**Breaking the taboo: Let’s talk about child-to-parent violence**

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*“Lots of kicking, lots of punching, lots of biting, lots of hitting, lots of swearing.” (Duncan, Fearon and Woolgar,2024, p6)*. That is how a parent in a study published in this issue of Adoption & Fostering describes their experiences of child-to-parent violence. But how many punches, kicks or hurtful words justify the use of this term? Or is not a question of quantity, but severity? Indeed, there is no universally agreed definition of child-to-parent violence as concluded by a recent scoping review (Rogers and Ashworth 2024). Definitions vary by the types of adverse behaviours considered, with some only including physical harm or threat thereof (Gallego et al. 2019). Supporting the use of broader definitions, the most commonly cited forms of child-to-parent violence include psychological abuse, financial abuse, and exertion of control in addition to physical violence (Rogers and Ashworth 2024). Additional considerations may include the intent of the instigator to cause harm, number of incidents (Gallego et al. 2019), subjective parental feelings of threat, intimidation or control (Paterson et al. 2002), or developmental age of the young person (i.e., child or adolescent; Selwyn and Meakings 2016). For the sake of simplicity in this editorial, the term child-to-parent violence is meant to refer to children and adolescents alike.

The variation in definitions is mirrored by the vast differences in reported prevalence rates ranging from 0.6 to 60% with more narrow rates for physical violence (0.6 to 21%; Gallego et al. 2019). As part of their annual members survey, a UK based adoption charity reported that 65% of adoptive families had experienced child- to-parent violence with 35% listing it within the top three most significant challenges they were facing (Adoption UK 2019). Consistent with this data, child-to-parent violence was reported by 38% of adoptive parents who characterised their current family situation as *very challenging* (Selwyn and Meakings 2016).

Sadly, child-to-parent violence may even act as a pre-cursor of adoption disruption. Though rare in the UK, with a prevalence of 3.2 for England and 2.6 for Wales, child-to-parent violence was the main reason for adoption disruption in the study by Selwyn and Meakings (2016). Some severe examples included the use of sharp objects such as knives and scissors, or being held hostage at home. In some tragic, if extremely rare, instances, child-to-parent violence (or in this case child-to-caregiver violence) can result in the death of a caregiver as shown by a case study published in Adoption & Fostering (Maclean 2016). In this case, the foster carer was stabbed to death by their adolescent foster son.

In order to prevent harm, it is vital to understand risk factors of these violent behaviours. A recent scoping review summarised the current evidence (Junco-Guerrero, Fernández-Baena, and Cantón-Cortés 2023). It should be noted, however, that causality was limited due to the majority of studies utilising cross-sectional designs. On an individual level, risk factors included personality traits such as impulsivity, substance use and symptoms of mental health problems. On a family level, main risk factors included prior experiences of domestic violence or abuse by the caregiver. Others referred to the child’s attachment style. Given this risk profile, one might expect for child-to-parent violence to occur more frequently amongst care-experienced young people. After all, experiences of abuse (Brodzinsky, Gunnar, and Palacios 2022), mental health (Lehmann et al. 2013; McMillen et al. 2005) and attachment problems (van den Dries et al. 2009; Engler et al. 2022) are more common in this population.

While most parents in the study by Selwyn and Meakings (2016) reported an onset of child-to-parent violence during primary school years, the problem was harder to manage in adolescence due to shifts in the power balance as young people physically matured. Though timely intervention at the first occurrence of violence could be key, shame and stigma on the parent’s side may pose barriers for help seeking (Morvwen Duncan et al. 2024; Rogers and Ashworth 2024).

Unfortunately, research on interventions for child-to-parent violence is limited, as demonstrated by a recent systematic review (Toole-Anstey, Keevers, and Townsend 2023). One promising approach is non-violent resistance (Omer and Lebowitz 2016), a parenting intervention that aims to change the parents’ response to violence. Treatment elements include training of de-escalating reactions characterised by self-control, the formation of a support group, and resistance steps. The latter include the reporting of violent instances to members of the support group (i.e., grandparents, school staff) who will then contact the young person, the implementation of acts of reparation, and a sit-in. As part of the sit-in, the young person is asked to come up with a proposal on how to change their violent behaviours and to engage in a discussion of this plan with the parent.

Across a variety of settings and countries, the intervention has shown efficacy in reducing violent and other externalising behaviours, parental feelings of helplessness, and escalations between parents and children. A Belgian study evaluated its use in a sample of 25 foster carers who reported high levels of externalising symptoms in at least one child they cared for (Van Holen, Vanderfaeillie, and Omer 2016). Following the intervention, foster carers reported an increase in their coping ability and a reduction in child externalising and internalising problems. A qualitative study published in Adoption & Fostering interviewed 10 adoptive mothers who had undergone non-violent resistance training (Samuel, Holdaway, and Vella 2022). The reduction of hopelessness found in quantitative studies of non-violent resistance was echoed by most study participants (9/10). While mothers described it as effortful, they generally appreciated the approach as a lifeline and noticed an improvement in their parenting.

The discussed studies hold some important indications for policy, practice and research. Firstly, though exact prevalence rates are unclear, child-to-parent violence is an issue experienced by foster carers and adoptive parents that must not be ignored. Secondly, the topic needs to be actively addressed in the training of foster carers and prospective adopters to reduce stigma and shame, thereby reducing barriers to help seeking. Lastly, more quantitative and qualitative studies on interventions specifically aimed at foster carers and adoptive parents are needed. Addressing the problem will benefit parents and young people alike. So, let’s break the taboo and talk about child-to-parent violence.

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