

Parents Victimised by their Children

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The author has worked with over 60 families where children have been violent to parents. In the light of this experience (and a review of the scant literature) he identifies two common patterns: sole mothers being victimised by children after having experienced violence from partners; and over-responsible parents, often middle-class, being victimised by over-entitled children. This, the first of two articles, looks at some of the basic issues involved and offers some ideas on working with parents. The second article will focus on how to work with the young people involved.

Anna and Mark

For the past two or three years I suffered severely. I was verbally abused, hit and kicked and I was afraid of him. In fits of rage and anger he would hurt me and cause damage to my home. He was a violent, abusive and angry person who would not do anything he was told and could not take 'no' for an answer. When he didn't get what he wanted, especially money, he would start abusing me and get stuck into me. He was like a person possessed.

This was domestic and violent, but not 'domestic violence' as usually understood. Anna, a single mother, was describing her fifteen-year-old son, Mark (names and some details have been changed, although both mother and son are pleased that their story may help others). Mark had been physically violent towards Anna since the age of twelve or thirteen, with the violence becoming more serious as he grew larger and stronger. Anna had spoken to police, clergy, a psychiatric nurse and a youth worker, though with no ongoing support. She said she had been advised to charge Mark with assault or kick him out, or told that he needed psychiatric treatment.

Anna is from a traditional Italian family. The idea of calling the police was abhorrent to her. I explained that an Intervention Order was not the same as charging someone, but at first she was quite definite that this was not an option; nor was 'kicking him out' (not that I suggested this).

She felt trapped and powerless. If he was mentally ill, then he could not help himself and was even more in need of her help. Both Anna and her son had been abused by her ex-husband. She felt guilty for having stayed with Mark's father long enough for Mark to witness her being bashed, and also guilty for leaving, as she was not coping on her own. She felt that Mark was not really to blame, as he too was a victim.

When I first met her, Anna was distraught. In my first few sessions with her I tried to:

- reduce her guilt (if anyone was to blame, other than Mark, it was clearly his father)
- clarify that Mark could control his behaviour
- weaken the belief that Mark was mentally ill (we don't assume that violent men are mentally ill, so why should we make this assumption about adolescents?)
- show that Mark was trying (successfully) to control her
- show that her lack of assertiveness (partly due to her past abuse and partly cultural in origin), made it much easier for him to treat her without respect
- convince her that change was possible

Anna responded quickly. She became more hopeful, less obviously depressed, and less willing to put up with her son's 'abusive' behaviour. Possibly because she became more assertive, his violence escalated slightly (as I'd warned it might) and Anna visited her GP with bruising to her neck. For the first time, she agreed that the GP could call the police and then agreed to take out an intervention order:

He just couldn't believe that I had the guts to do what I did. It was the hardest thing I ever did!



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I didn't want him charged, I just wanted him to know that he had to stop and he could not go on like that and that he wasn't allowed to touch me and he could end up in a lot of trouble. He said 'How could you put your own son in to the police?'

The Intervention Order was the most important single factor in creating a successful outcome. However, without a significant change in Anna's attitude and behaviour, Mark would soon have seen it as an empty threat. Attempting to rush her into this step would have been counterproductive.

Mark was adamant that he would not come for counselling. I decided to write him a letter. This was aimed just as much at reinforcing what I had been saying to Anna as it was aimed at Mark. I did not hold much hope that it would influence him, and am still not sure if it played a significant part. I told Anna that she had to leave the letter with Mark and not wait to see if he read it. Some people will make a point of tearing up such letters if they have an audience but can't resist reading them in private.

Dear Mark,

I hope you don't mind me writing to you. Your Mum says you are pretty smart so I am writing the kind of letter I would to an adult rather than one to a child. I don't expect a reply.

As you probably know, I have seen your mother for counselling a few times. I would very much like to meet with you, but realise how difficult this may be for you. Teenage boys (and many men) are generally pretty reluctant to come for counselling. In addition, you are embarrassed and ashamed about how you have acted towards your mother. This is good! The fact that you are embarrassed and ashamed shows that this is not the kind of person you want to be. I am quite sure from talking to your mother that you do not want to grow up to be the kind of man who bullies people or abuses women.

Your mother has told me that you are worried about being like your father. I assured your violence, or any other behaviour, more or less likely, but the evidence is that violence is not directly inherited.

However, as you may know, violence does often run in families. I have dealt with many children with behaviour such as yours. In fact I have made a special study of children who are abusive towards their parents (nearly always mothers) and have seen over 50 of them over the last ten years. Like you, many of them are otherwise decent, caring kids. I don't get the impression from your mother that you are generally a violent person. So what leads some kids to be abusive towards the people they love and depend on?

You have a number of characteristics that are common to many of the kids I have seen. Eight out of ten were boys. Three-quarters were violent to single mothers. There had been past domestic violence towards Mum from the father (or stepfather) in three-quarters of these families. Seeing violence or being abused yourself can make you more angry and more violent. One thing that happens is that some kids copy Dad's abusive behaviour. This is not the whole story, however. Some had never seen the violence or could not remember it. What seem to be just as important are attitudes. Kids pick up attitudes from parents (even parents they don't respect or like). Some of the attitudes that make abusive behaviour towards mothers more likely are:

- *women are inferior to men*
- *bullying is a good way of getting what you want*
- *it is acceptable to yell, swear, break things or hit people when you are really angry*
- *my anger is someone else's fault.*

Women who have been abused often have lost self-confidence and are not very good at being assertive. Thus they put up with behaviour that most parents would not put up with (such as children swearing at them or threatening them). This can lead to children losing more respect for the parent, which leads to more abuse, etc.

Another thing that can be important is a parent who has tried too hard to be a perfect parent. Some of the parents who get abused by their children have been the sort who don't think much about themselves and put their children first most of the time. Some children find it easy to treat parents like this as servants -and it is easy to be abusive towards servants!

You yourself know (if you think about it - you probably avoid thinking about it) whether the above things apply to you and your family. We can't change the past, but attitudes and behaviours can be changed. I have seen many kids (and older men) make changes to their behaviour and attitudes and become the sort of people they really want to be. It is not easy at first but gets easier and easier.

I realise that you probably feel pretty angry about your mother taking out an Intervention Order against you. However, this really has no effect on you unless you are abusive towards her. Try to see it as something helping you get control of your behaviour and get rid of the habit of acting abusively when you are angry. I am sure that you don't want to act that way, but probably have felt that you could not control yourself when in a rage. You can control yourself, even in a rage, though when in a rage you probably don't want to control

yourself. If you change your behaviour and your attitudes, you will find that you stop getting into rages nearly so often.

I hope you can read this without feeling 'got at'. I don't know you, but your mother has actually spoken highly of you (she loves you but hates your abusive behaviour). I am confident that you can change your behaviour and get rid of your destructive habits. You will be a happier person when you do and a lot more likely to go on to be a good husband and father in the future (if that is what you choose).

Best of luck,

Eddie Gallagher, Family Counsellor

(I avoid the term 'psychologist' with young people, who may confuse it with 'psychiatrist'.)

I continued to see Anna and she became noticeably stronger and less depressed over the next few months. Mark was angry and withdrawn for a few weeks, and then their relationship started to improve greatly. He started asking her advice, something he had not done for years, and began showing affection. He became more settled and productive at school.

Another incident of violence occurred about two months after the Intervention Order was taken out. Anna would not call the police but Mark reluctantly agreed to meet me if I went to their home and his mother was present. He was polite and contrite and seemed genuinely determined not to be violent to his mother again. I reinforced the changes he had made, and the proof of self-control. I made some general comments about people 'giving themselves permission' to hurt and abuse people they love, though they would not treat others like that. He seemed to respond in a thoughtful way to this idea and commented on this later to his mother.

No further physical violence occurred, and verbal abuse almost disappeared.

"As time went by, I got stronger and stuck to my guns and was not going to let him hit or threaten me any more. He learnt that when I said I don't have money, that he couldn't have it. He also now does what I ask him without a fuss, and if I say 'No', it's okay. He's changed so much. He's well behaved and doing much better at school. He tries very hard to control his anger and he likes the way he is now.

Life is finally much better for me and much more relaxed, and I have started to go out sometimes with friends, which I haven't done for years. Mark has become a different person, much kinder and nicer and more relaxed. The good person is back. He gives me hugs and kisses and says 'I love you Mum', something which he

hasn't done for a long, long, time. I really love the new Mark."

Nearly three years later he appears to be a well adjusted, happy young man, who is close and affectionate to his mother, while leading an active social life and doing an apprenticeship.

I'm not implying that a similar approach will automatically produce similar results. The important point is that such change is possible, even with an uncooperative adolescent.

Why has this Form of Family Violence been Neglected?

Anyone drawing attention to a neglected form of abuse tends to overstate the case. I'd like to avoid doing this. Some good reasons why child-to-adult violence has not been discussed or studied nearly as much as abuse by adult males of female partners are:

- It is not usually so dangerous - serious injuries are less common (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Smith, Baker, Buchan & Bodiwala, 1992)
- Children's victimising behaviour doesn't usually permeate the relationship to such an extent, so that the psychological effect on the other may be less
- It is more likely to be temporary, as children do sometimes grow out of it, or at least leave home
- In some cases violence is defensive or retaliatory (like much of women's violence towards men)
- It can be an attempt to protect mother or sibs from a violent father.

Some not-so-good reasons why the topic has been largely neglected:

- It does not appear to fit the feminist view of family violence (though I believe that much of it does)
- Children's behaviour is generally assumed to be directly caused by parents' behaviour (Harris, 1998)
- Children are seen as 'victims' within families where there is violence (as of course they often are) and we have difficulty dealing with those who are both 'victim' and 'victimiser'
- Children's behaviour problems are often 'explained' by the use of a clinical label, which obscures who is actually doing what to whom
- The medical model is widely applied to child and adolescent behaviour problems and by its very nature, does not give priority to the social dimensions of family violence' (Gondolf, 1990: 259).

Some good reasons for taking child to parent violence more seriously:

- It appears to be quite widespread and may be increasing
- It causes a great deal of stress to families and can lead to injuries and family breakdown
- It may be the beginning of a 'career' in domestic violence for some of these children
- Examining the dilemmas involved can sharpen and fill out our conceptualisation of family violence

Types of Child to Parent Violence

Excluding hitting by pre-schoolers and playful violence, situations in which a child may hit a parent may include

- Young people bullying single mothers (often in the aftermath of domestic violence or conflictual divorces)
- Under-responsible children victimising over-responsible parents
- Young people defending themselves or reacting to being abused
- Children attempting to defend mothers from fathers who are violent
- Severely disabled children lashing out at carers
- Psychiatrically disturbed youngsters attacking parents (I don't consider 'conduct disorder' or 'oppositional defiance disorder' to be psychiatric disturbances)
- Drug-affected or drug-dependent teenagers attacking parents (Potter-Efron & Potter-Efron, 1985)
- Violence towards parents as part of a general pattern of delinquent behaviour
- Young people being violent within chaotic families with poor boundaries

Hopefully, the range of situations illustrates the danger in assuming that any one explanation or theory will cover such diversity. This list is not meant to be exhaustive and categories are not exclusive (Mark fitted points 1, 2 and, to some extent, 3). Unfortunately one of the above is often seized upon as 'the explanation' of the behaviour, both by parents and by many professionals. So a child's disability or psychiatric label is often accepted as sufficient explanation. To protective workers, any 'abuse' of the child by a parent (which could be largely defensive) will be the focus.

I am particularly focused on the first two categories. In my clinical sample, the most common pattern is children (mostly boys) bullying single mothers in the aftermath of domestic violence. More impressionistic, and probably more contentious, is my observation that under-responsible children quite commonly abuse highly responsible parents, especially where the violence occurs in intact families with no known history of family violence.

We have no reliable indicators of how common these different patterns may be; indeed we can only make wild guesses at the overall prevalence of this form of family violence. Some researchers (Brezina, 1999; Browne & Hamilton, 1998; Wells, 1987) appear to assume that most children who are violent to parents are reacting to some form of child abuse. Most clinical studies, including my own (see below), suggest this is far from being the most common pattern. The implications for practice are huge if we assume that bad parenting or actual abuse from parents is the norm. Of course we should not go to the opposite extreme and assume that all parents are well-meaning and non-abusive!

Clinical Sample

My own experience is based on a clinical sample of 77 children in 73 families. All but fifteen I have dealt with as a counsellor (at three different agencies). Sixty-eight of these children were physically violent to parents and the remaining nine were clearly victimising their parents without actual physical violence. I have been able to compare my sample with the one described in this Journal by Paterson, Luntz, Perlesz & Cotton (2002) and with a similar group, 'Who's the Boss?' which I co-facilitated (at Inner South Community Health in Melbourne). We need to be highly cautious about making generalisations on the basis of such samples. Too many unknown variables affect who requests help, where they go for help, what they tell workers and what workers attend to, remember and record. My clinical sample is not representative of the general population, and may not be representative of those who seek professional help.

Gender: Young People

In my clinical sample boys outnumber girls by a factor of six to one (86% are boys)! Other clinical studies give the percentage of boys among parent-victimisers as between 66% and 80% (Charles, 1986; Du Bois, 1998; Dugas, Mouren & Halfon, 1985; Harbin & Maddin, 1979; Honjo & Wakabayashi, 1988; Laurent & Derry, 1999). Police reports (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988) and statistics on Intervention Orders (Crimes Family Violence Report, 1997) suggest boys are far more often seriously violent towards parents.

Yet surveys of American teenagers found little or no difference between boys and girls in self-reports of violence towards parents (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Neidig, 1995; Paulson, Coombs & Landsverk, 1990). I believe that this evidence is suspect because it relies on self-reports. Similar surveys found no difference between women and men in violence towards their spouses (Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980). Such surveys probably include much trivial 'violence', while actual abusers tend to greatly under-report their violence (Currie, 1998; Edelson & Brygger, 1986) or fail to reply.

It seems likely that boys really are much more violent to parents than are girls. Males are more likely to be aggressive overall, and cultural attitudes support male aggression and control of others. Boys are also physically more capable of violence and more threatening because of size and strength. They are also more likely to identify with an aggressive father than are girls (Bandura, 1973).

Gender: Victimised Parents

The evidence is that mothers are far more often the targets of children's victimisation than fathers. Of the 75 children in my clinical sample all but one victimised their mothers. Twelve fathers were victimised, and with only one exception the children in these families were also violent towards their mothers.

The one survey of parents (Cornell & Gelles, 1982) found that reports of violence towards mothers were more common than towards fathers, and this is supported by almost all clinical studies (Charles, 1986; Cottrell, 2001; Dugas, et al., 1985; Heide, 1992; Laurent & Derry, 1999; Pelletier & Coutu, 1992; Warren, 1978), by police records of assaults (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988) and by records of intervention orders taken out against children (Crimes Family Violence Report, 1997).

There are a number of likely reasons why mothers are abused more often:

- Mothers are usually physically weaker than fathers
- Mothers appear to be less likely to retaliate (even when physically capable)
- Women are much more likely to be sole parents and spend more time with children
- Mothers have far more often past been victims of spouse abuse than have fathers
- Common attitudes allow males (even juveniles) to feel superior to women

- Mothers take much greater responsibility for their children, and often feel guilty and inadequate because of children's bad behaviour, trapping them in the relationship and making them less likely to be assertive
- Women in our society are generally less assertive (and less aggressive)

Yet some surveys of teenagers report assaults on fathers almost as frequently (Browne & Hamilton, 1998) or even more frequently (Peek, Fischer & Kidwell, 1985) than assaults on mothers. It is likely that most teenage boys are ashamed of assaulting mothers but may consider that assaulting fathers shows toughness, hence they report assaults on fathers but not on mothers. It is a reasonable assumption that victimisers will distort the truth (both consciously and unconsciously) even in anonymous questionnaires (O'Leary & Arias, 1984). Technical problems occur with the use of measurements such as the Conflict Tactics Scale, because it confuses 'ordinary violence' (which includes play and defense [Straus, 1983]), with victimisation.

Thus, the most common pattern is of boys abusing mothers, in many cases following the lead of a violent father.

Is it 'Abuse'?

'Abusive' behaviour can be validly defined as violence, or other coercive behaviour, perpetrated against someone less powerful. By this definition it can be argued that children cannot be 'abusive' to their parents, since the parents objectively have far more power. However, a definition useful in one context may not be useful in another and, as I shall discuss later, it is often far from clear who really holds the power.

In counselling I sometimes choose to employ the word 'abuse' if it appears that children's physical violence, verbal aggression, destructiveness and emotional abuse are part of a behavioural pattern apparently aimed at controlling (or at least disempowering) the parent. Not every child who hits or even injures a parent is being 'abusive' or victimising the parent. Self-defense, a one-off outburst, or violence in a severely disabled child all constitute violence but are not 'abusive'. Violence by drug-affected or psychiatrically disturbed teens may or may not be 'abusive'.

However, although I defend my limited use of the term 'abuse' in this context (I used it rather a lot in my letter to Mark) I prefer the term 'victimisation' as I feel that it carries slightly less emotional and political baggage. In discussing the use of the words 'abuse' and 'victimiser', I

have been struck by how varied the implications of the words are for different people and how varied their assumptions. For the moment, I use 'victimise' with professionals although some colleagues think it too strong, others too weak, some feel it implies that the other takes on the role of 'victim'. I'm interested in feedback.

In my clinical experience, serious physical assault on parents by children has been rare. This may reflect my work settings (Community Health and family welfare agencies) and I am no doubt seeing less of the more serious violence which may be seen in youth work or psychiatric agencies, where teenage clients tend to be older. Even younger children do physically assault parents: punching, kicking, choking, pushing, throwing things and occasionally using knives or other weapons (more often as a threat). Thankfully few Australian homes, especially sole mother homes, contain guns.

Physical violence is only one way in which people may try to hurt and control each other. Thus using terms such as 'parent assault' or 'battered parents' would exclude some quite serious victimisation. I believe that focusing exclusively on the physical violence is a mistake with child victimisers, as it is with adult abusers. As others have noted (Cottrell, 2001), most of these children use a combination of verbal and emotional abuse, threats and property damage as well as physical violence.

Talking to parents about their children's 'abusive' behaviour can be very helpful to them if it encourages them to take an assertive stance and to consider their own rights. It may also draw parallels between the child's behaviour and the behaviour of abusive partners and ex-partners - though this can be either helpful or unhelpful. I certainly avoid referring to children themselves as 'abusers' and attempt to label the behaviour without labelling the person. I seldom use the word 'abuse' when talking to the child himself (though I may with older teens) but prefer more concrete terms such as 'hitting', 'violence', 'put-downs', 'insults', 'assaults', 'attacks' and the weak sounding but tactically useful word 'tantrums' (more on this in my second article, which will appear next issue). Purists can object to my flexible use of terms that carry a lot of political weight. I certainly believe that language is important - but sometimes there are more important things.

The first step in working with parents is to raise their awareness of their rights. It may seem obvious that children should not be allowed to victimise parents, but a great many parents are confused about what is

acceptable, and may be putting up with quite hurtful behaviour. The child is rewarded by feeling powerful and the vicious circles lead to individual incidents spiraling out of control, as well as long-term vicious circles of loss of respect and deteriorating relationships: 'No one benefits when parents place the positive, accepting aspects of parenting ahead of putting an end to being hit, robbed or vandalized' (Cavell, 2000: 134).

Children who 'get away with' abusive behaviour towards a parent lose respect for that parent and increasingly see him/her as helpless. Victimisers often mentally devalue the victim as justification for their abusive behaviour. In addition, parents may become increasingly stressed, may feel increasingly helpless and that they are failures as parents; they may become increasingly guilty and depressed (making it harder to be assertive). Thus verbal abuse, if ignored, often leads to pushing or threats, and eventually escalates to more serious violence and intimidation. This process may take years. Some parents who have been victims of spouse abuse have often already lost respect in the eyes of their children. It is sad, and quite unfair, that children often lose respect for both parents when one abuses the other.

Past Domestic Violence

"Beaten wives we interviewed told us that their children began threatening them after seeing their fathers become violent. A child who sees his mother hit by his father comes to view hitting as the thing to do - a means of getting what he wants. Our survey uncovered many women battered by both their husbands and their teen-age children" (Straus et al., 1980: 104)

Another study noted:

Both sons and daughters are more likely to use severe violence towards mothers if their mothers have been abused. Interestingly, in homes where wives are abused neither sons nor daughter used any form of violence against their fathers! (Cornell & Gelles, 1982: 13).

Of the 77 children in my clinical sample, 46 (from 41 families) had lived in a family where there had been spouse abuse, i.e. 60%. When only the sole mother families are considered, the rate rises to 34 out of 46, i.e. 74%. Thus three quarters of the sole mothers being victimised by their children had been victims of prior wife abuse! I have only included those families where mothers were clear about having been in DV situations;

thus this could be an underestimate most likely to exclude those suffering emotional abuse without physical violence. (In this article I am using 'DV' as shorthand for abuse of a woman by her partner.)

In only one family in my sample was the father, but not the mother, victimised (by a son and a daughter). This family shows an interesting role-reversal as the drug-abusing mother in this family had been physically violent to the father (who had not retaliated).

Only a few of the previous clinical reports on children who are violent to parents have mentioned past domestic violence as an issue (Cottrell, 2001; Downey, 1997; Livingston, 1986; Pelletier et al., 1999). Until recently, many workers may have given wife abuse a low priority (Gondolf, 1990; Harway & Hansel, 1993). If we don't ask the right questions, or respond to hints, clients will seldom mention violence and abuse within the family.

If this pattern of children victimising mothers following DV is common, it may also be surprising that it is seldom mentioned in the growing literature on the effects of domestic violence on children. However, most research has been on younger children, often on samples in refuges or soon after the woman has left the abusive man, and typically uses standardised measures of behaviour problems (which can obscure relationships and interactions).

It is well established that a subgroup of children exposed to domestic violence become generally more aggressive (Graham-Berman & Levendosky, 1997; Fantuzzo and Lindquist, 1989) and several studies (though not all) have reported that boys are more likely to develop behaviour problems than girls following DV (Jouriles & Norwood, 1995; Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson & Zak, 1985). Such children may be at increased risk of delinquent behaviour during adolescence (Carlson, 1990; Koss, Goodman, Browne, Fitzgerald, Keita & Russo, 1994) and adulthood (Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). As well as showing more violence in their relationships with women, young men with past exposure to DV have been found to have negative beliefs about gender roles and greater acceptance of violence (Reitzel-Jaffe & Wolfe, 2001).

In my sample, the abuse by partners was sometimes many years in the past. Some children could not remember the abuse, or did not even know that their fathers had abused their mothers. It would be wrong to always assume a direct connection between past DV and children's aggression. Besides the direct effects of witnessing DV, such as modelling or

trauma, several other possible influences of past DV are:

- children may have been influenced by father's attitudes
- some children may suffer a major psychological effect from the stress of the separation
- mothers may behave differently in their parenting (due to stress, depression, compensation or other reasons)
- children may have lost respect for their mothers
- highly conflictual divorces can be just as influential and damaging to children
- separated parents' ongoing conflict can have a big influence on their children
- the separated father's ongoing influence can be great even if contact is minimal

All of these, singly and in combination, may be important influences, with or without direct modelling of aggressive behaviour.

The trauma of witnessing DV may be far in the past but it often has ongoing social and psychological consequences. Physical assaults on women by ex-partners are not uncommon (Fleury, Sullivan & Bybee, 2000; Sev'er, 1997) and harassment and verbal abuse appear to be far too common. Some children still see their father verbally abusing their mother, years after a separation. I take a very firm stand that this exposure is harmful to the child and strongly encourage mothers to be more assertive (or to avoid all contact with their ex-partner, if being assertive is dangerous or unproductive). Often clarifying limits and boundaries with their ex parallels the process with their children.

Sometimes a mother's increasing awareness of her rights and more assertive behaviour results in a positive change in her relationship with her ex-partner. She may finally give up trying to be friends with him, she may stop him dropping round whenever he feels like it, she may even finally get a divorce. Occasionally, the separated father, even one who was abusive in the past, can turn out to be a helpful ally. Others appear indifferent to their child's behaviour or subtly encourage it. A few actively encourage the abuse ('Next time use a cricket bat!').

Don't Assume Bad Parenting

Many parents I have dealt with have been to parenting classes, read parenting books and know what they should do with reasonably co-operative children. They are often good at handling their other children and are emphatically not bad parents. Unfortunately, many parenting courses and books assume a fair amount of co-operation from children and are very hard to apply to out-of-control children.

I have also heard far too many stories about counsellors, paediatricians and psychiatrists overtly blaming parents for their children's behaviour. Other writers have noted that victimised parents may be as likely to feel disempowered and blamed as helped by professionals (Cottrell, 2001; Price, 1996; Omer, 2000). My reading on this issue indicates that mother blaming is at least as common an activity as it has been in clinical literature generally (Caplan & Hall-McCorquodale, 1985 [Caplan, 1985: 178] suggest this is a legacy of Freud). Victim blaming has also been a popular sport.

Since they generally already feel guilty and expect to be blamed, parents can feel 'got at' by therapists even when this is not intended. We need to be aware that what some see as simply gathering information may be taken by many parents as implying guilt. Parents may see questions such as: 'Was he a planned child?' or, 'Did you work when he was a baby?' as implying that he was unloved or neglected. Since the answers to such questions seldom have any useful effect on what we actually do with a family, such detailed history taking can be a dangerous habit.

Power and (Lack of) Control

Parents potentially have a lot more power than children (economic power, knowledge, size, status, supports) but when adults are constrained from using their power, even young children may be in the more powerful position, at least temporarily.

Being irresponsible gives power (at least in the short term). It may be that our desire to see the world as a fair and just place makes this a hard fact to acknowledge. The less responsible parent often exerts much more influence than the responsible one. If a child does not care about the consequences of his/her actions (while the parent does) the child can become very powerful. An example is a thirteen-year-old girl threatening to hitchhike if parents won't give her a lift to a party, then phoning and demanding a lift home in the middle of the night. 'Logical consequences' often simply do not work where a child is self-destructive!

When a teenager really doesn't care if he stays at home or not (or at least bluffs his parents into

believing this), then the teenager has the power. I have on occasions seen dramatic changes occur when parents stop chasing the errant child and instead lock the doors at night. Where separated parents cannot cooperate or communicate (often the case after DV), teens can flit from one to the other and effectively undermine both. If teenagers can voluntarily admit themselves to official care and return home as they wish, they can play similar power games.

Women have been socialised to take responsibility for other family members and this can severely limit their options. At the extreme, I have come across mothers being treated by older teenagers with contempt and abuse, yet these women have never even considered not doing their son's laundry or cooking his meals. When parents routinely take responsibility for their child's wrongdoing and mistakes, they are putting the child in a very powerful position.

Feeling powerful is rewarding in itself for many children; they need not gain material rewards from exercising it. I don't consider it necessary or helpful to pathologise this desire for power, e.g. by assuming that the child must be feeling particularly powerless, must be unloved, neglected or have abnormally low self-esteem. A common example of such pathologising is that when children appear to be misbehaving, they are often assumed by professionals to be not receiving sufficient attention from their parents, which may be the opposite of the truth.

When children are violent to their parents, this is not usually in the context of an overall relationship based on power and control, as often occurs with adult domestic violence - but there are similarities. Women victimised by children frequently lose self-esteem and confidence; they may become socially isolated; they feel shame and become secretive; they report 'tip-toeing around' the child; they are generally stressed and often depressed.

Social Class

In my clinical experience it has been noticeable (though unfortunately I haven't kept records of this) that parents victimised by children, especially in two-parent families, are more often middle-class and educated. Several have been teachers and professionals!

Agnew and Huguley found little overall relationship between SES (socio-economic status) and violence to parents, but also noted '*a slight tendency for assault to be highest among those whose parents are in the most prestigious occupations*' (1989: 707). Paulson et al. (1990) reported a trend for

parent 'hitters' to be more often middle or upper class. Cornell and Gelles (1982) found assault highest in families where the father was in clerical work. Charles found that the majority came from 'overly reasonable, 'democratic' families with parents who were 'intelligent, well educated, valuing verbal expression' (1986: 353). They also found that the rate was seven times greater for white than black families.

All this is quite unlike all other types of family violence and violent crime, which are found to be more common with lower SES. What is it about middle class and educated parents that might increase the risk of them being victimised by their children? Price suggests:

"The new ethics in child rearing that evolved in the 1960s and 70s primarily stressed children's needs, but the focus shifted away from the need for structure and leadership and emphasized kindness as a panacea" (1996: 18).

Omer states that 'the dream of total permissiveness has proved hollow' (2002: xi) and that children reared in such families are more liable to conduct disorders, violence and delinquency as well as suffering from low self-esteem. Although I agree, I am wary that, taken out of context, this could be used by traditionalists who want to return to a more authoritarian (as opposed to authoritative) form of discipline. I certainly don't favour this and am uneasy about most of what is called 'tough love', though some of the ideas are useful.

Over-entitled Children

"The abdication of authority by the parent and the symmetrical feeling of physical prowess on the part of the adolescent can result in the adolescent's manifesting a grandiose sense of self along with an enormous sense of entitlement" (Harbin & Maddin, 1979: 1290).

Harbin and Maddin's was the first article to look specifically at 'Battered Parents'. Since then, the question of 'entitlement' has only occasionally been touched on, with more writers suggesting that these children are victims of harsh or neglectful parenting rather than of permissive or indulgent parents. Laurent (1997) cites a lack of limit setting as one of the causes of children's violence to parents and

suggests that modern child-rearing theory is partly responsible.

Well-meaning parents who try too hard (or attempt to be super-parents) may produce children who expect to be entertained, chauffeured about, waited on, even have their homework done for them! Many parents today (probably most of us) take responsibility for their children's education, entertainment and social life in a way that was rare even a generation ago. The perceived risks of modern life also mean that children are protected more and often spend much more time in the home. These trends are not all bad and will not produce victimising children in the majority of cases, but a risk of parent-victimisation appears to accompany certain temperaments of children and certain life experiences. It is easy to act abusively towards servants!

A lack of limit-setting in extreme cases leads to children who 'tyrannise' their families:

The inadequate familial control typically found in these parent-child interactions is expressed in the form of consistent and repeated yielding to the child's wishes. A set is created whereby the child is rarely required to postpone gratification (Barcai, Rosenthal & Jerusalem, 1974: 392).

In addition to parents who may have taken democratic parenting ideals too far, some of the sole mothers I have worked with have also created high levels of entitlement by trying to make up for 'depriving' their children of their fathers, and for exposing them to DV. It has been noted that women living in situations of domestic violence may be strict when the abusive father is around and lax when he is not (Holden & Ritchie, 1991). In some cases, a pattern of not setting clear limits may stem from the time of separation, especially, though not exclusively, after being abused by a partner. One parent's over-responsibility may be a reaction against the other's irresponsibility.

I'll return in my next article to the important idea of 'entitlement' (which owes much to the work of Alan Jenkins [1990]).

Reducing Guilt and Redistributing Blame

It is crucially important that parents are not made to feel (more) guilty about their contribution to their child's behaviour. Instead of terms like 'over-protective' and 'over-indulgent', we could talk instead about a

mismatch between the parents' behaviour and a particular child at a particular time. Such parents often have other children who show no signs of disturbance or abusive behaviour, and the victimising child may be socially successful and well behaved in other settings.

Although a parent's behaviour is very important, it is only one influence. Innate temperament, school, siblings, peers, and the media may all be important, and children do have free will. Many parents (and some professionals) work on the unspoken, illogical, assumption that parents are the only influence on children's behaviour. It can be quite liberating to challenge the excessive burden of guilt and responsibility that this belief creates. I often joke about it: 'Now I suppose you are going to feel guilty about having been too dedicated and too responsible!'

Clarifying and Creating Consequences, and Associated Risk

"Very often the parent victims reward the violent behaviour by giving in or changing their position as a response to the aggressive act" (Harbin & Maddin, 1979: 1289).

Parents have often been given conflicting advice such as: 'Just ignore him when he swears'; 'Give him a good whack'; 'Send him to his father's'; 'Stop him seeing his father'; 'Give him more attention'; 'Help him release his anger'; 'Phone the police'. They often desperately want to know what is the 'normal', socially acceptable response. Unfortunately we have no real answer to this: we do not have a 'normal' socially sanctioned response to being abused by our children. With one's child, retaliation is neither socially sanctioned nor useful. Withdrawing is sometimes appropriate but may be dangerous, impossible or too guilt inducing. Legal processes are often far too guilt-inducing or may simply not be of any concern to the child. Asking 'How would you respond if he were older?' (or younger, or an adult, or someone else's child) can help clarify the possible range of reactions and the constraints operating on a particular parent's response.

It is usually possible to find consequences that the parent can impose, e.g. small fines work well for swearing. I don't believe that the effect of such punishments has much to do with simple reinforcement (as per traditional behaviour modification). Imposing a consequence can be empowering, symbolic ('I'm taking this seriously and I'm not powerless'), and can give an alternative to

previous unhelpful patterns of response, as well as making anti-social behaviour slightly less attractive to the child. Parents often need to be given permission to react in a more natural way, e.g. by leaving the house or refusing to talk to the child for an hour. I seldom actually suggest such methods but will challenge the parent's guilt about using them.

A common, understandable, mistake for parents is trying to make the punishment fit the crime. Some parents give up applying any consequences as they feel none are sufficiently severe. It is not necessary or possible to always have a logical consequence that reflects the seriousness of the offence. I try to convince parents that the length of a punishment (such as removing a privilege) has very little to do with its deterrent effect. They need to avoid using up all their ammunition at once. This militaristic analogy appeals to most beleaguered parents, and has the (dubious) advantage that it even appeals to aggressive fathers! Since most children have pretty short timeframes, lengthy punishments can quite quickly make them feel like prisoners on a life sentence, with nothing more to lose. I'll never forget a high-spirited twelve-year old girl who was grounded for another eighteen months! She said she deliberately goaded Dad into adding more weeks to her sentence. She could see the ridiculousness of the situation, even though Dad could not.

Making rules and consequences more explicit can help a great deal. Basically, what I am encouraging is assertive parenting. This sounds simple but often involves considerable discussion about the implications of various responses.

A useful exercise in finding useable consequences is to get parents to list all the things they do for the child. Next they add any other privileges they could possibly use and finally we brainstorm how withdrawing these could be tried as consequences. It is important to be clear what parents are willing to employ, as they vary widely in how much guilt they feel about not performing their 'parental duties'. It is also essential to examine what the child actually cares about. The potential power of the parent is dependent on what the child cares about, including whether they really want to stay at home, mind if they eat, or mind what they wear.

It is also essential to be clear about how much cooperation there is, e.g. will a child go to his room if told to do so and will he stay at home when grounded? It helps to be very clear about what consequences require the child's cooperation and which are completely under the parent's control. If a consequence involves denying access to something, does it have to be locked up or removed from the house? Children are

often cooperating more than parents realise and this is certainly worth highlighting. A central aim is to establish consequences for all violent, abusive or destructive behaviour, even if they are largely symbolic.

It is important to warn parents of potential risks in being more assertive with their kids. Some young people temporarily escalate their aggressiveness or may provoke a crisis. A few may actually leave home, those with sole mothers may go to live with Dad. One mother who took out an intervention order against her violent teenager found that her relatives, her church and the boy's school put pressure on her and treated her as if she were uncaring (though she still did not regret her action).

Conclusion

In the majority of the families I have encountered, children victimising parents follow the sad old pattern of males abusing females. Males are further to blame as the majority of these children have had past exposure to their fathers abusing their mothers. It is thus rather discouraging that much of the earlier literature is mother-blaming, pays little or no attention to gender and makes few mentions of past DV. On the other hand abuse by girls is far from rare and deserves further study and attention.

No reliable available evidence indicates whether child to parent violence is an increasing problem. Like some other writers, and many workers I have spoken to, I have the impression that it is increasing, but I have no concrete evidence. It is possible that raised awareness is wholly responsible for us seeing more of the problem. If it is increasing, one possibility is that more women are leaving men who act abusively: overall a good thing, but a sad irony if they are later being victimised by their children. This has obvious implications for those working with adult domestic violence, though we don't know how many children will follow this pattern and we certainly must not assume that it is inevitable. I hope I am not reinforcing the common tendency to exaggerate the intergenerational transmission of violence.

The second category of children victimising parents that I have identified is that of over-responsible parents being abused by overly-entitled children. These are often intact, middle class families, though some are sole mothers maybe trying to compensate for the past. It is also possible that more democratic, liberal parenting practices sometimes misfire and

create excessively entitled children, a few of whom victimise parents.

The phenomenon of children victimising parents was first mentioned in the literature 45 years ago (Sears et al., 1957). In 1979 when Harbin and Madden called their paper '*Battered Parents: A New Syndrome*' they said that the behaviour was surrounded by a 'veil of denial'. It is not new, it is not a 'syndrome', but it is time that the veil was lifted.

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