The Restorative Parenting program leads men who have been violent and are fathers through a process to safely restore their relationships with their children. Through a group counseling experience, the program helps these fathers build empathy toward their children, and take responsibility for their abusive behavior and the impact it has had on other family members. The Restorative Parenting curriculum is being used as a stand-alone program or as part of batterer intervention programs and parenting classes.

HISTORY
Restorative Parenting is part of the Restorative Community and Family Frameworks Project created in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota in 1999. The program has its roots in the experiences of batterer intervention program staff who found that: 1) men in the batterers’ groups seemed genuinely interested in talking about their children and how their children may have been affected by violence in the home; 2) the men wanted practical strategies for improving their parenting skills and rebuilding the relationships with their children; and 3) none of these men seemed to have an understanding of where to begin this process of rebuilding. Despite these findings by staff, very little time was spent on these issues in the existing programs.

New activities to address these issues began to emerge in the mid-1990s as a result of work with men’s parenting groups and applying restorative justice principles in therapeutic settings. These activities and the materials developed for them were tested for several years, and in 1999 a curriculum was drafted. This curriculum includes the guiding principles for the program, underlying assumptions of the work, and a description of activities to use with batterers’ groups. Restorative Parenting continues to be refined through the newly developed men’s parenting program at the Domestic Abuse Project (DAP) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The Restorative Parenting framework has also been implemented in several Minnesota counties, as well as in some other states.

OVERVIEW
The Restorative Parenting framework is based on several psychology theories, including attachment, cognitive behavior, and empowerment, as well as the principles of restorative justice. It is a developmental approach that emphasizes identifying strengths and increasing the capacity of the fathers to build, when safe, a respectful relationship with their children. There are two priorities for this work: 1) to maintain safety for all family members, and 2) to increase accountability for the fathers’ abusive behavior.

It is important for the men in the program to understand that the violence in the home has redefined how the children see them as fathers. Restorative Parenting helps these men better understand their children’s perspectives, increase empathy for their children, and improve the quality of their connection with their children.
One of the basic premises of the Restorative Parenting program is that when a major trauma, violent event, or threat to one’s safety occurs in a family, it causes the unwritten relationship contract between the parent and child to be broken. It is the responsibility of the parent to initiate and lead the process for restoration of the relationship. It is important for the fathers to understand that it is not developmentally appropriate to expect the children to make first steps toward reconciliation. When these men can accept this and the impact their violence has had on their children, healing and restoration can begin.

There are six essential components of the program, which distinguish it from other parenting or batterer intervention programs:

1. Principles of restorative parenting—that parents are responsible to the family; that parents must take care of themselves as well as their children; that children determine the pace of the restoration process; that individuals have choices and are responsible for their own behaviors.

2. Practitioner assumptions—that all parents have strengths; that all parents have the capacity to change their unhealthy behaviors; that parents want what is best for their children; that domestic violence negatively affects how children view their parents; that parents and children should not forget the actions of the past.

3. The contract—is a binding agreement from the parent to the child; has 30 separate commitments to the child, including, “I will keep you safe from all harm,” and “I will respect your decisions and opinions.”

4. Building empathy—men must understand how their violence affects their children.

5. Creating a plan for relationship restoration—structured exercises that fathers complete; plan includes communication, self-awareness, listening, action, debriefing, evaluating, and integrating learning into future behaviors.

6. Self-care—manage self when feelings of violence are escalating or when a situation may lead to violent feelings; develop healthy alternatives so difficult situations do not result in violence; better understand the decisions that led to past violence.

**ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CHALLENGES**

Restorative Parenting is increasingly viewed as one way to help batterers stop their violence. It is one point on a continuum of care for men who have been violent, and it offers promise as a way to prevent future violence. However, it also raises some areas of concern. For example, the term “restorative” leads some people to believe that the program is trying to restore the relationship between the batterer and his partner. In addition, some people believe that it is too dangerous to have batterers work on restoring their relationships with their children, and feel that the focus on fathering is a distraction from holding the men accountable for their violence. Others do not believe that these men can actually change their behaviors.
The principles of the program make clear that the ongoing focus is on the men taking responsibility for their own behaviors and exercising self-control. As men look at how their behaviors have affected their children, they are better able to acknowledge the harms they have caused and to hold themselves accountable. This work on their relationships to their children may also help them better acknowledge the harm their violence has caused their partners. This program assists men in being realistic about what they can expect from their children, and to realize that their past actions will not be forgotten. The relationship will not be “fixed” by participation in this program, but the men can prepare themselves for the possibility of responsible interaction with their children in the future.

It is a challenge to educate the more “traditional” programs about the value of the Restorative Parenting approach. To be successful, program facilitators must create an environment of trust in which the men can begin to develop empathy for their children, acknowledge the limits of past parenting styles, and be open to learning new skills. Many of the men want to have good relationships with their children, but do not know how to go about it. These men may, at first, try to blame their partners for any problem behaviors they see in their children. Instead, they must focus on ending the violence, whether or not it is the sole cause of these problems. The group exercises and activities help them do that.

LESSONS LEARNED
Flexibility is a key ingredient of success for these programs. Facilitators must be willing to adjust the materials and exercises to the needs of each group. It is critical to understand what stands in these men’s way, what negative views of parenting they may have, or inappropriate expectations of their children. It is also important to understand how the men view themselves as fathers, what they think are their strengths and weaknesses as fathers, and where they have resources and support. Men can explore their own stories about being fathers and men. Facilitators take these new understandings and help the men apply them to the process of restoring their relationships with their children.

This approach is a key intervention point on the continuum of care for men who have been violent. And it is also a domestic violence prevention strategy. It is a way for men to develop deeper commitments to being accountable for their behaviors and ending their violence. It is a way to help them have responsible relationships with their children, so that these children do not also grow up to be violent or adult victims of violence.