



Overview Paper

# Parent Abuse: The Abuse of Parents by Their Teenage Children

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

## What Is Parent Abuse?

Parent abuse is any harmful act by a teenage child intended to gain power and control over a parent. The abuse can be physical, psychological, or financial.

*Physical abuse* includes hitting, punching, slapping, and pushing and is the most visible form of abuse. A number of large-scale studies suggest that up to 14% of parents are physically assaulted by their adolescent children at some point.<sup>1-5</sup>

*Psychological abuse* includes name calling, criticizing and put-downs, creating fear, running away from home, and threatening to hurt or kill a parent or themselves. Although behaviours such as yelling occur at some point in many families, they can be considered parent abuse when they become persistent. Abuse often begins verbally and escalates to include other forms.<sup>6</sup>

*Financial abuse* includes stealing or taking things without permission, damaging the home or possessions of the parent, and demanding things that parents cannot afford.

## Who Are The Teenage Abusers?

Both boys and girls are capable of abusing their parents. Although some research findings suggest that adolescent boys are more likely to be physically abusive than girls,<sup>7-13</sup> aggressive behaviours in girls are increasing.<sup>14</sup> Generally, the older, bigger, and stronger the teenager, the more at risk the parents are of being abused.<sup>15-19</sup> Abuse typically appears at puberty. “Tantrums”, which may be used by younger children as a form of communication, may be an early-warning sign of abusive behaviour.<sup>20</sup>

Some abusive teenagers have themselves been physically, emotionally and/or sexually abused, or they have been exposed to one parent being abused by the other. They may feel powerless and retaliate by abusing the parent who is seen as the least powerful.<sup>21-30</sup>

Some abusive teens have behavioural disorders or medical conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorder, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia.<sup>31-33</sup>

## Who Is The Abused Parent?

Parent abuse can occur in any family and is not associated with socio-economic class, ethnic background, or sexual orientation. Although fathers are also susceptible, mothers are the most frequent victims of parent abuse.<sup>34-41</sup> One of the reasons is that women are the primary caregivers. They spend more time with their children than fathers and have closer emotional connections to them.

Often, abused mothers are single parents.<sup>42,43</sup> Elderly parents and parents with disabilities may be particularly vulnerable to abuse by their teenage children.<sup>44,45</sup>

Teenagers who abuse their parents may also abuse their younger siblings and/or family pets.<sup>46,47</sup>

## What Are The Contributing Factors?

Societal values, family dynamics, and child development may all play a role in parent abuse.

### Societal and cultural values

As a society, we need to take collective responsibility for our children. Although parents play a major role in their child's development, there are other influences on children.<sup>48</sup> Parents, however, are usually blamed and held responsible when things go wrong.<sup>49-52</sup>

Society plays a pivotal role in creating, accepting, and perpetuating abusive behaviour. In films, on television, and in everyday life, teenagers see that violence is commonly used to achieve goals and is an acceptable form of social control. Teenagers are also exposed to violence against women in society, and they see that women are demeaned and undervalued. This may be one of the reasons why mothers are more likely to be abused than fathers.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, women have traditionally been more aware of and receptive to the feelings and emotions of those around them. Many teens find it is easier to share their emotions with their mothers. As a result, teens feel they can express a whole range of feelings towards their mothers, including anger.<sup>54-56</sup>

Today's youth are under a great deal of pressure. Schools can be violent and unsafe, and teens may feel they have to be in control to avoid being victimized.<sup>57,58</sup> Some act out their victimization and rage with abusive actions at home. Parent abuse may also be the manifestation of teens' frustration and alienation in a culture that bombards them with advertising and then denies them the economic opportunity to access material goods for themselves.<sup>59,60</sup>

Although there is no evidence that substance abuse causes violent behaviour, many parents report that when their teens are using drugs or alcohol their behaviour is more abusive.<sup>61-63</sup>

Adolescent aggression may be viewed by some as "normal" teenage behaviour, but it should not be seen as acceptable.<sup>64</sup>

## **Family dynamics**

In some cases, teenagers react abusively when they have been abused or when they have been exposed to the abuse of one of their parents by his or her partner.<sup>65,66</sup> Sometimes the teenager directs the abuse towards the non-offending parent. In some families or communities, physical, emotional, or verbal abuse is used as a method of communication; if it has been occurring for years or generations, it may have become normalized behaviour.

In other cases, permissive or absent parenting may contribute to the teenager's abusive behaviour.<sup>67-71</sup> When

parents do not demonstrate adequate or appropriate leadership in their families, the teens may act out because they do not feel safe.<sup>72-77</sup> In these cases, however, parents often state that the abuse occurs when they attempt to regain leadership by enforcing rules or consequences.<sup>78,79</sup>

Stress caused by family breakdown, work pressures, and money worries creates additional problems for the family and may leave parents with little time, energy, or patience for their teens.

When parents are separated or divorced, the abusive situation may be worsened. Not only can divorce cause stress for adolescents, but also parents' failure to work together to deal with the abuse may make it worse. In addition, teenagers sometimes resent the parent they live with (usually the mother) for changing their life.

## **Individual development of the abusive child**

Some teens who abuse their parents may have a disorder or condition such as ADHD, conduct disorder, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia. However, researchers have found that most abusive teens are not mentally ill.<sup>80</sup>

As yet, little is known about the biological predisposition to violence. Some parents report that their abusive child was aggressive from a very young age,<sup>81-83</sup> but the link has not been established.

## The Effects

### Parents

Most parents have difficulty accepting that their teenager is abusive and may deny the problem. They often feel depressed, anxious, and ashamed that they were not able to “produce” a “happy” family. Their despair interferes with their ability to regain leadership in their families. In addition, some parents feel it is not safe for them to attempt to control the situation because they are in physical danger.<sup>84</sup>

Abused parents often feel unsupported and isolated. Many couples’ relationships undergo tremendous strain and are sometimes torn apart because of the abuse.<sup>85</sup>

When teenagers are removed from the home because of their abusive behaviour, parents may grieve their loss, especially when the teenager is the only child of single parents. If the teenagers have children of their own, parents may also lose contact with their grandchildren.

Stress is not limited to the home. Parents of abusive teens take their concerns and anxiety to work or school with them. For some parents, worry about a child can interfere with their concentration and lead to anxiety about the security of their job or school performance.<sup>86</sup> Additional stress may result if parents receive many personal telephone calls at work or need to take time off because of the abusive situation. The cost of counselling for themselves and/or the abusive teenager can add financial strain.

### Siblings

Abusive behaviour also affects other children in the home. Parents may fear for the safety of their non-abusive children. Some parents are concerned that the teen’s risky activities (drugs, alcohol, prostitution) may influence the other children or put them at risk. In addition, focusing on the abusive teen often means that parents pay less attention to the behaviour of their other children. Parents fear that this sometimes leads to the other children acting out in order to gain attention. When an abusive teenager leaves the home, some siblings experience a sense of grief and loss.<sup>87</sup>

## The Legal System

### Legal rights

Although laws differ across Canada, most parents are legally bound to provide for their children until they are 19 years of age.<sup>88</sup> However, their obligation to children between the ages of 16 and 19 years is not clear. In Nova Scotia, for example, the *Children and Family Services Act* protects children up to the age of 16. Between 16 and 19 years of age, children may legally leave home, but their parents continue to be legally and financially responsible for them. This means that if a 16-year-old child runs away from home, the police will usually not investigate, and the parents could be sued by child welfare agencies for support.

## Police and courts

It is important that parents understand what the criminal justice system can and cannot do. Some forms of parent abuse are difficult for parents to live with, but they may not be offences under the Criminal Code. Physical abuse, threats, theft, and damage to property are, however, criminal offences with which abusive teenagers can be charged.

Many parents do not call the police because they do not want their children to be charged with assault. Other parents are afraid that they will be charged with assault because they have attempted to physically restrain their abusive teenager.

Some parents find it more difficult to live with a child after assault charges have been laid because the children are often angry and resentful. Others feel they have less control when the police and the court system are involved.

## Children's service agencies

Because child welfare agencies usually have a mandate to protect children from harm, they do not often have the resources to help in situations of parent abuse. Anger management programs are available for some children in trouble with the law.

## The Helping Hand

First, parents need to admit the abuse and talk about it, and then they need to find support. For support to be appropriate, it is important that service providers understand the dynamics of parent abuse. However, since this abuse has only recently been recognized, many service providers are uncertain how to help. The dilemma for

service providers is how to help parents deal better with an abusive or aggressive child without appearing to blame the parents for the abusive situation.

Therapists who narrow their practice to focus only on the needs of the child may leave parents feeling criticized or judged. Instead, parents need help to accept themselves lovingly and overcome the guilt and fear that interfere with their making changes in their lives. Parents also report that when they seek professional help, they are often sent from one agency to another while professionals try to find or treat the cause of the abuse. They suggest that it would be more helpful if they were first supported in regaining a gentle, non-violent leadership role in their families.

It may also be useful to help teens recognize that they are abusive and to let them know how to access support to change their behaviour. If a teenager refuses to participate in counselling sessions, parents should make it clear that they have decided to seek counselling with or without their child. In these cases, teenagers will often attend sessions so that they can maintain some control of the situation (Jerome Price: personal communication).

When parents use "gentle" attempts, such as reasoning, to encourage their aggressive teenager to stop the abuse, they are often ignored or treated with contempt. However, abusive teenagers often react even more aggressively if parents use force, and a vicious circle of mutual retaliation evolves. It is sometimes useful to gain the support of others to deal with the abuse in a non-violent way.<sup>89</sup> Because children often behave more respectfully in front of other people, a parent could call a friend to come to the house instead of reacting aggressively to a child's refusal to

obey rules or a child's abusive behaviour. Parents should stay in close communication with people who are a part of their child's life, such as parents of the child's friends, teachers, coaches, principals and guidance counsellors, doctors, church leaders, police, and probation officers.

For some families, removing the teenager from the home – for a short time, a longer period, or permanently – is the only way to stop the abuse. For many parents, the options are limited. Some are able to have the child stay with a friend or relative or in a group home, but many fear that if they demand that the child leave home, he or she will live on the streets.

Once the immediate crisis has been handled, parents need time, space, and support to deal with the effects of the abuse. They often find that healing is helped by their focusing less on the abusive teenager and more on reconnecting with more positive aspects of their own lives.

## Where To Go For Help?

Many parents state that finding support can be very difficult. Sometimes the child's behaviour does not change, and parents may want to enlist the aid of a counsellor to help them cope. It might be helpful to contact a women's centre, family resource centre, or women's shelter. Your local library might also be aware of support groups. Other resources, including distress lines, are listed in the front pages of your local telephone directory.

## Resources

### Video

The Crown Prince. National Film Board, 1989. Available from the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.

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