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Child to Parent Abuse

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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth offending services.

This report was kindly produced by Dr Amanda Holt, summarising the research findings on child to parent abuse, covering its prevalence, contexts, and impacts. Notably, child to parent abuse can cause a wide range of harms, to the parent/carer, to the young person, and to the wider family and community. There are clear implications for youth justice practice in relation to initial identification and screening – with disclosure being difficult for many parents/carers, and differing structural and familial contexts – and the need for tailored and multi-agency responses. Within our inspections, we will continue to consider whether high-quality, well-focused, personalised and coordinated services are in place which support both the safety of the child and the safety of other people.



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Dr. Amanda Holt is a Reader in Criminology at the University of Roehampton, London. Her research interests focus on families, young people and harm, and she is a specialist on the problem of violence towards parents. She has written the UK's first book on the topic ([Adolescent to Parent Abuse: Current Understandings in Research, Policy and Practice](#)) and edited the world's first collection on practice and intervention ([Working with Adolescent Violence Towards Parents: Approaches and Contexts for Intervention](#)). She has worked on a large number of research projects on violence towards parents, most recently a [London-wide analysis](#) for the Mayor of London. She has also worked with the UK Home Office on developing a national policy response to the problem. She is a trustee of the national charity, [Family Lives](#), and is a board member of [PEGS](#), a support organisation that works for families who are experiencing violence towards parents.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation.

1. Introduction

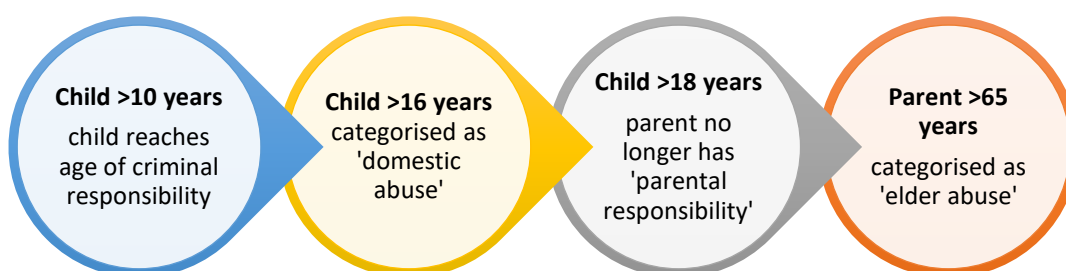
Child to parent abuse is defined as:

'a pattern of behaviour...which involves using verbal, financial, physical and/or emotional means to practise power and exert control over a parent...such that a parent unhealthily adapts his/her own behaviour to accommodate the child. Commonly reported abusive behaviours include name-calling, threats to harm self or others, attempts at humiliation, damage to property, theft and physical violence'.
(Holt, 2016:1).

Within this definition, there are a couple of points worth highlighting. First, the reference to 'a pattern of behaviour' recognises the importance of differentiating this problem from one-off incidents where, for example, teenagers might 'kick off'. While not wishing to minimise their seriousness, such incidents rarely form part of a wider tapestry of abuse and control that negatively impacts family dynamics. Second, while the term 'parent' is often used in discourse around child to parent abuse, carers – including foster carers and kinship carers – should be included in any conceptualisation of the problem, and their specific needs should be recognised in any strategic response to it.

The problem is particularly complex because it can take place throughout the life-course. This means that conceptualising and responding to it is not straightforward as it potentially cross-cuts a number of policy fields. Cases that involve children who are under the age of 18 years, where parents/carers are likely to have parental responsibility for the child, will require a different response compared with cases that involve adult offspring. Furthermore, in cases where parents/carers are older and deemed to be vulnerable¹, child to parent abuse might constitute a form of 'elder abuse'.

Figure 1: Child to parent abuse through the life-course



This *Academic Insights* paper focuses on child to parent abuse specifically in the context of children and young people in England and Wales. It outlines current research on its prevalence, contexts and impacts before discussing what this means for youth justice practice.

¹ 'Elder abuse' is not defined only in terms of age, and perceptions of 'age-related vulnerability' is an important part of its definition (e.g. see [Crown Prosecution Service](#), 2020).

2. Understanding and responding to child to parent abuse

2.1 Child to parent abuse: prevalence, contexts and impacts

It is difficult to measure the prevalence of child to parent abuse, or to identify the populations most affected by it, for a number of reasons, which include:

1) Differences in terminology and definitional criteria

In the UK, a range of terms are used to name this problem, including *child/adolescent to parent violence and abuse (CAPVA)*, *child to parent violence (CPV)*, and *adolescent family violence (AFV)*. In terms of measuring the prevalence of the problem, some studies might examine cases that involve a single reported incident, whereas others might look for 'a pattern of behaviour' through criteria that stipulate repeated incidences. Studies might also impose age-related criteria to the populations studied – for example, by including only children aged over 10 years and/or under 18 years. Then there are the thorny questions of which specific behaviours constitute 'violence' or 'abuse', and whether intentionality on the part of the child should form part of any definitional criteria.

2) Differences in the populations that are studied

Some research studies look at *criminal justice data* (e.g. incidents reported to the police, or disposal/conviction data from the courts), some studies look at *service-user data* (e.g. information about parents/carers who seek help from support services), and other studies use *community surveys* to ask parents/carers about their experiences of victimisation, or ask young people about their use of violence against parents. While each of these data sources are valid, each needs to be interpreted in terms of its own methodological limitations.

3) Reluctance to disclose

Holt (2011) suggested that child to parent abuse constitutes a 'double stigma' because it combines the stigma of being a victim of domestic/family violence with the stigma of being the parent of a 'difficult' or 'troublesome' child. The shaming and blaming that accompanies stigma means that parents/carers are very reluctant to disclose their experiences of child to parent abuse – whether to researchers, to the police, to support services, or to friends and family.

Additional reasons why parents/carers are reluctant to disclose include:

- fear of retribution (whether from their child or from other family members)
- fear of the consequences (e.g. removal of the child (or other family members) from the family home, or criminalisation of the child)
- fear of not being taken seriously, or of not being believed.

Differences in terminology, definitions, research samples, and parents/carers' reluctance to disclose the problem means that it is very difficult to get an overall understanding of the prevalence of child to parent abuse, or of its characteristics and contexts. These caveats should be kept in mind when making sense of the research evidence that is discussed below.

The prevalence of child to parent abuse

In our comprehensive UK-based study that looked at police data, we examined incidents reported to the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) over a two-year period (Jan 2018 – Dec 2020) of all cases involving offspring under the age of 25. Overall, we found that reported incidents were decreasing year-on-year. The majority of offences reported were categorised by the police as 'Violence Against the Person' (60%), followed by 'Criminal Damage' (25%). Of the victims, 89 per cent were parents and six per cent were grandparents (Brennan et al., 2022).

The same study also analysed the *Crime Survey for England and Wales* (CSEW) over a nine-year period (2011/12 – 2019/20) and found that child to parent abuse constitutes 1.2 per cent of all violence reported in the CSEW. This analysis also revealed that 43 per cent of cases of child to parent abuse are not reported to the police (Brennan et al., 2022).

The contexts of child to parent abuse

Gender

Regardless of which data source is used, mothers (and female carers) appear to be much more likely to be targeted than fathers/male carers, at a ratio of approximately 8:2 (Simmons et al, 2018). Mothers are also more likely to be fearful of their child following a violent incident (Boxall and Sabol, 2021).

In contrast, the gender of the child involved appears to vary depending on the data source. For example, the majority of incidents (81%) reported to the MPS involved sons, and the accompanying analysis of the CSEW found that sons instigated 71 per cent of the incidents (Brennan et al, 2022). However, many other surveys have found that daughters are as likely as sons to disclose their use of violence towards parents/carers (Simmons et al, 2018). Certainly, violence by sons is more likely to be reported to the police (Brennan et al, 2022) and there is also evidence from the US that sons are more likely than daughters to be arrested if the victim is female (Armstrong et al., 2021). It may be that the kind of abusive behaviours engaged in are gendered: anecdotally, practitioners have reported that girls are more likely to engage in psychological and verbal abuse, with boys more likely to engage in physical violence (O'Toole, 2022; Holt and Lewis, 2021)².

Age

In our recent study of cases involving children and young people under 25 years, 65 per cent of incidents reported to the MPS involved those aged 19-25 years, with 34 per cent aged 15-18 years, and one per cent aged 12-14 years³ (Brennan et al., 2022). Of course, the age of children in reported incidents may not reflect the age of children who are violent towards their parents: parents often disclose that the abusive behaviours have been developing for some time before the police become involved. Indeed, some parents report it starting very young, sometimes pre-school. This appears to be particularly the case for children who have experienced early childhood trauma, which is more likely with adopted children (Selwyn and Meakings, 2016) and children in kinship care (Holt and Birchall, 2021).

² It is worth comparing these findings with data on *fatal* violence towards parents, where there is no significant difference of whether mothers or fathers are likely to be killed by their children. However, sons are overwhelmingly more likely to be the offenders (at a ratio of 9:1) (Holt, 2017).

³ There were no reported incidents involving children under 12 years.

Ethnicity

In our study of reported incidents to the MPS, 53 per cent of cases involved young people from ethnically minoritised groups (Brennan et al., 2022). Given that such groups are similarly over-represented amongst other types of offence groups, this finding is likely to be a reflection of systematic discrimination within the criminal justice system more broadly. The implications for youth justice practice, in terms of the reluctance of particular populations to reach out for help, combined with the organisational barriers that prevent such reaching out, are discussed in Section 2.2.

Deprivation and poverty

Analysis of the CSEW found that child to parent abuse disproportionately affects respondents from deprived neighbourhoods, with 17 per cent of victims living in the most deprived decile and 64 per cent living in the more deprived half of neighbourhoods (Brennan et al., 2022). US research has also found links with lone-parent families (Kennedy et al., 2010) which is significantly correlated with poverty and lower household income.

Dis/ability

There is little research that has looked at child to parent abuse in relation to dis/ability. Research from Spain has found that ADHD is the most common clinical diagnosis in children in the criminal justice system who have engaged in child to parent abuse, with other diagnoses reported as Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) (Contraros and Cano, 2015). In the UK, practitioners who engage in intervention work with child to parent abuse have reported disproportionate levels of neurodivergent children and those with learning difficulties in their caseloads (Brennan et al., 2022).

Mental health and substance use

Some international research has reported links between child to parent abuse and poor mental health, particularly in relation to depression (Ibabe et al., 2014) and suicidal ideation (Martinez-Ferrer et al., 2020). Substance use has also been found to predict psychological/verbal abuse (Calvete et al., 2015a) and physical abuse (Beckmann et al., 2021) towards parents. However, there is little research on the processes involved, and whether the role of substances is direct (e.g. has a direct physiological impact on behaviour) or indirect (e.g. causes more parent-child conflict). Substance use may not necessarily produce an increase in escalation – one UK study found that young people who engage in such violence took substances (specifically cannabis) to *de-escalate* conflicts with their parent(s) (Baker, 2021).

Wider harmful contexts

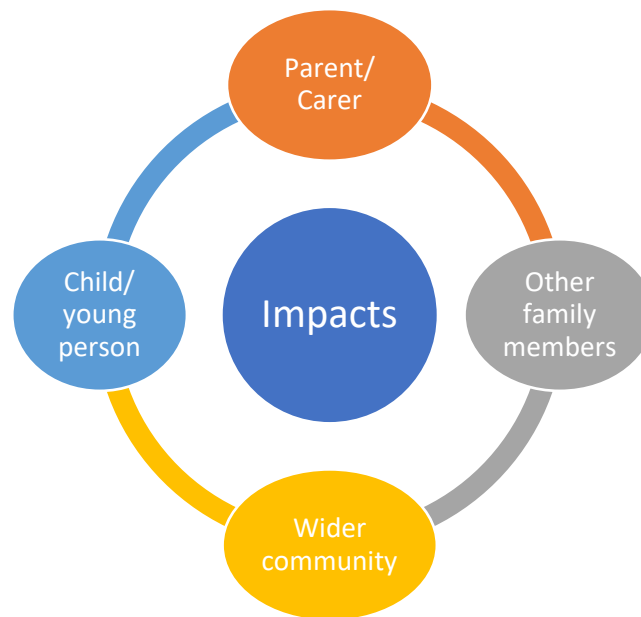
Simmons et al. (2018) estimate that 50-80 per cent of young people who engage in child to parent abuse have prior experience of domestic abuse in the family home, particularly in cases involving severe and/or frequent use of violence towards parents. Further research has found that this effect is particularly pronounced in cases involving sons (Calvete et al., 2015b) and mothers (Lyons et al., 2015). Links have also been found between child to parent abuse and:

- a child's previous victimisation by parents (Gallego et al., 2019)
- low engagement in school (Ibabe, 2016)
- engagement in other offending behaviour (Moulds et al., 2019).

The impacts of child to parent abuse

There is now compelling research evidence about the impacts of child to parent abuse on families. Aside from the physical injuries caused by the violence, there are wider impacts for parents/carers in terms of their psychological health (e.g. anxiety and depression), financial harms (e.g. loss of income and home, property damage), family relationships (e.g. marital conflict), and harms to social life (including social withdrawal and isolation) (Holt, 2016). The abusive behaviours also often target others in the family home, including siblings and pets. Even if not directly targeted, siblings often withdraw from the family in response – for example, by spending more time outside the home or by withdrawing into their bedrooms.

Figure 2: The impacts of child to parent abuse



It is also important to recognise that harms extend to the young person engaging in the violence. In her research with young people, Baker (2021) documented:

- physical injuries
- psychological harms (e.g. guilt, exhaustion)
- damage to self-worth and self-identity
- financial losses
- damage to their family relationships.

International research has identified further links with later violence perpetration or victimisation with dating partners (Ibabe et al., 2020).

2.2 Child to parent abuse: considerations for youth justice practice

Is it domestic abuse?

The statutory UK government definition of 'domestic abuse' includes child to parent abuse in cases when the child is aged 16 years or over⁴. However, there remains a tension between this definition and how to respond appropriately in cases that involve children who are under the age of 18 years. On the one hand, the evidence suggests that the most common dyad in cases of child to parent abuse involves sons and mothers and that it shares many of the gendered dynamics of other forms of domestic abuse. This has led to the development of intervention work that draws from domestic abuse programmes in their emphasis on gendered patterns of power and control and the rights of victims⁵. Applying a domestic abuse framework also directs attention towards youth offending *inside* the family home – this is in contrast to the traditional youth justice model that focuses on offending *outside* the family home, with parents framed as both the problem and the solution to youth crime. On the other hand, the fundamental youth justice principles of diversionism and children's rights might suggest that restorative justice approaches are more appropriate, even if they are generally not seen as appropriate in cases of adult domestic abuse (Doran, 2009). Youth justice practitioners have also argued for child to parent abuse cases to be heard in youth courts, rather than in specialist domestic abuse courts.

Identification and screening

In some cases, youth justice practitioners will receive a case directly as a result of a child harming their parent or carer. However, in other cases, child to parent abuse may not be immediately apparent and practitioners will need to ask the right questions to identify it. As outlined in Section 2.1, there are a number of reasons why parents/carers are reluctant to disclose the abuse, and these concerns have gendered, racialised and classed contours, with some minoritized populations facing additional barriers to disclosure. For example, there may be concerns about disclosure for fear of racial discrimination, something that has been reported in the domestic violence literature (Decker et al, 2019), or fear that the child will be removed by social services, something that has been reported in research with kinship carers (Holt and Birchall, 2021). Thus, when screening for child to parent abuse, practitioners need to be mindful of both the structural context and the familial context. There may also be organisational barriers that need to be addressed, such as:

- the appropriateness and safety of the setting
- the time made available for disclosure
- the quality of the relationship between practitioner and parent/carers.

Once child to parent abuse has been identified, parents/carers as victims can be included in the risk management process and in the development of a cohesive response.

⁴ See [Domestic Abuse Act \(2021\)](#)

⁵ For example, see Papamichail and Bates (2019) for a review of the application of the 'Duluth Model' to cases of child to parent abuse.

The need for multi-agency working

In Section 2.1, the contexts of child to parent abuse were outlined, and many of these, such as growing up with domestic abuse and engaging in substance use and in wider offending behaviour, are particularly harmful. Given such complexity, it is likely that intervention work will need to involve children's social care services, schools and other educational providers, and CAMHS. It may also require engagement with the police, adult social care services, housing, health, substance misuse services, and domestic abuse services. For this reason, some youth offending services have piloted a 'Junior Marac', which applies the multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) model used in cases of adult domestic abuse to cases involving children under 16 years. However, these can present challenges in terms of ensuring consistency of process, avoiding duplication with other safeguarding meetings, and lack of awareness amongst MARAC co-ordinators of its possibility in such cases.

Developing intervention work

Youth offending services across England and Wales vary in their responses to child to parent abuse. Some have pioneered in-house intervention programmes⁶ to work with families, often running parallel groups with parents/carers and young people. However, many have been reduced in recent years due to budget cuts; programmes are very resource-intensive and it can be difficult to engage young people. Other youth offending services have trained practitioners to run programmes such as *Non-Violent Resistance* (see Omer, 2016), *Step-Up* (see Routt and Anderson, 2016) and *Who's in Charge?* (see Gallagher, 2016), while some services offer more general interventions such as family mediation, functional family therapy, multi-systemic therapy, and family group conferences, usually in partnership with other agencies.

⁶ Examples include *Break4Change* at Brighton and Hove, *Getting On* at Doncaster, and *Let's Get Along* at Hartlepool.

3. Conclusion

There is now compelling evidence that child to parent abuse causes a wide range of harms, to the parent/carer, to the young person, and to the wider family and community. There are a number of contexts in which it plays out, many of which are inter-related, and it is likely to require a tailored and multi-agency response for effective intervention. Disclosure is difficult for many parents/carers, and their structural and familial context needs to be taken into account when developing screening and assessment tools. Furthermore, the age and the needs of the child should inform the extent to which it is appropriate to respond as if it is 'domestic abuse'.

As more research evidence becomes available, there is a growing recognition that even a tailored child to parent abuse intervention might not address the needs of particular families. Examples of families where specific input is needed include adoptive parents, foster carers, kinship carers, neurodivergent children (including parents/carers who may also be neurodivergent), and children with disabilities. Furthermore, as research starts to examine child to parent abuse from a life-course perspective, there is growing recognition of the need to address the problem at all stages of the life course – from the early years, when parents/carers often request help but the problem is ignored, into adulthood, when the problem can endure and produce even greater (and sometimes fatal) harms.

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