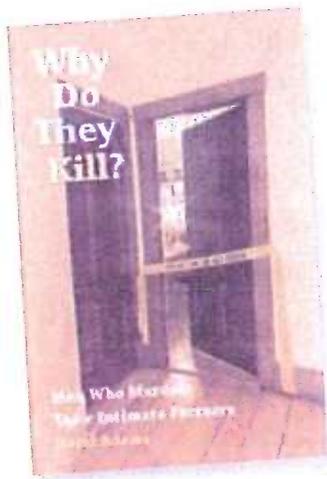


# Watching Dad Watching Mom: Early Learning for Men Who Kill Their Intimate Partners

DAVID ADAMS

**W**hy Do They Kill? is based on post-mortem analysis of intimate partner homicides and attempted homicides of women in Massachusetts. This included in-depth interviews (of up to five-hours each) with 31 men serving time for having killed their intimate partners, as well as 20 women who suffered near fatal assaults. In conducting these interviews, I sought to identify the immediate triggers to these



crimes. By moving backwards in time through the lives of the perpetrators, I also sought to understand the long-term factors. I found that there was much in the killer's adult lives that foreshadowed their murder crimes. Most of these men fit the profile of possessively jealous husbands or boyfriends, whose jealous rages appeared early on in their relationships and grew steadily worse over time, often escalating to terroristic threats, severe assaults, and stalking.

These findings suggest that intimate partner homicides are neither random acts nor 'crimes of passion' as commonly portrayed in the media. Rather, they are culminations of longstanding grievances on the part of abusive men. It appears that these kinds of killings are the end result of an interaction between the perpetrator

and the victim. From the victim's perspective, there were fairly clear turning points in the relationship. These began with the first appearance of violence and the abuser's initial apologies and promises that it would not happen again. This was followed by the reappearance of violence. By this stage, many perpetrators had stopped apologizing and instead began blaming their victims. In response, many victims expressed dissatisfaction and talked of ending the relationship. This seemed to trigger increased surveillance and stalking of the victim by the perpetrator. And while

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most victims had already been subjected to rape and sexual humiliation prior to separation, some said that this became more severe over time. As victims became increasingly unhappy and resistant, the perpetrators continually adjusted and escalated their abuse tactics.

Was there anything in these men's childhoods to explain such persistent adult behavior?

Forty-eight percent of the killers said that they had been physically abused as children while 55% said they had witnessed spouse abuse. Overwhelmingly, their fathers were the perpetrators of both kinds of abuse. Fathers were also rated as more verbally abusive, more 'cold', and more likely 'absent'. Twice as many of the killers said that as children, they felt more fearful of their fathers and closer to their mothers. Despite this, it was their fathers whom they most emulated. Some of the killers talked of coming to admire the fathers that they once feared. Child experts say that this reflects the need of some children to identify with the more powerful parent. The child seeks to shed feelings of vul-



nerability and anxiety by adopting the abusive parent's attributes. For boys, it is simultaneously a way of resolving conflicts about male identity. Many of the killers came to appreciate their fathers physical violence as a way of helping to "toughen me up", as one man put it. Another man said, "I was just tired of being scared. But I was attracted to my father's philosophy, which was to 'do onto others before they do onto you'."

In some cases, the men's admiration for their fathers was accompanied by a growing disdain for the mothers whom they blamed for their failure to protect them. Experts on children who are exposed to family violence say that one common effect of such exposure is the development of insecurity and anxiety about intimacy. This in turn can lead to difficulty establishing relationships that rely upon intimacy and trust. Most of the jealous killers appeared to have been perpetually vigilant toward their intimate partners, and this only seemed to escalate over the course of their relationships.

It appears that some male children who are exposed to serious domestic violence learn to emulate the attachment style of the abusive parent, one that involves possessive control. Though possessive control doesn't always lead to murder, it is a toxic condition that will surely harm relationships, unless better examples are provided through early intervention.

David Adams is a Licensed Psychologist who is Co-Director of Emerge, the nation's first abuser education program, founded in 1977. His book, *Why Do They Kill? Men Who Murder Their Intimate Partners* was published by Vanderbilt University Press in September 2007. "This book can be purchased online at [www.emergedv.com](http://www.emergedv.com)"