



Following up on some of the issues raised in her March article on parent abuse, **Helen Bonnicks** considers to what extent we can draw a causal link between parent-teen violence and violent tendencies witnessed in much younger children

Since the publication of my article on parent abuse in the March issue of PSW, a number of people have asked me how teen violence toward parents is connected to the disturbed and violent behaviour witnessed by practitioners in younger children. The primary aged child throwing chairs in the classroom and running amok with scissors, the foster child who shuts themselves away in their room one moment and is trashing the house the next, the child in the street angry at the world and letting us all know are some examples, but we will all have our own. There is no reason to assume these children are not

also acting out in the safety of their homes. Some perhaps more so, when the family offers the only place they can truly be themselves.

Are these the same children who will grow into abusive teenagers? What can we learn about causation or remedy from this younger group that might be relevant later? How big is the problem and what can we do about it?

The question that begs to be asked, is whether we can confidently say that it is the same younger children who grow up to be those who are violent in their teens. As with all questions of this complexity, the answer is both yes, and no! We are talking here about punching, kicking, damage to property,

threats to siblings and pets. Younger children will be more verbal in their aggression. Physical violence tends to take more prominence around the age of 10 or 11. Where good support is in place early on, there is every reason to hope that family conflict can be overcome, more positive, supportive relationships established and parenting styles adopted to reinforce this progress as children grow up.

But families do slip through the net, whether through their own disengagement, their invisibility, or the absence of appropriate service provision and so some will continue to experience conflict and violence that increases in frequency and

seriousness as the child gets older. Some families of teens will say that they feel the problem had always been there – they cannot remember a time without conflict, but others report that the early years had been calm, and that the rage and abuse had seemingly come out of nowhere, or from a later specific incident.

Where does the disturbed behaviour and violence come from in younger children? I would hope the students I work with would be able to hazard a guess at this one. If they offered me “poor parenting”, I would throw it back: too sloppy an answer and too complex an issue.

Undoubtedly there are families whose own experiences of being parented have given them fewer skills to work with. But in any relationship of two or more people there will be feedback in progress, which also needs to be recognised. Parental depression, exhaustion, lack of boundaries, poor behaviour – who can say which came first? Some will point to a culture of laissez-faire parenting, which leaves children uncontrolled, un-boundaried and perhaps feeling unsafe.

Some children may grow up in households believing themselves entitled to anything and everything. Attachment issues, abuse, domestic violence are acknowledged to be key determinants of child behaviour, and recent reports on family violence point to the devastating impact of family breakdown. Some families will negotiate this more or less successfully, though not without upset.

But where there is ongoing conflict over access for instance, or discipline, inconsistency or alienation, or where there was domestic violence involved in the relationship, it is these factors which are seen to be most damaging to the child. In the 2011 update to their report: *When Family Life Hurts*, Family Lives quote research suggesting children of parents who separate are four times as likely to experience behaviour problems, but that it is the inconsistency and ongoing conflict which is the most damaging.

The analysis of calls to their helpline revealed strong correlations between parental mental health, children’s aggression and violence and the child’s own poor mental health. Children presenting autistic spectrum behaviour or ADHD may be very hard to parent. We should not automatically assume it is the parent’s fault.

There are still issues around firmly pinpointing how widespread this problem is. This is going to depend on exactly what levels of behaviour we are trying to measure, before we even get to the problem of interpreting statistics. Family Lives found

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that calls to their helpline had increased even in the last year, but was this due to greater awareness? The organization, 4Children estimates that there are 4 million parents with dependent children currently having “serious and frequent conflicts” within their family and of the 120,000 ‘troubled families’ identified by the Prime Minister for special help, an estimated 80% have previously been in contact with services regarding domestic violence. Family Lives suggest that 6% of 5 – 16 year olds have a diagnosed conduct disorder, but also that over half of their callers identified the problem as having begun before or at the time of the child starting school.

Many of these children may well be unrecognised, invisible to the services to this point, as parents consistently minimise the difficulties, or hide the problem because of shame and stigma. As many as 44% of callers to the Family Lives helpline had not previously sought help with the extreme difficulties they reported.

We can’t really know exactly how big a problem we have. But more worryingly, we can certainly speculate that it will increase. As actions of the current government widen the gap between the haves and have-nots, as more children slip into poverty, as worklessness increases, as more relationships fail, as budgets and services are cut, one thing is certain that the strain on mental health and on stability will increase, all of these factors impacting on the levels of conflict within the family.

What help is there?

Recognising first that these are families for whom the preferred parenting programmes: Webster Stratton, Strengthening Families, Triple P etc, may be too late; or indeed may make too great a demand in terms of organisation or commitment at the stage they are at, there remains a clear need to further develop these services and to provide early intervention as a matter of priority to prevent further the slide into aggressive and violent behaviour.

For the families we are concerned with, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) may be the eventual source of help. Some will contact Family Lives where

they receive one-to-one, confidential, non-judgemental, empathetic phone-support. However, as with older children, we are starting to see a network of specialist services addressing the needs of families experiencing such abuse.

Hertfordshire Practical Parenting Programme recently won a grant from the Big Lottery Fund and was featured in an article in the Independent. They work with children aged 9 years upwards, offering intensive one to one parenting support in the home or other safe place, enabling parents to remodel their own behaviour, improve consistency and support change from their children. This is not short-term work. The Director, Sandra Ashley, indicates a need to work first to build up trust and reassurance before addressing the behaviour itself. We are in this for the long haul!

Whether from a mental health, economic, educational, or childcare point of view, it makes no sense not to act to support families experiencing the complete antithesis of what we are taught to expect in our homes. Early intervention to help families with parenting skills before things get too late, plus specialist support for families at the sharp end can help to break into the cycle of crime, low achievement, poor mental health and economic prospects which otherwise lie ahead.

But action is needed too in supporting families as they separate, and in addressing the multiple effects of ongoing domestic violence in so many homes. And as with the families of teenagers, we need greater campaigning to raise awareness. This is not something ‘normal’ in family life. It is not something that people should have to put up with. It should not be something parents feel ashamed to name and seek help for. The evidence base needs to grow and the stigma needs to be lifted, this is a very real problem and one that we can’t ignore. **PSW**

Helen Bonnick trained as a social worker in the early 1980s. Her interest in parent abuse stems from this time and was developed further through a Masters programme in 2004. She currently works as a Practice Educator with social work students and blogs about parent abuse on the side.