

# Exploring how teenage boys are constructed in relation to parent abuse

Helen Baker cautions against using popular assumptions to explain abuse

*Historically, the impact of domestic violence on children and young people has been relatively neglected in comparison to its effects upon adult women. Recently however, there has been increasing awareness of its effects upon this vulnerable group, with a recognition that they can and are profoundly affected by domestic violence (Hester et al., 2007). This growing awareness has been part of a broader trend of increased understanding of the many forms which domestic violence can take and its effects.*

There is less known, however, about the phenomenon of parent abuse or child-to-parent violence as it is often referred to, such that the terms used to refer to it are currently contested and there is no agreement on exactly what parent abuse is (Cottrell, 2004; Gallagher, 2004; Hunter et al., 2010). There does however seem to be agreement that parent abuse can take many forms, such as physical, emotional, social and financial abuse and in rare cases sexual abuse. Tactics of control in order to gain power are often also features of parent abuse. Furthermore, there are distinct differences between parent abuse and what could be seen as 'normal' adolescent behaviours (ibid).

Nevertheless, there is an emerging interest in and awareness of the problem of parent abuse within families in the United Kingdom, with recent studies suggesting a 5-18 per cent incidence rate (ibid). Often, teenage boys are presumed to be the main perpetrators of parent abuse due to the influence of the 'cycle of violence' theory,

which assumes a simplistic causal connection between witnessing domestic violence as a child and perpetrating it as an adult. Consequently, teenage boys are often assumed to be 'potentially violent men' in this context. This article explores how these problematic assumptions impact upon the ways in which teenage boys are perceived in relation to parent abuse, and will suggest that a more nuanced understanding of men, masculinity and violence is necessary in order to prevent this vulnerable group from being unfairly labelled, and as a consequence of this, discriminated against.

## Unrecognised parent abuse

Although there is evidence that the issue of parent abuse has come to the attention of some practitioners and academics recently (Cottrell, 2004; Hunter et al., 2010), it remains little understood and largely unrecognised by law and policy makers, demonstrated by the lack of mention of parent abuse within governmental definitions and understandings of domestic violence (Hunter et al., 2010). The reason for this lack of awareness can be partly explained by the shame and embarrassment felt by those who experience parent abuse, which is exacerbated by the attacks on the victim's self confidence involved in such abuse (Hunter et al., 2010), not dissimilar to the experience of women and children who experience male violence.

Many parents who experience child-to-parent violence also feel at fault for their children's violence because they have not managed to maintain adult control over their



children.

Therefore parent abuse may not be reported by parents as law and policy discourses involve a culture of punishing parents for the behaviour of their children by, for example, courts automatically issuing a Parenting Order to parents if their child is subject to an Anti-Social Behaviour Order under the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998* section 8(A). Furthermore, many parents may feel responsible for the abuse they experience as they may have exposed their child to the violence which they themselves suffered as an adult.

## A cycle of violence?

The silence in relation to the issue of parent abuse in both laws and policies and indeed until within academia itself within the UK (cf. Hunter et al., 2010), may mean that there is a danger of grasping at what seem to be 'easy' common sense explanations for why it occurs. One such highly problematic explanation for why parent abuse occurs which may threaten to re-emerge in the context of parent abuse, is the so called 'cycle-of violence' or 'intergenerational transmission of violence' theory. For a time, it held some explanatory power in the context of male violence towards women in the UK in the 1980s after gaining prominence in the USA in the 1970s (Hester et al., 2007). This theory presumes stereotypical gendered effects of violence upon girls and boys who experience domestic violence, with girls reacting in passive, submissive and internalised ways, and boys reacting in an externalised, aggressive manner which can involve them 'acting out' (ibid).

This explanation assumes that children who experience violence as

a child will inevitably go on in adulthood to either perpetrate violence if they are male, and be a victim of such violence if they are female. The reality is that *some* children do exhibit aggressive behaviour after experiencing violence between their parents or care-givers, but there are many factors which influence how a child reacts to violence which *include* their gender, class, age, race, disability, sexuality and individual resilience (ibid). Every child experiences and reacts to domestic violence differently and on an individual level. Moreover, violence is sometimes used by children as a self-protection strategy against further violence (ibid). The cycle of violence theory also reinforces gendered assumptions about who are victims and perpetrators of violence, namely *adult* women and *adult* men respectively, which is part of the dominant feminist conception of violence, but which does not reflect all the forms which domestic violence can take.

### Active agents

Although the 'cycle of violence' theory has been widely discredited as presenting an overly simplistic and deterministic account of how children experience domestic violence in relation to their gender, there is evidence that some practitioners continue to believe in it (Baker, 2009). Such theories are also problematic, however, because they do not attribute any agency or choice to children to determine their lives, viewing them as passive reactors to violence and acting in a pre-determined way. Children are however, active agents in their own lives, and able to make choices. Therefore these theories make generalisations about the futures of *all* children who experience violence, treating them as a homogenous group rather than as distinct individuals. Furthermore, the labelling of teenage boys in particular as 'potentially violent men' can have devastating effects upon a young person's sense of self and, significantly, upon the help and support received as a domestic violence victim (ibid).

Parent abuse as an issue therefore raises serious concerns, particularly in relation to how teenage boys are assumed to be 'potentially violent men'. More specifically, the main perpetrators of parent abuse are *thought* to be teenage boys, but this is *without* definitive evidence (Cottrell, 2004; Hunter et al., 2010). Significantly, much less than 50 per cent of boys and far fewer girls who experience domestic violence as a child go on to abuse their mothers (Gallagher, 2004), thus there is *no* definitive correlation between experiencing domestic violence as a child with perpetrating parent abuse. There is however, more agreement that mothers rather than fathers *tend* to be the victims of parent abuse, because of their increased contact time with their children. Hunter et al., have gone so far as to call parent abuse 'mother abuse' because of this (2010).

### Perpetrators of abuse

Arguably, the assumption that boys are the main perpetrators of parent abuse (Cottrell, 2004) has been influenced by 'common sense' cycle of violence theories which presume that all men are violent or will be. Consequently, it assumes that all women are not 'naturally' violent. This is not to deny that *some* men and boys *are* violent. This way of thinking about gender and violence is related to one dominant or hegemonic version of masculinity, to which it is assumed *all* men subscribe to (Hearn, 2004), which draws overly simplistic associations between masculinity, violence and men. This is problematic in the context of parent abuse, for example, as there is evidence that the differences in the numbers of teenage girls compared to teenage boys who perpetrate parent abuse, is, at best, slight (Cottrell, 2004).

There are clear limitations in linking theories of masculinity based upon deterministic sex roles to the cycle of violence theory in the context of parent abuse (Gallagher, 2004). This analysis neglects the role of power in relation to masculinities. Moreover, masculinities are: '... institutional practices located in structures of power' (Hearn, 1996).

Thus, it needs to be asked how and why masculinity has been linked with the cycle of violence theory and parent abuse at this moment in time, and for what purpose. Significantly, masculine traits such as aggression are thought to be a twentieth century construction, which enabled the justification of the 'natural' separate spheres of work for men and women. Therefore, how and why has the perpetration of parent abuse become coded as masculine?

Parent abuse undoubtedly presents challenges to the traditional feminist conception of domestic violence which presents women as victims and men as perpetrators. This is because parent abuse questions adult-child societal power relations, and the presumption that all men and boys are 'potentially violent', especially those who experience domestic violence as a child. These conceptual challenges are however relatively insignificant, but a necessary precursor to law and policy makers actually recognising parent abuse as a problem. ■

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