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PLUS: Parent abuse

Lifting the lid on a
destructive and
growing phenomenon



How should we respond to the hundreds of parents who write on internet message boards that they have been rebuffed when seeking help for the violence they suffer at home – sometimes over many years – and have even been accused of contributing to it themselves? How do we account for the fact that practitioners across many professions report being very familiar with an issue which does not have a proper name, and about which research within Britain is only emerging in the last five years?

Take one example: *“It started off with increased anger, irritability, being verbally aggressive, but then it escalated to the point that he was out of control of these angry feelings that were coming upon him, and it culminated in him being destructive within the house, so there was a lot of damage in our house. He bashed doors, he smashed pictures, he smashed windows. It was like an explosive anger that was erupting at this point in his violence ... And then he started to become more directly aggressive and threatening towards my husband and I.”*

A woman locks herself in the bathroom with her young children as threats are shouted and the door is kicked and smashed. A knife is wrestled from the young man standing against the front door demanding the car keys. The police receive a 999 call and turn up to find only one adult in the home. It looks like domestic violence, it certainly sounds like domestic violence, and the adults at the

Social worker and founder of the ‘Holes in the Wall’ blog, **Helen Bonnick** considers the plight of parents suffering violence at the hands of their children, exploring the complexities of an under-reported but deeply corrosive problem for thousands of families

The violence without a name

receiving end report that it feels like domestic violence, but these threats come from their own children. As such this can neither be described as, nor dealt with, as domestic violence because currently within the UK domestic violence, by definition, occurs between adults over the age of 18 (though the current consultation may change this) and many academics argue that the history and power relationships inherent in parent-child violence mean that such behaviour should be interpreted and understood very differently. For many of those involved it has become known as ‘parent abuse’.

For the last 40 or so years, researchers from

the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand in particular have sought to identify the determinants of such abusive behaviour. Parenting style is the easy culprit – hence the vicious and cutting responses on message boards to those highlighting their own plights, or government policies which indirectly hold parents to account – take, for instance, the ‘sentencing’ of parents to attend parenting classes. But what has become clear over the years is that this sort of behaviour can be found as easily within wealthy homes as in those less privileged, in strict families as well as libertarian, and in caring environments as well

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as those deemed dysfunctional.

The way a child is parented is only one facet of the problem and many other factors can also be prevalent. Some parents report that they cannot remember a time when there have not been difficulties in their relationship with a child (most often a son, but daughters are implicated in around a third of cases). Others are able to pinpoint the exact moment everything seemed to change.

Sometimes there is a clear link with substance abuse, mental health problems or learning difficulties. One of the foremost research-practitioners, Australian writer Eddie Gallagher, found that in up to 50% of parent abuse cases there had been previous instances of domestic violence witnessed by a teenager who was now expressing their own anger. Other children exhibiting the behaviour seem to have grown up believing themselves to be entitled to everything and anything.

There may or may not be actual physical harm involved. Verbal abuse and belittling is typical, theft of money or property common, sometimes the threat of violence alone prevails. Other children in the same family may show no such aggression, and the young person involved may themselves present as a very different person outside of the home.

According to a report by parenting charity Family Lives (formerly known as Parentline Plus) the abuse of parents by their teenage children seems to peak around age 13-15 years, but in some families children as young as eight may be involved in persistent and aggressive manipulation of their parent(s), a situation which contributes to the confusion over a name for this phenomenon. Parent abuse, child-to-parent violence (CPV), or even teenage violence to parents (TVP) all fall short of properly capturing the range of behaviours displayed, and themselves generate professional angst regarding labeling, power and the binary nature of family life presented. Of course, arguing over a name may seem like fiddling while Rome burns, but it is of real significance when the way a problem is understood plays such a part in determining not just who pays for help, but also the most appropriate form that assistance should take.

One of the key questions, which many researchers have tried to answer, is that of frequency. Being able to count something is important in terms of positioning within a

hierarchy of action. Too small a problem and it has to wait. Put the number too high, though, and you are not taken seriously. Suggesting that the figure for parents experiencing abuse at the hands of their children could be as high as 10-15%, as proposed in early research, may be met with disbelief.

How you count, what you count and where you count can all contribute to inflated or underestimated figures. Drawing on 20 years of work, Gallagher believes around 2-3% of families experience serious and ongoing abuse. It will undoubtedly be the case that social workers will encounter a higher figure than that for the general population, since the cohort they serve is one already defined as experiencing difficulties.

Reluctance

The reluctance of parents to seek help has been widely recognised in the literature around this subject and itself contributes to the lack of clarity around frequency. Shame is cited over and over again; a disbelief that this is happening to you, a sense that you must be to blame since you raised this child yourself – confirmed sometimes by your family's attitude and often by the state when you do seek help.

In this there are similarities to domestic violence which cannot be dismissed: parents will typically have experienced many, many events before seeking help, yet they are denied the possibility of evicting the aggressor since they continue to hold parental responsibilities.

The most recent Family Lives report, *When Family Life Hurts: Family Experience of Aggression in Children*, published in 2011, suggests that the phenomenon is increasing, up by 2% for physical aggression, according to an analysis of calls they received over the previous year, and 4% for verbal aggression. Whether this represents a real increase in frequency, or indicates that parents are better informed about the service, is hard to judge. What is not contested is that for the parents affected the stress can be intolerable and can, according to another Australian, Mary McKenna, a researcher and legal studies lecturer, lead to thoughts of suicide.

When the Labour Party came to power in 1997 support for children and families shot to the top of the agenda but in a way which described children as victims. Respect and responsibility were key concepts within the

development of domestic violence work, child welfare and youth justice, as parents were held to account for their poor record in raising the next generation. Parenting classes sprang up, initially serving those with younger children. While dedicated classes for parents of teens emerged over the next five years, the criticism was that they addressed only 'normal' teenage difficulties.

Even in 2005, there was thought to be only one programme within the UK specifically recognising the needs of parents of abusive teens. Set up in the Wirral, within the Education Welfare Service, as a response to the need to work with parents of truanting teens outside of the court system, the programme was seen to be extremely successful in supporting parents. Elsewhere around the country parents accessed help through an over-stretched Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), through informed and experienced individuals across various services, and through helplines such as Parentline Plus.

The good news for parents in 2012 is that, as awareness and expertise grows, resources are finally developing. Successful models of intervention have been introduced from both the US (Step-up) and Australia (Who's in Charge) and are being adapted for the UK in programmes around the country, working in parallel with both teens and parents. Respect, a leading authority on domestic violence work, has responded to the challenge too, having developed the Young People's Toolkit which can be accessed through its website.

These programmes seek to support parents, to enable young people to accept responsibility for their abusive behaviour and to work to realign the power relationships within the family. While CAMHS teams continue to offer their own support to parents and contribute to the growing body of knowledge and expertise, this dedicated and specialist support is finally reaching out to an abandoned and misunderstood group.

When abused parents are questioned they ask that the subject be recognised for what it is, and that the development of resources should continue in parallel with a growing national awareness, so when they do speak up they are taken seriously and not forced to endure further humiliation.

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