

Child and adolescent to parent violence and abuse

Briefing paper 1 of 3

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Child and adolescent to parent violence and abuse (CAPVA) refers to a pattern of harmful, and in some cases, controlling, behaviour by children or adolescents towards parents or caregivers, where abusive behaviour can be physical, verbal, emotional, psychological, economic, property-based or sexual.

Abusive behaviour can be intentionally harmful and controlling, and/or unintentionally harmful, functioning to communicate distress, anxiety or trauma.

What's the problem?

Violence and abuse towards parents or caregivers is an issue appearing with increasing regularity on practitioners' caseloads, with minimal UK policy or practice guidance. A lack of access to specialist provision is resulting in families struggling without the support they need. This can result in enduring physical and emotional harm and young people being criminalised and/or removed from the home.

How common is it?

Currently there is no agreed UK definition of CAPVA and no consistent way of recording cases when they do arise. This means our insight into prevalence and incidence is seriously lacking, with estimates varying according to research designs and sample characteristics. Further, parental minimisation, shame and fear, all work to keep the issue hidden, resulting in underestimates of the problem.

"I think it happens more often than people think it does...it's sort of like a dark figure in society"
(Pippa, 17 yrs)

"... because, I was feelin' violent, I was rippin' me curtains down"
(Jenn, 14 yrs)

"I call her a rat sometimes"
(Dan, 15 yrs)

"I started breakin' things at six ...about nine the violence starts"
(Jo, 14 yrs)

"I smashed her head against the wall"
(Penelope, 17 yrs)

What does it look like?



10%



Young people who repeatedly use verbal, emotional, or psychological forms of abuse.

3-5%



Young people who repeatedly use serious and sustained forms of physical violence.

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What are the impacts of this form of family abuse?

Impacts on...	Parents/carers	The young person	Siblings
Physical health	Minor or serious injuries as a result of violence by the child/adolescent. In rare cases, this can even result in the death of a parent.	Injuries from hitting parents, hitting/smashing walls or objects, self-harm or risky behaviour, being restrained.	Injuries from direct or indirect violence from sibling.
Emotional health	Low self-esteem, shame and guilt (the “failed” parent) , poor mental health, stress and anxiety (treading on eggshells)	Low self-esteem, shame and guilt, poor mental health, stress and anxiety, trauma from historic or ongoing victimisation.	Distress from witnessing violence and abuse.
Property/finances	Damage to property, cost of replacing/mending, loss of earnings and endangering of rental agreements, paying off debts owed by child (often drug-related).	Removal of privileges, potential reparation, own belongings damaged.	Belongings damaged
Relationships	Damaged relationship with abusive and non-abusive children, partner conflict, loss from child separation, diminished support network.	Damaged relationships with parents and siblings, loss from separation, reduced social contact with peers.	Damaged relationships with sibling, loss from separation, lack of parental attention.
Education/work	Potential job loss due to time spent addressing issues, picking up from school or police station.	Missed school, wider aggression resulting in exclusion, reduced life chances.	Can impact on concentration, attendance, reduced life chances.
Criminal record	Fines for missed school and child ASB, legal consequences of harming child through restraining or fighting back, legal consequences of refusing the child entry to the home.	Arrest and legal orders due to violence and abuse.	Siblings can sometimes copy or be drawn into similar behaviours, with similar outcomes.
Space, movement, and personal agency	Parents’ social contact limited as needing to stay in the home, parents (particularly mothers) hiding in rooms for protection, parents forced to take/drive child places.	Lack of freedom of movement through grounding, refused entry to home, moved out of home.	Avoiding the home. Social contact and family trips away can also be restricted.

“It feels like suffering a bereavement. He wasn’t the child I had imagined. It is only me that he hits.”
(‘Jenny’)

“I felt like I wasn’t good enough for anyone because I was violent and stuff, so obviously I took the overdose.”
(‘Penelope’, 17 yrs)

“A slow and steady erosion of you as their mum...then suddenly they are in control”
(‘Adrienne’)

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Who does it affect?

Child and adolescent to parent violence and abuse (CAPVA) affects families of all shapes, sizes and backgrounds. Although evidence exploring diversity is still in its infancy, what we do know is that it is highly gendered, with mothers being the most likely targets and sons the most likely to come to the attention of services for their abusive behaviour. However, both sons and daughters abuse mothers and fathers – as well as other caregivers such as stepparents, grandparents, aunties, uncles, foster carers, adoptive parents and other non-biological parents or carers. Sibling abuse is also a common feature, although highly under-researched.



What age does it start?

Although violent and abusive behaviour towards parents or carers seems to peak between the ages of 13 to 17, it can often start much earlier, with behaviours only reported once the child is old enough to do physical harm. Further, although research and interventions for CAPVA often stop at age 18, abuse can extend beyond this age and well into adulthood. In short, violence and abuse towards parents can come from children, adolescents and adult children, with fear of blame or child criminalisation or separation meaning abuse can go unaddressed for years.



What indicators should I look out for?



Injuries



Missing from school



Distress



Damage to property



Constantly tired



Staying out



Increasing isolation



Fighting or bullying



Substance use



Offending and ASB



Families evicted



Multiple GP visits



Noise complaints



Police call-outs

Where can I go for more information?

For up-to-date information on research, policy and practice visit: www.holesinthewall.co.uk
For our 2021 rapid literature review for the Domestic Abuse Commissioner click [here](#) or [here](#)
To explore the University of Oxford Filial Violence Project page, click [here](#)
For an overview of the issue, read Amanda Holt's (2013) book '*Adolescent-to-parent abuse: Current understandings in research, policy and practice*', [Policy Press](#)

About the authors

Helen is an experienced social work practitioner, trainer and CAPVA expert, creating the website 'Holes in the Wall' in 2011 to provide information to parents, practitioners and researchers in the UK and further afield.

Victoria is an experienced academic and third sector researcher, having completed her [PhD thesis](#) on young people's perspectives on violence and abuse towards parents. She also specialises in research on domestic homicide (including parricide) and gender-based violence and harm more broadly.