

# Batterer Interventions May Help the Few Abusers Who Finish the Programs

By **Claudia Boyd-Barrett** • May 8, 2017



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Andre Fleder of Oxnard had multiple run-ins with the justice system before he began to break free of a lifetime of anger and violence. For years, the people around him bore the brunt of his rage: relatives, his kids and intimate partners. Each time he went to court on a domestic violence charge, the judge ordered him to attend 52-week batterer intervention program, classes that combine group therapy and education for people convicted of domestic abuse. Begrudgingly, Fleder attended, but quickly slipped back to his old, aggressive ways.

Until now. Fleder, 40, recently completed his third batterer intervention program, this one run by the Oxnard-based non-profit Coalition for Family Harmony. At this point in his life, Fleder said, he was ready to learn from the program and do the work needed to change his behavior. Homeless and facing jail time, he'd hit an all-time low. Determined to put himself on a positive track and set a good example for his 13-year-old son, he enrolled in a sober living house to address a long-standing drug problem, and attended the batterer intervention classes willingly, he said.

"It really helps and it really works if you're open minded and willing to allow the process to occur," Fleder said. "If you attend it and just sit there with your arms crossed and you've got a messed up look up on your face and you're really not participating in the class, it won't help you."

There are dozens of batterer intervention programs in California. State law requires people on probation for a domestic violence conviction to attend a program for a year, one of the most stringent mandates in the country. The programs offer a minimum of two hours of

classes a week, and vary in content and approach. However, under state law they must include certain components, such as education about the nature of domestic abuse, how it affects children and others, and techniques to stop violent behavior. Programs are approved by county probation departments and frequently run by non-profits.

Batterer intervention programs began to surface in the late 1970s and have expanded dramatically since then. Despite their prevalence, there is limited research into how well the programs work and what strategies are most effective at getting perpetrators to change. Some critics, citing notoriously high dropout rates, say batterer intervention classes don't actually work.

### **Change Possible for the Few Who Finish**

On average, about half of participants don't complete batterer intervention programs, according to Jeffrey Edelson, professor of social work at the University of California, Berkeley and an expert in intimate partner violence.

Part of the problem is that once men enroll in a program, their partner, family or friends assume the perpetrator is getting the help they need, Edelson explained, and in many instances the court system doesn't follow through to make sure they keep attending. As these pressures subside, the men lose motivation and drop out.

"When you look at the overall picture and you look at it in comparison to other programs like substance abuse treatment program, they are relatively effective, but they're not the sole answer," said Edelson, who has lead batterer intervention programs himself. "As I would tell any woman, you cannot depend on a batterer enrolling in a batterer intervention program for your safety."

A task force report to the California Attorney General in 2005 found that dropout rates in some California counties run as high as 89 percent, citing lack of meaningful enforcement as the main problem. Many programs allowed men to skip multiple sessions without reporting their absences to the court system, as they are required to do by law, the task force found. When the men did get sent to court for absences they were often just reenrolled in a program instead of facing sanctions for not attending. Programs, courts and probation departments need to improve how they hold men accountable, the task force concluded.

Yet evidence shows batterer intervention programs do help stop domestic violence among those men who do stick with the classes. A large study of batterer intervention programs, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found that four years after enrolling, 90 percent of participants had not assaulted their partners within the previous year. These findings may reflect the time it takes for perpetrators to absorb new, non-violent habits. People who are violent toward others frequently grew up in abusive households and have deeply ingrained thought patterns and behaviors that they've carried for many years, Edelson said. "These men have learned something for 20 to 30 years and you expect them to change it rapidly in a treatment program that meets once a week," he said.

### **Space for Change**

The best programs seem to be those that combine education about the impact of domestic violence with therapeutic strategies that help perpetrators identify why they're violent and come up with non-violent ways to respond to situations, Edelson said.

One program that's enjoyed considerable success is The Center for Violence-Free Relationships in Placerville. The center enrolls about 200 men and women in their batterer intervention sessions each year. Most are mandated to attend by the court but some attend voluntarily, said the center's executive director Matt Huckabay.

Huckabay said many batterer intervention programs focus on reprimanding abusers, teaching them about what domestic violence is and trying to hold them accountable. But about eight years ago, the center realized that approach wasn't working well. Treating abusers like they were bad people reinforced a sense of shame they already felt about themselves and didn't allow space for change, Huckabay said. Data also showed that up to 70 percent of clients had experienced childhood trauma and abuse, and they needed help processing that and learning new relationships skills, he said.

The center now makes a point of calling out bad behavior, but not labeling the perpetrators as bad people, Huckabay said. The intervention curriculum also explores in depth how childhood experiences may play a role in the participants' violence, and how to change that behavior. "It is generally new information for them that how they were raised impacts how they show up as adults," Huckabay said.

Since making the changes, the program's graduation rate is almost 70 percent, up from about 30 to 40 percent under the prior curriculum, he said. Working to build self-esteem and exploring childhood trauma is also part of The Coalition for Family Harmony program in Oxnard that Andre Fleder attended. Fleder said he was stunned when he began to consider the answer to one question in the class: Where did you learn violence from? Suddenly, it dawned on Fleder that he'd learned violence from his dad, who he said used to hit him when he became angry. "In my subconscious mind, that's how I thought you dealt with things that upset you, with hitting," Fleder said. "I thought, man, that's a trip. It was a learned behavior." Even with the best intervention strategies, old habits can be hard to break and men convicted of domestic violence are often struggling with other problems such as unemployment, homelessness, or lack of job flexibility to attend a program, which can affect their ability to stay in the classes, said Krista Niemczyk, public policy manager for the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence, an advocacy group.

She said batterer intervention programs are one part of a broader strategy for addressing domestic violence that includes early intervention, educating young people about healthy relationships, social support for perpetrators released from jail so they can find housing and jobs, and outreach to survivors.

"We need to continue thinking about batterers intervention as one component of our response and not a solution in and of itself," she said. "Putting the sole burden for preventing future domestic violence on batterer's intervention is probably a pretty high bar to put on any program."