responsible for our difficulties co-parenting” was created from the DV fathers’ description of difficulties within the co-parenting relationship and the assignment of responsibility for these difficulties to their ex-partner. Under this theme, six subthemes were created: (1) She’s responsible for our breakdown or absence of co-parenting, (2) She makes it difficult to communicate, (3) She’s responsible for our high level of disagreement, (4) She makes it impossible to handle disagreements, (5) She undermines my authority as a parent, and (6) She has power over contact and decisions about our child.

3.1.2.1 She’s responsible for our breakdown or absence of co-parenting
The blame that characterizes the overall theme of “She’s responsible for our difficulties co-parenting” extended to multiple aspects of the co-parenting relationship. Several fathers
expressed a global attribution of blame to their ex-partners for the overall breakdown in, or absence of, co-parenting. In one case, the father seemed unable to understand why the co-parenting relationship broke down, just that it was her fault:

[…] like I would always try to talk to her, but just one day she just cut me off and I just didn’t understand why, so […] so the la-, to be honest it’s been quite a while while the last the time we collaborated in terms of parenting. It was, it’s probably at least two years again […]. So yeah, like it’s, really no collaboration for the past few years or so unfortunately. (5)

In other cases, the father attributed the total breakdown in the co-parenting relationship to the mother’s new romantic relationship, “[…] she wants to ignore me because she has somebody [a new romantic partner] in the picture” (3). Fathers also blamed the mother’s new romantic relationship for difficulties communicating:

[…] we do talk when [our daughter] is getting picked up, or. And, not as much as I’d like to, depending on whether or not [my ex-partner’s boyfriend] is in the car or not. Not that that’s a problem, it’s just that we don’t really talk […]. We don’t talk as much as I’d like to. The communication is far more open with [my daughter] and me than it is with [my ex-partner]. And anytime I bring it up, it’s always a rush to get out and leave. Far too many times that I find […]. She always says, “Oh, everything is fine, I don’t want to get involved in anything emotional”. It’s difficult […]. Although, it does happen that we can talk. But then, if she feels like there is any kind of deep emotional attachment it, it, it becomes difficult for the both of us to discuss, because it conflicts with her relationship, with, that she is currently having right now. And that’s about the science of that. I would always like more. (2)

3.1.2.2 She makes it difficult to communicate

Other fathers also blamed mothers for difficulty communicating within the co-parenting context. Sometimes the fathers described mothers as deliberately withholding information from them, “She tries to tell my son not to tell me certain things that goes on in the house, so it makes it harder for me to even want to trust her with that too.” (3) Another father did not know why his ex-partner did not want to communicate with him, but still explained the lack of communication as her fault:

[…] like unfortunately she doesn’t like communicating with me for some odd reason, I mean like she’s told me that she doesn’t to want to talk to me unless [our son] is involved but like even then she doesn’t like to talk to me about him which I find kind of odd […]. I mean like I said like she doesn’t really communicate like very well, even though she said that we should only
communicate when it comes to [our son], but even then she takes it upon herself to tell [our son] to tell me what’s going on. (5)

3.1.2.3 She’s responsible for our high level of disagreement

Another area of difficulty for which the fathers blamed their ex-partners was the high level of disagreement in the co-parenting relationship. Sometimes this was based on the father’s view that his partner had poor parenting practices: “A lot of the times I don’t agree, or I did not agree with certain things that she was okay with the kids doing and learning, you know what I mean? […] So no, a lot of times me and her don’t agree and that’s why I’m not in the house right now, living there right now, you know what I mean? […] But no, so no, I don’t agree with many things she says.” (6) Other fathers had the sense that their ex-partners would disagree with them simply out of spite or to make things difficult:

So we agree some of the time, but the majority of the time she doesn’t want to agree with me, so, I don’t know. (3)

3.1.2.4 She makes it impossible to handle disagreements

Fathers also felt like mothers made it impossible for them to handle disagreements when they occurred. In some cases, this was because the father felt unable to raise any questions about or become involved with his ex-partner’s parenting because if he did, there would either be conflict or the mother would shut down the conversation:

[…] the biological mother, obviously she has her own ways in her disciplinary actions in how she raises [our daughter]. I don’t conflict with those at all, like obviously I, I spend the nights with [our daughter], I, I spend alternate weekends as well […]. So, I do not get in the way. If I did, there would be a big conflict […]. There would be big problems. Cause there has been problems in my, if I questioned anything that she does […]. So, like I said it, it, I can’t, I can’t criticize, that’s the only difficulty, it’s difficult to communicate with her if I if I see a problem […]. And any time I bring it up, it’s always a rush to get out and leave. (2)

And that created conflict, and, you know, it just, if I didn’t humble down and be like “okay, yeah okay,” I didn’t have an opinion, everything would be smooth […]. (6)
3.1.2.5 She undermines my authority as a parent

The fathers also reported that they felt their ex-partner undermined their authority as a parent. In some cases this occurred when the father gave one order to the child but then felt the mother contradicted him, “There is incidents where I’ll tell him don’t do something and then she’ll go behind my back and say yeah do that, so when I try to tell him that’s wrong he’s running to her but she’s saying it’s okay, it’s okay.” (3) In other cases, the father reported the mother reneged on agreements they had made “[…] and it’s sad, it’s fact she actually took him, she actually took him [to Marineland] […] and it was kind odd, like we had an agreement but she went anyways.” (10)

3.1.2.6 She has power over contact and decisions about our child

Finally, fathers described feeling powerless as parents and unable to contribute to decisions about parenting. Men attributed blame to children’s mothers for creating this power imbalance. When speaking about their perception of power imbalance, a degree of resentment or hostility was often present in the fathers’ words or tone. In some cases, the resentment over lack of power related to the perception that the ex-partner controlled the amount of contact the father had with his child:

She’s a type of person that if it’s not about me and her I can’t have nothing to do with my son, so I have to suffer in the long run. She’ll be okay for say 5 months, 6 months, after that she’ll have somebody new in the picture and once she has a boyfriend or a man friend it’s forget about the father […]. So she’ll either end up telling me to leave or don’t come around, or it’s just, “Oh you’ll see him whenever I want you to.” (3)

In other cases the power imbalance was attributed to the mother’s relatively increased contact with the child as compared to the father’s own:

I hate that and their mother is all up in to that, entertainment, and who’s who, and you know, you got the Paris Hilton, you got all these. She has these kids, up into that because these kids, Halloween, they want to dress up as these people that they see on TV. My daughter wanted to dress up as Nicki Minaj one Halloween and I had no power over that because I’m not in the household […]. (6)
Another father explained that because of the difference in contact, he felt his ex-partner made most of the decisions about parenting:

As for us parenting together, she really makes most of the decisions when it comes to [our daughter]. Like she would just do it and then tell me […]. Yeah so, yeah that that’s mostly her, again, it’s mostly her […]. Like my thing with [our daughter] isn’t as much as her mother so really she, she’s boss when it comes to her. You know, she’s boss. She, she’s the, who makes most of the decisions. (9)

In sum, two themes were created from the analysis of the DV fathers’ responses: (1) She’s a bad mother and (2) She’s responsible for our co-parenting difficulties. Within the first theme, fathers criticized specific areas of their ex-partner’s parenting, as well as her attributes as a person. When fathers made positive statements regarding their ex-partners as a parent or co-parent, these statements were mitigated by further criticism or qualifying statements. Within the second theme, fathers described areas of difficulty within the co-parenting relationship that they attributed as the fault of their ex-partner: a high level of disagreement with regards to parenting, a struggle constructively approaching disagreements, difficulty communicating about their child, an imbalance of power in the co-parenting relationship, and the general breakdown in or lack of co-parenting.

3.2 Community Fathers

The community fathers’ responses, when read as a whole, described co-parenting relationships that were functional and respectful. The fathers provided a range of general and specific positive statements regarding their ex-partner as a person and as a mother. When fathers made negative evaluative statements, the statements were surrounded by positive statements and mitigated in their severity. The fathers typically indicated that they co-parented well together with their ex-partner, mostly agreed on how to raise their child, and took a constructive approach to disagreements. The tone was predominantly positive and respectful.

Analysis of the community group’s responses generated three themes: (1) I value my ex-partner’s involvement with our child, (2) We’re good as co-parents, and (3) How we co-parent impacts our child.
3.2.1 Theme: I value my ex-partner’s involvement with our child

Under the umbrella of the theme “I value my ex-partner’s involvement with our child”, four subthemes were created: (1) She’s a good mother overall and in these specific ways, (2) She contributes to raising our child in unique ways by virtue of being a mother, (3) She’s a good person overall and in these specific ways, and (4) She’s a good role model for our child.

3.2.1.1 She’s a good mother generally and in these specific ways.

All fathers in the community group indicated that they valued their ex-partner’s involvement with the parenting of their child. This was evident in several ways, the first of which was that almost all of the fathers made statements that praised her all-around as a mother. For example, one father stated that, “By all criterion she would be a nice mom […] I think that she is a very good mom […].” (B) and another that, “She’s very good, I couldn’t ask for a better mother than her […].” (D)

In addition to the global evaluation of his ex-partner as a mother, each of the fathers also identified a range of positive aspects of their ex-partner’s parenting. Some fathers praised mother’s skill in organizing and structuring children’s activities. For example, one father commented that, “She makes sure the kids don’t sleep in too late, even on weekends […] she encourages them [to] go outside […].” (J) Others spoke positively of mothers’ level of love, affection, and dedication to their children. One father remarked that, “She obviously cares a great deal for [our daughter]” (I), and another reported that, “She’s a very caring and understanding mother […] she really puts a lot of time and effort into just everything she does for the baby right, for the kid.” (G)

3.2.1.2 She contributes to raising our child in unique ways by virtue of being a mother

Some fathers described ways in which they believed that their ex-partner made a unique contribution to their child’s life by virtue of the fact that she was a mother. Implicit in this description was the fathers’ sense that, because the contribution was tied directly to the ex-partner not as a person but as a mother, these were contributions that he himself would be incapable of making:
[Her mother] makes her really happy, and like when she is like down or sick or what not she is really good at, much much better than I am you know what I mean, emotionally or nurturing. And I get that, it’s usually the mother, the mother’s role. (C)

She loves her, her kids, I think that’s part and parcel of just being a mother. Having the children be inside your womb for nine months out of the year you certainly, there is an attachment, a different type of attachment as supposed to one an attachment compared to a father. (E)

3.2.1.3. She’s a good person overall and in these specific ways, and, she’s a good role model for our child

The fathers also demonstrated their esteem for their ex-partner by expressing praise for her as a person. Several fathers commented on their ex-partner as a positive role model for their child, “I do feel if she’s anything like her mom […] she’s got a great leg to stand on.” (C) Others spoke positively about mothers’ characteristics. For example, one father commented that, “She’s very caring, nurturing, considerate […] genuinely a good-hearted person, who really, has just no ill ways about her.” (H), and another remarked that, “She is kind of an A-type, hardworking personality, busy, but just makes it work […]. She is very bright.” (F)

In sum, in the theme “I value mum’s involvement with our child” the community fathers praised specific aspects of their ex-partner’s mothering, made general positive statements about her as a mother, described her positive attributes as a person, described her as a good role model, and indicated that she was able to provide a unique contribution that the father could not by virtue of being a mother. Captured together, these perceptions of their ex-partner’s mothering indicate the fathers valued their ex-partner’s involvement with and contribution to their child’s life as a parent.

3.2.2 Theme: We’re Good as Co-parents

Community fathers expressed that they and their ex-partners were able to do a good job as co-parents in their efforts to raise their child. Under this theme, five subthemes were created: (1) We do a good job as co-parents, (2) We communicate frequently and respectfully about our child, (3) We mostly agree on how to parent, (4) We disagree sometimes, but not fundamentally, on how to parent, and (5) We take a constructive approach to disagreement.
3.2.2.1 We do a good job as co-parents
Some fathers gave general descriptions of the ways in which he and his ex-partner were able to have a relationship that focused on working together for their child. They described that they could “co-parent very nicely” (H), reported that they “agreed that it is very important for us to be on the same page…” (F), and that “…for the most part that works completely.” (F)

3.2.2.2 We communicate frequently and respectfully about our child
One facilitating aspect of the co-parenting relationship was their ability to communicate well with their ex-partner. Fathers emphasized the frequency of communication, commenting that “We talked, we talked about [our parenting strategies] a lot, and we still talk about that a lot” (F) and explained, “We stay in constant communication […] the lines of communication are wide open, me and her […] we share information on a regular basis.” (H) Fathers also described the positive quality of their communication, describing the respectful way in which both parties engaged in communication, as well as their ability to “[…] just talk things out and […] put our personal issues aside just for the sake of our kid.” (G)

3.2.2.3 We mostly agree on how to parent
Another facilitating aspect of the co-parenting relationship the community fathers described was the high level of agreement with their ex-partner with regards to parenting decisions and styles. For some fathers, this began even before they had children and continued after separation: “We were together before around her sister’s kids so we already had similar ideas towards children from just from being around each other, we had ideas that brushed off.” (C) For other fathers, this high level of agreement stemmed from sharing principles or general ideas regarding parenting:

I, generally we say that we, have the same principles, so luckily we agree on things that, that should be done when it comes to [our child] and we generally agree, on, on things, so I think we agree mostly on what should be done and what should not be done. (D)

We generally agree on [our child] being raised a certain way […]. Generally, generally we agree on most things […]. (I)
Fathers also described particular ways in which they and their ex-partner were able to achieve a working co-parenting relationship. For example, they indicated working together and communicating in order to create a better co-parenting relationship.

And and yeah I think we have grown with that kind of relationship 'cause in the beginning it was start, it was hard […]. But then when we actually sat down and talked, just you know, for how are we gonna take care of the kid and I think we just kind of built that relationship towards in supporting everything towards the kid, like our effort and our energy […]. (G)

3.2.2.4 We disagree sometimes, but not fundamentally, on how to parent

Despite describing generally high levels of agreement, fathers also described areas in which they disagreed. In some cases, men described disagreement about small decisions such as “[…] how much sugar he’s going to have […] we don’t totally [agree] on those sorts of things.” (F). For others, disagreements were attributed to personal views, “[…] there are a few things we don’t agree on, but that’s because of our own differences, like in religion” (D), or due to upbringing, “[…] there are some occasions where we don’t see eye to eye, and that’s part and parcel because of the fact that cultural upbringing and society and culture […]. So there might be some differences but with regards to the basic needs and upbringing of the children we’re usually on the same boat and the same page.” (E)

In other cases, the disagreement was about the parenting style of their ex-partner. However, the fathers expressed an understanding that having a different style did not necessarily mean that their ex-partner’s style was negative or incorrect. For example, one father noted his ex-partner’s style was different to his own, “[…] her style of parenting is different than my own, and she doesn’t like to, you know, just sit around and hang out and talk […]” but then immediately described her areas of strength as a parent, “[…] but what she’s good at is she coordinates activities such as swimming and group activities” as well as commenting that despite a different parenting style, the drawbacks to this style seemed to be mitigated as time passed, “[…] now that [our daughter] is becoming older, they seem to be closer and talking more” even if his ex-partner and daughter were not hanging out and talking in the way that he did with his daughter (I). Other fathers indicated that disagreements or a difference in style were less of a kind, and more of degree, “I would say we, we pretty much agree on what the child is allowed to do, sometimes it’s just maybe how far things will go, like I let a lot of things go, per se […]. Like we still support the same things it’s just depends on how much, I guess we enforce things.” (C)
Another father described wishing for aspects of his ex-partner’s parenting to be different, but simultaneously indicated that he did not see the criticized aspect as particularly worrisome:

Sometimes [she is] maybe not the most organized, or, I guess, takes it with more foresight. But that’s not really something, that’s just people, and how they are in general, right? I can’t expect everyone to be the same […]. But yeah, I’d say I’m satisfied, it could have been a lot worse. I wouldn’t change anything if I could because right if you change one thing then you don’t know what else would […]. But I feel that she could maybe do more around like, like physical interaction or what not right, she could do a little more. But again, it’s really splitting hairs. (B)

3.2.2.5 We take a constructive approach to disagreement

Fathers also spoke about how they made the co-parenting relationship work when there were disagreements. They described the various constructive ways in which they and their ex-partner were able to approach these disagreements. For one father, one aspect of the approach was that he and his ex-partner were willing to compromise, “So, there’s never really anything that…we can’t compromise on […].” (C) For another father, the process was also about not letting their personal relationship get in the way of their co-parenting relationship:

And she’s doesn’t let any of our personal issues get in the way […]. And in terms of us it was like raising the kid as a whole like, we do have our differences but then we talk it out instead of just like, “No” or, “My baby’s not doing that” or like, “Uh-uh, no, no, I’m doing this, I’m the father.” No, we actually, you know come to a point where we talk things out first and see the outcome of you know the good and the bad. (G)

3.2.3 Theme: How we co-parent has an impact on our child

A final theme was generated from a few fathers who expressed insight into how their practices as co-parents impacted their child. Under this main theme, two subthemes were created: (1) I believe how we co-parent impacts our child, and (2) I believe co-parenting well is in the best interest of our child.

3.2.3.1 I believe how we co-parent impacts our child

These fathers had considered how their co-parenting practices might impact their child and prioritized the child’s needs over any of their own difficulty navigating a post-separation relationship with their ex-partner. One father implied an understanding that as co-parents, he and his ex-partner could control what aspects of that co-parenting relationship they wished their
child to be exposed to: “There’s some arguments going on in the background that [our child] never hears.” (A) Another father focused on the understanding that he and his ex-partner, as parents, could ensure a consistent environment for their child, as well as prevent their child from playing one parent off against the other:

So we try to create that same environment wherever he is, and it’s kind of the same rules and the same structure […]. He knows that, he knows that we also speak not in front of him, so I’ll tell him that I’m going to send a message to [his mother] and vice-versa, so that his intents to play us off against each other have not been too successful. (F)

Another father discussed his awareness that children can pick up on subtle cues between parents and expressed that as co-parents, there is a need to manage such cues:

I mean we make sure we talk to each other with respect, keep the tone you know what I mean nice and pleasant, you know what I mean even if you could be saying nice things, but the tone is off, you know what I mean, children key in to all that, so we’re very aware of the environment we create when we’re, when we’re together. (H)

3.2.3.2 I believe co-parenting well is in the best interest of our child

Fathers in this theme also indicated that behaving as co-operative co-parents was in the best interest of their child, even when that co-parenting relationship might be difficult for them to achieve as ex-partners:

[…] we still get along very well even though we’re not together, because we’re both mature, logical thinking adults and you know, what’s in the best interest for our daughter is for us to be copasetic when we’re together as a unit even though we’re not together in that way, you know. So I’m glad that we both understand that, and we’re both very self-aware of our situation, what it takes to be parents to my daughter and I’m lucky to have someone who is on the same level as me, and that works great for my daughter and it’s been working beautifully and I hope it keeps going. (H)

In conclusion, three themes were generated from the analysis of separated fathers with no history of DV perpetration: (1) I value mum’s involvement with our child, (2) We’re good as co-parents and (3) How we co-parent impacts our child. Although these themes may be construed as broadly positive endorsements of their ex-partners as mothers and of their co-parenting relationship, the analysis of the data also revealed nuances: Despite the mostly positive responses, fathers still described areas of disagreement, and noted specific differences
in their parenting approaches. However, the fathers mitigated the importance of these areas of difference by describing the constructive ways in which they approached disagreements with their ex-partner, and by indicating that the aspects of the mother’s parenting that were different were not overly concerning, especially within the broader context of their praise of her parenting. This analysis demonstrates that overall, fathers in the community group had positive perceptions of both their co-parenting relationship and their ex-partner as a mother.

3.3 Positive Co-Parenting DV Fathers

As mentioned previously, there were two fathers with a history of DV perpetration whose responses were qualitatively different to the other DV fathers. Their responses appeared highly comparable to the community group. In order to ensure that their responses were truly similar to the community group and did not merely appear so at the surface level, their responses were analyzed using both the DV codes and the community group codes. This analysis showed that these fathers were not accurately represented by the themes and codes for the fathers with a history of DV perpetration. Instead, they were represented by the themes and codes for the community fathers without a history of DV perpetration, as reported below.

Under the theme “I value mum’s involvement”, the two positive co-parenting fathers made both general and specific positive statements about their ex-partner as a mother: “She is an incredibly loving person, an incredibly loving mother […] she does everything, she puts [our daughter] first in everything she does […] she’s always finding extra-curricular activities for her to do.” (4)

Like the community fathers, when the positive co-parenting fathers criticized their ex-partner’s parenting, they mitigated that criticism by emphasizing how good they perceived her to be as parent or by minimizing the impact of the criticism. One father remarked that he felt his ex-partner never said no to their child, but then immediately noted, “[…] which is a bad thing but it’s good too because sometimes you’re not supposed to say no all the time.” (8) The other positive co-parenting father made one criticism, describing his perception that his ex-partner gave in too easily to their daughter, but that, “[…] other than that, she is a fantastic mother, and there’s nothing bad to say about her, at all.” (4)
Finally, like the community fathers, one of the positive co-parenting fathers described how he felt his ex-partner was able to make a unique contribution to parenting their daughter by virtue of being her mother, “Her mom, her mom keeps the female structure proper ’cause there’s only so much a father could do when he’s trying to teach a female.” (8)

The two positive co-parenting fathers were also captured by the second community group theme “We’re good as co-parents”. Under this theme, both fathers made positive statements about themselves and their ex-partners as co-parents, while also expressing that they did not have unrealistic expectations about agreeing about everything, “I think we’re not exactly on the same page when it comes to everything about her. We work together, we agree on things, we discuss everything, you know, we don’t make decisions without talking to each other first.” (4) The positive co-parenting fathers indicated that they had a high level of agreement about parenting with their ex-partners, and noted that they took a constructive method of approaching disagreements when they occurred. One of the fathers explained:

But her mom or I will have her own reasons for what we don’t want and what we want, so we have to compromise, come to a, a agreement on what’s better, you know what I mean? So we compare what’s better, a lot of the times decisions are better for our seedling. (8)

One of the positive co-parenting fathers described the positive quality of his communication with his ex-partner. The other father indicated that he and his ex-partner had low levels of disagreement in their co-parenting relationship, as well as a good amount of communication about parenting their child, “[…] it involves a lot of communication, which, which, which is good, the communication is there.” (4)

Finally, one of the two positive co-parenting fathers was also captured in the third community group theme “Our co-parenting impacts our child.” This father showed both an awareness of how his co-parenting behaviours with his ex-partner impact his child, as well as an understanding that having a functional co-parenting relationship was in his child’s best interest:

You don’t have to be together but you have to work together, you gotta be strong, you gotta be strong-willed too. If you’re not strong-willed then a lot of things won’t work, and your kids, your kid will fall into a slight gap […]. (8)
In sum, two of the DV fathers provided responses that were not only more similar to the community group than to the DV group, but when analyzed using the codes that were created from the community group analysis, were indistinguishable from the community fathers’ responses. These fathers’ responses fit within all three community group themes of (1) I value mum’s involvement with our child, (2) We’re good as co-parents, and (3) Our co-parenting impacts our child.

4. Discussion

Analyses of the fathers’ interviews regarding their co-parenting relationship with their ex-partner revealed qualitative differences between the group of fathers with a history of DV perpetration and the group of community fathers with no history of DV perpetration. The community group responses reflected co-parenting relationships in which the fathers valued their ex-partner’s contribution as a mother, felt that they were able to co-parent effectively with their ex-partner, and perceived that the way in which they co-parented impacted their child. Conversely, fathers with a history of DV perpetration described their ex-partners as poor mothers who were to blame for their distressed or broken-down co-parenting relationship. Unlike fathers in the community group, the DV fathers identified difficulties in the co-parenting relationship as the (sole) fault of their ex-partner. Although both groups of fathers described disagreements in their co-parenting relationships, only fathers with a history of DV perpetration expressed these disagreements in terms of their ex-partner as a bad mother and as to blame for their difficulties co-parenting.

There are limitations inherent in all methodological approaches, and this study is no exception to these limitations. The following discussion must be understood within the context of a small sample size whose results cannot be generalized to the broader population of DV and non-DV, post-separation co-parents. The mixed results in the group of DV fathers in particular underscores the need to further investigate co-parenting post-separation for fathers with a history of DV using larger sample sizes, other measurement approaches, and other analysis methodologies. However, the rich qualitative data presented here do suggest discussion points, tentative conclusions, and possible future lines of research worth considering in the broader context of DV and co-parenting research. These may be fruitful to pursue with methods that may produce data that are more likely generalize to broader populations.
The results indicate that conflict in post-separation co-parenting for fathers with a history of DV may vary from that of community fathers not merely as a matter of frequency or even intensity, but as a function of a qualitatively different pattern of co-parenting. Instead of mimicking the results of the fathers with no history of DV, there may be clusters of markers associated with a history of DV that could be easily envisioned to lead to significant post-separation conflict and abuse. Like the wealth of research showing that the end of a romantic relationship in which there has been DV does not guarantee that the abuse of the women will cease, the results of this study emphasize that the cessation of the romantic relationship in which DV has occurred is likely not a panacea that predicts the end of difficulty between the parents (Brown, 2006; Hester & Radford, 1996; Hotton, 2001; Humphreys & Thiara, 2002; Kelly, 1999; Radford, Sayer, & AMICA, 1999; Saunders, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2002; Wilson & Daly, 2002).

These results dovetail with a pattern seen in research on fathering of domestically violent men. This pattern has shown that these fathers often lack insight into the effect that their violence has on their children (Buston, 2010; Haland, Lundgren, Eri, & Liden, 2014; Rothman, Mandel, & Silverman, 2007; Salisbury, Henning, & Holdford, 2009). Abusive fathers are also more likely than non-violent fathers to use hostile, coercive parenting practices, to lack in self-esteem and child-centered parenting skills, to provide inconsistent parenting, to be unable to prioritize their children’s needs over their own, and to undermine their partner’s mothering even when the men express a desire to be a father and emphasize the importance of this role to them (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Edelson, Mbilinyi, & Shetty, 2003; Fox & Benson, 2004; Fox, Sayers, & Bruce, 2002; Perel & Peled, 2008; Scott & Crooks, 2004; Sturge & Glaser, 2000).

The DV fathers’ blaming of their ex-partner is particularly worrisome in the context of their lack of insight into how their co-parenting impacts their child. This combination sets the stage for children to be exposed to ongoing parental conflict by fathers who lack the insight to see how such exposure negatively impacts their child. Holt’s (2015) child interviews demonstrated just such a situation, in which fathers with a history of DV perpetration exposed their children to criticism and denigration of their mother.

Situating the results of this study within the context of studies reporting mothers’ perspectives of co-parenting with a history of DV underscores the difficult position professionals are likely to face when assessing these families. On the one hand, results of this study indicate that the father
may confront the professional with a narrative that describes his ex-partner as a very bad mother who causes difficulty with co-parenting, and as such he ought to have control of the children. On the other hand, other studies (e.g., Holt, 2015; Morrison, 2015) suggest that the mother may report to a professional that her ex-partner is constantly critical and tries to control her through contact with their children. Within this context, it is essential that these narratives are considered together and viewed with the intent of identifying what patterns of behaviour and perspectives may contribute to ongoing post-separation violence. Such consideration requires a careful weighing of evidence and a search for patterns of behaviour in both parents. It may be easier to identify and find evidence of poor parenting on the mother’s side than to search for and discover evidence of a father’s controlling behaviours or minimization of his own negative impact on the co-parenting relationship or child. The relative difficulty of finding evidence for such control or minimization may create a situation in which the father may be perceived as accurately describing their ex-partner as a poor parent who is to blame for co-parenting difficulties, when the reality is more complex.

Pointing out this challenge is not intended to imply that fathers’ perspectives should be discounted or characterized as untrustworthy. Instead, it underscores that one way to approach fathers’ perspectives is to understand that the way in which the father frames the co-parenting relationship, and his ex-partner as a mother, in itself provides information about the father. A father who lays all the blame for their difficulties on his ex-partner, thereby avoiding assuming any responsibility for the co-parenting relationship, and who lacks insight as to how this dynamic impacts his child, will likely require support in order to achieve a healthy co-parenting relationship. This is true even if the mother also requires support with her parenting.

Even if fathers’ reports on their co-parenting relationship are conceptualized in part as providing information about the father, there remains the question of whether the mothers in this study, whom the DV fathers described in overwhelmingly negative tones, might be understood to be “bad” mothers by more objective standards. If this were the case, it could make the DV fathers’ narratives less reflective of them as co-parents, and more reflective of their frustration with an objectively lacking co-parent. There is some evidence to suggest that this is not the case. First, the two positive co-parenting DV fathers gave responses that were respectful of their co-parent and showed insight into how their co-parenting impacts their child. When these fathers criticized their ex-partner, they did so in a way that mitigated the severity of the criticism. They reported
that they were co-parenting well and taking a constructive approach to disagreements. These two cases suggest that it is unlikely that there is some characteristic of couples with a history of DV that make it almost inevitable that the women are bad mothers who single-handedly cause all the co-parenting distress. In any case, even without these two positive co-parenting DV father narratives, such a conclusion would necessarily be predicted on the idea that only women who make bad mothers/co-parents end up in domestically violent relationships. Furthermore, it is still unlikely that even a more objectively poor mother is all bad, all the time, and that she does not have some redeeming characteristics that make her valuable as a parent and co-parent. Neglecting to identify such characteristics likely offers more information about the informant than about the mother. In addition, it is worth recalling that some of the censure the DV fathers made concerning aspects of their ex-partner’s parenting made objectively less sense as criticism (e.g., letting children watch TV, the mother’s prioritization of the children’s needs). Alongside a lack of insight into how their own co-parenting behaviours impact their children’s wellbeing, these findings suggest that the overwhelmingly critical description of their ex-partners is as much a reflection of the father’s perspective of the mother, and his approach to co-parenting, as it is an objective reflection of the ex-partners as mothers.

It is notable that not all of the DV fathers in this study described their co-parenting relationship in a predominantly negative and blame-assigning way. The presence of the positive co-parenting DV fathers suggests that not all DV fathers can be understood in the same way. The difference between their responses and the responses of the other DV fathers underscores the need to assess what is occurring in the co-parenting relationship, rather than to assume that the relationship is or is not functioning. It may be that these more positive co-parenting DV fathers progressed over time from a negative view of their ex-partner’s parenting, a lack of responsibility taking, and a lack insight, to a more functional co-parenting relationship. There is also the possibility that these fathers and their post-separation co-parenting relationships are somehow intrinsically different to the other fathers in the DV group, as might be suggested by Hardesty et al.’s (2008) research with mothers. The results of Hardesty et al.’s study indicated that it was the severity of previous violence that predicted whether or not DV fathers used the post-separation co-parenting relationship as a means to continue the abuse. Whatever the potential explanations may be, the results of this research suggest that post-separation co-parenting relationships for fathers with a history of DV will likely require ongoing assessment in order to ascertain the quality of that relationship. The results of this study suggest that it may be
that some fathers can be supported over time to achieve functional co-parenting relationships, but that this may be a difficult goal for other fathers to achieve. It may be possible that careful ongoing assessment could identify which co-parents are on the path to achieving a healthy, co-parenting relationship, and which are likely to experience and expose their children to continued post-separation conflict and abuse. The qualitative differences seen in this study between fathers with and without a history of DV point to the possibility that it may be feasible to identify clusters of markers that, as part of assessment, could help distinguish which co-parents are likely to display more substantial or ongoing conflict.

Any careful assessment of a co-parenting relationship requires gathering information from more than a single source. It is a limitation of this study that it investigated only the fathers’ perspectives on the co-parenting relationship. It would be advantageous for future research to obtain the perspectives of multiple invested parties, such as the mother, the child(ren), and professionals working with the family. It is also worth considering that the DV fathers in this study were all in the midst of completing a court-mandated domestic violence intervention program, and as such their co-parenting relationships may differ from the co-parenting relationships of post-separation DV fathers who have not received any intervention. This may be particularly pertinent when considering the results of the positive co-parenting DV fathers. Another limitation of this research is that the fathers may not have had as healthy co-parenting relationships as they presented. The short response time given to each father (four minutes), and the high demand characteristics of speaking to research assistants in a university setting, may have resulted in fathers presenting a healthier narrative of their perspectives on co-parenting than might have been revealed with deeper investigation. However, it is worth noting that even within the short time frame and with the high demand characteristics, fathers in the DV group still expressed predominantly negative, blaming narratives, and struggled to speak in a constructive way about their ex-partner or co-parenting. That the fathers could not suppress the blame even given the study’s methodology speaks to the deep-seated nature of the lack of responsibility-taking and insight that these fathers showed.

The results of this study underscore the difficulty of intervening with co-parenting fathers with a history of DV: If the fathers’ overarching perspective on their co-parenting relationship is one in which they view their ex-partner in an extremely negative light, blame her for problems in co-parenting, do not recognize the impact on their child, and feel powerless to change the situation,
they will be very difficult to engage in intervention programs to improve co-parenting via their own behaviour. However, some research has shown that when violent fathers can achieve insight into the effect their violence has on their children, this insight can be used as motivation to be better for their children (Fox et al., 2002; Haland et al., 2014). This suggests that creating insight for fathers into the impact of a poor co-parenting relationship might be a starting point for leveraging the motivation to take responsibility for their role as a co-parent.

In line with other research showing that the end of the romantic abusive relationship does not ensure the beginning of a safe, co-operative post-separation relationship, the results of this study suggest that the end of an abusive romantic relationship is not enough to ensure that children are no longer at risk for negative impacts on their development through compromised co-parenting relationships. As such, policies that promote father-contact in an indiscriminate way do not take in to account the reality of how co-parenting in the post-separation, father-perpetrated DV context is likely occurring, or the potential negative impact that co-parenting breakdowns can have on children. Policy and practice should reflect the reality that the end of the abusive romantic relationship does not necessarily predict a functional co-parenting relationship. Nor does it necessarily predict the end of child exposure to parental conflict, particularly in the context of fathers who blame mothers for co-parenting difficulties, and who, with lack of insight as to how it may impact their child, may be exposing their children to this blame. These results suggest that, even when the abusive romantic relationship has ceased, many fathers who have perpetrated DV may be in need of support in order to safely and effectively co-parent. A system which indiscriminately promotes father-contact because it is concerned only with the negative impact of father absence, and that does not understand the nuances of research that highlight the possible negative impact of unsupported father presence, is doing a disservice to the children in its purview (Holt, 2015).

It is clear from the lack of research on post-separation co-parenting of couples with a history of domestic violence that much work has yet to be done in order to understand the ways in which these parents require support. It may be fruitful to more deeply investigate the differences between positive co-parenting DV fathers and DV fathers who still lack insight and responsibility-taking for difficulties in their co-parenting relationship. Examination of the co-parenting trajectories and relationships of positive co-parenting DV fathers may provide crucial insights that could be harnessed in order to support other co-parenting DV fathers. It may also
help researchers and professionals to understand which of these DV fathers are likely to be able to achieve healthy co-parenting relationships. Acknowledging and understanding the risk of post-separation father-contact is not about assuming that these fathers will have a negative impact on their children, or that they should be indiscriminately refused access to their children. Rather, it is about recognizing the potential on-going risk to children and beginning to address that risk in ways that may support some DV fathers to be ‘good enough’ fathers and co-parents (Holt, 2015).

Another line of future research would be to compare the post-separation co-parenting relationships of fathers with a history of DV to post-separation co-parents with formerly highly conflictual, but not abusive, relationships. For example, such a comparison group might consist of post-separation co-parents from previously high-conflict marriages who underwent litigious divorces. The literature on divorced parents suggests a typology of post-separation co-parenting relationships that falls in to three categories: high conflict co-parenting, undermining co-parenting, and cooperative co-parenting (Lamela, Figueiredo, Bastos, & Feinberg, 2015), and research in to the trajectories of post-divorce co-parenting relationship suggests that although some ex-partners show decreases in conflict over time, some high-conflict post-separation co-parenting relationships remain high-conflict over time (Drapeau et al., 2009). Given such research, it is somewhat surprising that all ten of the non-DV fathers in this study presented such positive co-parenting relationships. As discussed above, this may be due in part to the methodological approach. Therefore, using the high-conflict and more distressed co-parenting groups of non-violent fathers as comparison for DV fathers may provide further insight into how these groups may or may not differ, as well as into the ways previously or continuingly violent fathers co-parent in the post-separation context. Such insights might then be incorporated into or identified as areas to target for intervention.

The interviews in this research demonstrated differences between community and DV fathers’ post-separation co-parenting relationships that indicate that the end of the abusive romantic relationship does not automatically result in a healthy coparenting relationship. Nor does it remove the risk of negative impacts on children’s development due to ongoing parental conflict and/or abuse. Within the context of recent policy changes that indiscriminately assume that all father contact is beneficial to children, these results add to a growing body of research that emphasizes the need for a nuanced approach to DV father-involvement in the post-separation
context. Because the quality of the co-parenting relationship is critical to children’s development, the evidence of this study suggests that post-separation parents with a history of father perpetrated DV are likely to require ongoing assessment and support in order to ensure that children are not at risk of negative outcomes due to co-parenting relationship conflict.
References


Appendix A

Table 1. Themes and subthemes for DV fathers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My ex-partner is a bad mother</td>
<td>She’s a bad mother in these specific ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She’s not a great person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have only limited positive opinions about her as a mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She’s responsible for our difficulties co-parenting</td>
<td>She’s responsible for our breakdown or absence of co-parenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She makes it difficult to communicate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She’s responsible for our high level of disagreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She makes it impossible to handle disagreements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She undermines my authority as a parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She has power over contact and decisions about our child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Themes and subthemes for community fathers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I value my ex-partner’s involvement with our child</td>
<td>She’s a good mother overall and in these specific ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She contributes to raising our child in unique ways by virtue of being a mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She’s a good person overall and in these specific ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She’s a good role model for our child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We’re good as co-parents</td>
<td>We do a good job as co-parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We communicate frequently and respectfully about our child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We mostly agree on how to parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We disagree sometimes, but not fundamentally, on how to parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We take a constructive approach to disagreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How we co-parent has an impact on our child</td>
<td>I believe how we co-parent impacts our child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I believe co-parenting well is in the best interest of our child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>