# Adolescent Violence Towards Parents [*]

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## Introduction

The recognition of multiple forms of violence at the state, community and family levels has been one of the pivotal developments in the study of family violence in the last three decades.  This process of unearthing different forms in which family violence is manifested has been gradual, and whilst the problem of adolescent violence against parents is not new, its recognition in the public sphere has emerged only recently.  Consequently, there has been little research into the causes and effects of adolescent violence against parents, and into the most effective ways of assisting parents who have been challenged in their role as carers.

The widespread belief that parents need to protect their children, even when it is to their own detriment, and the lack of clarity about what is acceptable and what is violent adolescent behaviour have compounded the slow recognition of adolescent violence against parents amongst helping professions and policy makers.  This paper describes Australian and international research to date, points out the overlapping nature of different forms of family violence and encourages active debate about parental abuse.

### *Definitions*

Adolescence (ages 12-24) is an 'in-between' developmental stage in which young people are no longer considered children, but are yet to be accepted as adults. This

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can add to the complexities in trying to distinguish between what is 'normal' and what is 'abusive/challenging' behaviour. Terminology around these issues refers to adolescent *violence against parents* and *parental abuse*, with the latter being more common in international literature (Romans et al. 2001). These terms have only recently been defined in the literature. In Canadian literature (Cottrell 2001), parental abuse is defined as any act of a child that creates fear in, and is intended to hurt parents. As with partner abuse it includes physical, psychological, emotional and financial abuse. Cottrell elaborates:

- **Physical abuse** – hitting, punching, shoving, breaking things, punching holes in the wall, throwing things and spitting;

- **Psychological abuse** – intimidating the parent, making them fearful;

- **Emotional abuse** – maliciously playing mind games, trying to make the parents think he or she is crazy; making unrealistic demands on parents, such as insisting they drop what they are doing to comply with their demands; lying, running away from home and staying away all night; making manipulative threats, such as threatening to run away, commit suicide or otherwise hurt themselves without really intending to do so; and controlling the running of the household;

- **Financial abuse** – stealing money or parents' belongings. Selling possessions – theirs or their parents', destroying the home or parents' belongings, incurring debts the parents must cover; demanding parents buy things they don't feel they can afford (Cottrell, 2001, pp.3-4).

Australian definitions are not specific to adolescent violence and suggest that "behaviour of one family member is considered violent if others in the family feel threatened, intimidated and controlled" (Paterson et al. 2002, p.90). This failure to be specific to adolescents reflects the early days of research on adolescent violence against parents in Australia.

# Prevalence and typologies of adolescent violence against parents

## *Prevalence*

There are few overseas and no Australian statistics on the prevalence of adolescent violence against parents. Shame and guilt are singled out as the main reasons for parents' unwillingness to report their children's violence.

> *It was difficult when I saw the judge at court when I went to get the intervention order. He said "well we usually have husbands and wives, not adolescents" and it made me feel that I was doing something totally irregular, even though I know they are taken out on adolescents. I felt like I was having my hand slapped* (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation 2001, p.43)*.*

U.S. data estimate the incidence of adolescent violence towards parents in two-parent families at 7–18% (Peek et al. 1985, in Downey 1997) and at 29% in one-parent families. Canadian statistics estimate that 1 in 10 Canadian parents are assaulted by their children (DeKeseredy 1993), while this figure is estimated to be significantly lower in France at 0.6% (Laurent et al. 1999). The differences in estimates reflect the use of different measurement scales and methods of data collection used to arrive at these prevalence rates, which makes comparisons difficult. Additionally, USA and Canadian estimates (Cornell et al. 1982; Peek et al. 1985; DeKeseredy 1993) date back to the late eighties and early nineties, when emotional, psychological and financial abuse were not included in definitions of abuse.

Anecdotal information suggests that adolescent violence against parents mainly occurs in one-parent families. However, research to date has been conducted with small samples and therefore does not offer reliable statistics to either support or contradict this belief. A recent Australian study of 17 mothers of abusive adolescent children reports similar numbers of one- and two-parent families who experience adolescent-to-parent violence (Paterson et al. 2002).

The only official Australian estimates of adolescent violence against parents come from the Queensland Domestic Violence Telephone Line's data collection in the late nineties, when in the period 1 July – 30 December 1997, 33 calls were recorded from parents about adolescent violence (Hastie 1998). This represented 5% of all calls made to the Line.

The NSW Children's Court, which deals with criminal charges against adolescents, does not officially collect data on the number of Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs) taken out by parents against their children (New South Wales Law Reform Commission 2001; Allen et al. 2002). This lack of official data collection is also notable in police records. Whilst Domestic Violence Liaison or Youth Liaison Officers across police stations in Sydney's Inner West differ in their views on the prevalence of adolescent violence, those who do identify it as a problem suggest that it mainly occurs in one-parent families, between sons and mothers. One police station in the Western suburbs suggests that "perpetrators of violence at home who are under 16 represent between 4-25% of all domestic violence incidents" (DVLO, Campsie Police Station 2003). These estimates do not give us any indication as to the prevalence of adolescent violence against parents, as they fail to distinguish between siblings and parents as victims of this type of violence.

## *Typologies*

The lack of official data collection and the dearth of studies about the prevalence of parental abuse, nationally and internationally, also characterise studies that identify common characteristics of perpetrators and victims of adolescent violence towards parents.

A number of studies conclude that there are no significant gender differences in the *numbers* of perpetrators of adolescent violence against parents (Cornell et al. 1982; Agnew et al. 1989; Paulson et al. 1990, in Micucci 1995; Cottrell 2001; TeamCares 2001; Paterson et al. 2002), although differences have been found in the *types* of violence perpetrated. Boys are more likely to be physically abusive and girls more likely to be emotionally abusive towards their parents (World Health Organization 2000). In addition, girls who witness more parental aggression are less likely to be violent towards their parents (Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Neidig 1995).

Deviant behaviours, alcohol and drug abuse and truancy at school are also identified as predictors of adolescent violence (Ellickson & McGuigan 2000), and the continuation of violence across different developmental stages is attributed to social influences (including Internet and video games) that support violent behaviours (Moffit 1993; Herrenkohl et al. 2001). The experiences of mothers who are victims of adolescent violence attending the Anglicare's programme suggest that whilst adolescent abuse of alcohol and drugs does not cause violence, it does increase its severity (Macleod 1995; Mak & Kinsella 1996; Anglicare Victoria 2001; Cottrell 2001).

Early USA studies estimate the peak age for violence among adolescents at 15-17 (Strauss et al. 1988; Wilson 1996; Evans et al. 1998). However, the more recent Canadian studies suggest that it begins a lot earlier, when a young person is between 12 and 14 (Cottrell 2001).

Mothers and female carers represent the majority of parents on the receiving end of violence. Australian data indicate that in comparison to fathers, "mothers are more likely to take out intervention orders against adolescent children" (Paterson et al. 2002, p. 91) and that physical violence by sons is the most common type of assault (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg 1998). However, when other forms of abuse are included, daughters use violent behaviour as frequently as sons do (Paulson et al. 1990, in Micucci 1995; Weiler 1999).

## Theoretical explanations

Although sociological perspectives are slowly starting to permeate explanations of parental abuse, psychological models still underpin most responses to this type of violence. It is arguable whether psychological models offer sufficient explanatory and analytical frameworks, as wider societal influences are also significant in explaining the creation of values or beliefs that underpin violence.

The theoretical tools most commonly deployed in working with violent adolescents and their families are structural and family approaches, conflict resolution and analysis of gender and power relations (Sheehan 1997; Howley 2000). Family therapy often sees parental abuse as a reflection of family breakdown (Robinson et

al. 1994, in Downey 1997; Sheehan 1997), whilst psychodynamic theory examines the interaction patterns within the family when working with adolescent rage and aggression (Sheehan 1997). In social learning theory these patterns are seen as connected to strained family relations (Brezina 1999). Narrative therapy places parental abuse "in the context of culture, gender and power in society" (Sheehan, 1997, p. 82) and examines the effects of violence on all parties (Efran & Heffner 1991-2), whilst the intergenerational transmission of violence often appears in relation to perceived links between child abuse, domestic violence and parental abuse (Tomison 1996). A perspective focusing on disorders such as ADD/ADHD, oppositional defiant and conduct disorder, is rarely mentioned (Loeber 1990, in Sheehan 1997), and seen by some as allowing adolescents and parents to use disorder labels to justify violent behaviours (Hemphill 1996).

## Other explanations of adolescent violence

Some young people develop the idea that they are entitled to get what they want even when this means using violence and/or abuse to intimidate or control members of their families (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation 2001).

Adolescents may use power as a means of control over parents. In some instances, parents who had previously been victims of either child or partner abuse respond to adolescent violence as victims, surrendering the role of adult or a person of authority (Downey 1997).

Factors that put adolescent children at risk of becoming violent are grouped into five categories: individual; family; peer group; schools; and community which include neighbourhood and the larger society (US Surgeon General 2001). As a result of a research focus on parenting styles, risk factors are rarely placed into a mutually dependent framework, which potentially obscures our understanding of adolescent violence against parents. For instance, a sole focus on the role of children as perpetrators at home fails to understand violence in a wider context as these children could concurrently be victims of bullying at school (Cottrell 2001). However, the most common explanations of adolescent violence emphasise individual and family contexts. Here, adolescent perpetrators of parental abuse are often recognised as victims of child abuse or witnesses of domestic violence (Rubin 1996), and other

forms of family violence are seen as pivotal in influencing adolescent violence (Brezina 1999).

When examining the family context in which adolescent violence occurs, research identifies three types of families.  The first one has inadequate parental guidance and supervision, in which adolescents assume an autonomous role that often results in violence (Charles 1986, in Wilson 1996; Ramsey 1989, in Wilson 1996). Cottrell (2001) warns that equal parent-child relationships can result in a boundaries vacuum, where children are not set any limits.  In the second type of family, parents are overprotective of adolescents, and the latter's struggle for autonomy can result in violence (Heide 1992; Polk 1998). In the last category parents are often unable to fulfil their role as adults for whatever reason, and adolescents are forced to take on this role (Downey 1997).  This burden can be overwhelming and result in violence.

## Links between adolescent violence against parents and other types of violence

Many studies provide evidence to suggest that adolescents who are violent towards their parents have often either been abused as children or have witnessed violence between parents.  "What seems to be happening is that young men, having seen their fathers beat their mothers, learn that she is an appropriate victim" (Brown 1997).  In other words, in addition to trauma, children may face "behavioural, emotional, physical and cognitive functioning, attitudes and long-term developmental problems" (Edleson 1999; Kobho et al. 1996, in Mitchell & Finkelhor 2001, p. 944), due to their having experienced or witnessed violence.  This may mean that they are also at risk of accepting violence as a solution to interpersonal conflict (Mitchell & Finkelhor 2001).  This is especially emphasised in relation to boys, who "more than girls identify with their fathers" (Cottrell 2001, p.19).

However, a linear association between child abuse and domestic violence and adolescent violence towards parents can be misleading, as it reduces the problem of adolescent violence to simplistic explanations. "While living with violence as a child is one risk of later perpetrating violence, it is very far from inevitable that one leads to the other" (Laing 2001, p. 6). Accepting simplistic explanations at face value may place inappropriate emphasis on intervention strategies that only focus on violence

once it has occurred. It is important that efforts directed towards prevention are also implemented as wider prevention programmes can address the social norms and societal influences that encourage the development of values and beliefs that perpetuate violence.

Support for this focus has arisen from research such as *Young People and Domestic Violence – National Research on Young People's Attitudes and Experiences of Domestic Violence* (National Crime Prevention 2001, pp. 16-17), which found that the strongest predictors of relationship violence are:

- beliefs about the acceptability of violence and threats as a way to resolve conflict; and

- beliefs about males being entitled to control their partners and/or their household.

Whilst exposure to violence at home is one of the risk factors for adolescents to become violent, focusing only on families who are the subject of parental abuse further exacerbates the problem, as it promotes feelings of shame and guilt in parents with violent adolescents, making them even less likely to report it and seek outside assistance. The more permeating level of violence that all adolescents are exposed to is societal. Adolescents are exposed to violence on the Internet, TV, computer games and other 'pop culture mediums'. Further still, adolescent boys are also subject to social norms that promote physical strength and authority as defining qualities of being a man. Peer pressure that encourages "macho" behaviour and involvement in activities such as teen gangs are examples of how such norms are manifested. These wider social influences are crucial in explaining the creation of values and beliefs that underpin violence; however, their acknowledgement in the literature is lacking.

## Intervention

With very little research and low public recognition of adolescent violence against parents, most practitioners struggle to obtain information regarding the most effective ways of dealing with this form of abuse. Some of the services that deal specifically with adolescent violence against parents are RAPS (Adolescent Family Therapy and

Mediation Service) in Sydney, MATTERS in Melbourne (Howley 2000), Anglicare's Meridian Services in Victoria (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation 2001) and Relationships Australia.

Family and narrative therapy appear to be the most common ways of addressing parental abuse. The family context is crucial in assessing the extent of adolescent-to-parent violence, as it identifies other forms of violence at home and outside (Wilson 1996), and helps to explore non-violent interaction patterns between parents and adolescents.

Group work, especially with abused parents, is becoming a more common way of working with adolescent violence (Paterson et al. 2002). In Australia, the Meridian Youth and Family Counselling Team at Anglicare, Victoria developed a group intervention programme for mothers dealing with violent adolescents. The programme specifically focused on mothers, as they are often the ones who:

> *Recognize that there is a serious problem and seek to find solutions. It is common that both the adolescent and other family members blame the mother and they are not interested in seeking assistance for themselves* (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation 2001)*.*

Few conclusions can be drawn about the success of this programme, due to its small sample size, although participants said that it "had a positive impact on their lives" (Paterson et al. 2002, p.92).

The programme is underpinned by the recognition that finding solutions often involves a multi-faceted approach, which includes educational, therapeutic and legal/social control interventions. It suggests the following principles as useful in working with parental abuse:

- Violence is never acceptable

- Violence is the responsibility of the person using violence

- Families want to end the violence but not the relationship

- Families can help young people become responsible

- Violence is a choice

- Violence is not the same as anger or temper

- Mothers are not responsible for the violence but are important to the solution (Paterson et al. 2002, p.92).

Isolation and lack of understanding by friends, family, helping professions and the justice system were identified by mothers as the most common obstacles in trying to address their child's violence. Joining Anglicare's support groups was for many women the first time that they were able to speak about the problem without blaming themselves for it.

> *The group helped me make sense of what was happening, and helped me to keep holding the line. It also helped me get back my self confidence…that I wasn't a bad parent and that helped me take a stand.*

> *When I came to the group it helped me because it made me realize that there were some people worse off than me, and also that I had to change my attitude sometimes.*

> *The most useful bit of coming to the group was to be with people where you could say what you'd been going through and they didn't doubt you.*

> *Meeting with other women at the group was a relief because I wasn't the only one. It's not easy to talk about this because you are breaking a family secret, but it felt safe and comfortable…[as] people didn't judge me* (Anglicare Victoria & Precision Foundation 2001, p. 14)*.*

## Conclusion

Families are affected by adolescent violence in a range of ways. Family members distance themselves from one another or isolate themselves from family and friends for fear of the family secret being revealed. They also often label the adolescent as the problem, which prevents them from identifying other family dynamics as factors contributing to violence (Micucci 1995).

The central issue raised in the literature is the need to raise awareness about abuse of parents. This would help to reduce guilt and blame felt by parents of violent

adolescents. Currently, parental abuse is peripheral in discussions of family violence and this provides practitioners with little guidance regarding the most effective ways of addressing this issue. Encouraging public debate about adolescent violence is a challenge for practitioners, researchers and policy makers, and an opportunity to develop more effective ways of addressing all forms of abuse.

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