

COMPARING CHILD TO PARENT VIOLENCE (CPV) WITH INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV)

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The following quick summary is based on my work with 150 families where there has been abuse of a parent by a child (aged 8 to 18) and my review of the (sparse) literature on this subject. I have dealt with a larger number of families over several decades where women are abused by male partners and have read the literature on IPV (less thoroughly than for CPV). Some of the following ideas are quite speculative as there is little reliable research.

I often avoid the term “abuser” when applied to young people and children but use it here for comparison and brevity.

COMPARING CHILD TO PARENT VIOLENCE (CPV) WITH INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV)		
	IPV	CPV
Physical violence	From minor to lethal	Same range, but <u>possibly</u> more often minor and less serious injuries
Types of physical violence	Pushes, slaps, etc very common but punches, kicks & use of weapons also occur	Pushes, slaps, punches, kicks also very common, as is threats with weapons
Self-defence by victim	<i>May</i> be seen as justified, even heroic	Often seen as child-abuse
Property damage	Not <i>uncommon</i> , but usually done infrequently	Very common, & may be quite frequent
Verbal abuse	Almost universal, may precede and predate physical abuse	Same
Other emotional abuse	Common: mind-games, threats, isolation, etc	Common: threats also include running away, self-harm, calling the authorities
Gender of victim	Overwhelmingly female	Mainly mothers (75%+) but in 2-parent families around 50% of fathers also abused
Gender of abusers	Overwhelmingly male (90%+)	About a quarter to a third are girls
Age of abuser	Declines somewhat with age	Often starts around 10 to 13 but seriousness increases with size
Duration	May last for decades	Usually lasts for a few years
Legal position	Clearly a crime, though only recently taken seriously	Seldom treated as a crime, very patchy response
Psychological effect on victim	Depression, fear, helplessness, shame, guilt, stress, ill-health	Similar, may feel just as trapped but for different reasons

Shame	Victim typically feels shamed	Victim invariably feels shamed
Guilt	Victim often feels some guilt but others often challenge this	Victim almost always feels guilt and others often reinforce this
Power	Abuse by more powerful individual	Parent-victim has <i>potentially</i> more power than child ¹
Control	Abuser controls victim to varying degrees	Abuser may control, or may just disempower or distance self from parent
Anger vs. control	Move away from “anger management” to seeing partner’s behaviour as attempt to control	Still usually seen as needing “anger management”, rather than as attempt to control others
Expressive vs. instrumental violence	Now usually seen as instrumental	Likely to be seen as expressive rather than instrumental
Effect on (other) children in family	Trauma, modelling, fear, stress, loyalty conflicts; they may also be direct victims of abuse; exposure seen as emotional abuse (mother may be blamed)	Probably a bit less traumatic & less loyalty conflicts, but stress, fear, modelling all similar & <i>more</i> likely to be direct victims; exposure not seen as emotional abuse
Incidence	Estimates vary <u>greatly</u> , 5% to 20%; <i>may</i> be decreasing to some extent	No good estimates of incidence, possibly 3 to 5%; <i>appears</i> to be increasing ²
Social class	More common in less-educated and poorer families but found in all classes	Overall unrelated to social class, but more common in better-educated families when no past IPV in family
Psychiatry	IPV no longer seen as indicator of psychiatric illness in itself	Children often labelled with pseudo-psychiatric label on basis of their behaviour
Victim blaming	Becoming <i>less</i> common than in past (though still a problem)	Still the norm
Abuser as victim	In some circles abuser’s given excuses and seen as a victim (stress, poverty, illness, childhood abuse)	Abuser very likely to be viewed as a victim
Abuser’s prior exposure to family violence	Estimates vary greatly, ? 50-60%	? 50% overall past exposure, but very low among 2-parent families

¹ See my handout for parents on “Who has the Power?”

² This is my interpretation of the research and differs from the published consensus that takes dodgy surveys at face value – usually quoting a figure of 10% or higher.

Peer group attitude to abuse	Some social groups excuse partner abuse	Abuse of mothers not acceptable to any social group but abuse of fathers may be seen as tough
Support options	Specific support agencies exist though using these may be problematic	Specific supports very rare, wide range of agencies may be involved but parents often report these are of little help
Usual referral pathway	Typically the female victim initially refers, usually for help for self or children	Parent refers with focus usually on helping abusive child; far less afraid of abusers reaction to referral
Initial intervention	Either separation, or abuser expected to make changes	Parent usually expected to make changes to their behaviour
Separation	Separation often seen as good outcome (sometimes as the only good outcome)	Separation usually seen as a tragic failure

The behaviours involved In CPV and IPV can be very similar. Women who are victims of CPV often say it is disturbingly similar to the way an abusive partner treated them. The stress and feelings of shame and betrayal may be quite similar. “Walking on eggshells” and “Jekyll & Hyde” are commonly used phrases used by victims of both IPV and CPV. Both are often highly traumatic and distressing for the victims. Post Traumatic Stress symptoms are recognised following IPV but undoubtedly occur also following CPV.

Both are fundamentally about control, not about being out of control.

Abusers often see themselves as victims and almost always minimise and deny their own abusive actions while exaggerating the violence or abuse of their victims.

Unfortunately, when the abuser is a young person these excuses and self-serving exaggerations are far more likely to be taken as fact by those in authority.

Abusers often deliberately play on their victim’s guilt and self-doubt.

Abusers often claim to love their victims – at heart it is not about love but about respect. It is often quite clear that these children do love their parents but (for most) a close relationship is not possible while they are acting abusively (amazingly some remain affectionate despite severe abuse of a parent). When the abuse stops they often show a close and loving relationship quite quickly.

There is a common tendency to look down on victims: this applies to those in the wider community, to workers, to those who witness abuse, and to those who are doing the abusing (which can lead to a downward spiral for some men, and many children, of loss of respect and increasing abuse).

“Family violence” is recently being used as equivalent to IPV. This is very confusing as CPV (not to mention elder abuse and sibling abuse) is quite clearly family violence. There are important differences between a thirteen-year-old child bullying, terrorising and abusing a parent and a thirty-year-old doing the same to his partner but there are enough similarities that we can learn a lot, both theoretically and practically, from the comparison.