

Searching for help for Parent Abuse: The usefulness of the internet as a resource for parents

Introduction

Between 2005 and 2006 I was engaged in a small research project examining the help available for the victims of child to parent violence (CPV). As well as a study of the available literature and interviews with both parents and professionals, I became interested in the information available online. Since that time I have continued to receive regular “alerts” of news items, blogs, or websites dedicated to this subject and have observed a marked increase in number over the last four years. While we should applaud the raising of the profile of the plight of these parents, the increase is, sadly, not matched by a rise in the quality of support offered.

I found that parents regularly turned to the internet in their search for advice, and, as more and more people become frequent users, it is to be assumed that this trend will continue. As awareness of the impact of CPV widens among professionals, and with training opportunities such as the Toolkit, I believe it is beholden upon us to ensure that parents are able to easily access the best help available and, as far as possible, are protected from the worst excesses of prejudice and exploitation.

Abused by their children

The notion that parents, apparently in a position of power within the family, might be subject to levels of abuse from their children, akin to domestic violence from a partner, is one which many people find hard to grasp. So shocking in fact, that, until recently few people have felt able to come forward to admit their suffering and few services have been available for their help. It is thus hard to know how many parents are affected by CPV – or why. Statistics, notoriously unreliable, quote anything from 5 to 15 percent. Gallagher’s work as a therapist and researcher suggests two main, but not exclusive, causal factors: previous exposure to domestic violence and over-responsible parenting. Cottrell comments that the parents she met and worked with were all very different, in their family makeup, the circumstances surrounding the abuse, race, income and reasons, but what they had in common was,

The extreme stress they suffer, and that they all feel guilty, isolated and unsupported. They questioned their parenting abilities, agonized over whether or where they went wrong and felt responsible without hope and helpless. They felt they had failed. (p61)

This was echoed in my own findings, by a group of mothers who described themselves and their partners as “desperate” and “prepared to try anything”, including, in one case, spending £600 on a day’s life coaching.

Abused by the Helping Professions

In view of the dearth of literature on the subject of CPV, I had expected to find little awareness among professionals. Indeed my study was partly prompted by comments from colleagues suggesting parents should improve boundaries, be more consistent, make more demands on their children, or that they might be making claims to mask their own abusive actions. Clearly no parents are entirely blameless as all make mistakes, but I believe, as Cottrell suggests,

Parents who are not controlling their teens are not permissive but rather are showing the effects of being abused. They are too worn down by their teens' abuse to insist on obedience to the rules. (p44)

I was surprised then to encounter both an awareness of the issue among the management level professionals I interviewed and a small level of provision locally, some of which has since been withdrawn as funding ceased. That I had great difficulty finding the appropriate services though is perhaps indicative that parents might also give up, particularly given the experiences documented in the literature and spoken out by colleagues and my "own " parents: of being passed from agency to agency, of being disbelieved, of having to wait months and months for a service.

Feeling safe

Apart from the statutory local authority, health or police services, or small voluntary groups, other less formal avenues of support do exist. We all recognise the line at the end of a TV or radio programme: "If you have been personally affected by any of these issues ...". In the last few years, dedicated phone lines have offered immediate counselling or signposting on to appropriate agencies after a discussion of CPV in programmes as diverse as Coronation Street or Woman's Hour. Few and far between perhaps, but it may be the first time that a parent has acknowledged that what they are experiencing is abusive – or that they realised they were not alone.

In a situation such as this then it is to be expected that parents will turn to avenues with which they are familiar or feel safe, depending on how they define the problem, on previous successful experiences, and on awareness of resources. My study found that each parent had identified a trusted friend on whom they were heavily dependent, but each had then moved out to find other support. In 2 out of 3 cases this was at least in part through the internet, a media with which they were already comfortable. Indeed, the Office for National Statistics 2010 Social Trends Report states that, for 2009, "37.4 million adults aged 16 or over (76% of the UK adult population) had accessed the internet in the 3 months prior to interview", and 60% went online every day or almost every day.

Hardly surprisingly, the most prominent support available online, using basic search terms such as "parent+help+support" is from Parentline Plus. That organisation has reported that, between October 2008 and October 2009, they received 1139 call to their help line from parents saying they had suffered abuse from their child. On this website parents will find advice sheets, message boards,

phone line and even access to conference calls, as well as a link to the dedicated GotATeenager website.

many other parents will be going through () the same issues that you are experiencing with your teen, so this really is the best place to find support, advice and a listening ear.

Abused online

Sadly, not all the parents interviewed in my own study had heard of Parentline Plus and so had engaged in sometimes protracted searches, starting with what might be called their own “community”, so, religious affiliated websites, adoption agencies, Mums’ networks. My research suggests that parents in this situation, depending on the search terms used, very quickly become exposed to less than helpful advice.

The content of some blogs, and support networks is measured, researched and supported by references to helpful books or other organisations (eg. <http://psychcentral.com/lib/2010/parent-abuse-by-teen/>). However, attracted by, for instance, a newspaper article, the unwary parent can just as easily find themselves the recipient of a diatribe against liberal-minded, neglectful parenting, or the recommendation of issuing “a good thrashing” as they can the helpful encouragement of a fellow sufferer or the advice to contact their GP or Social Services. (eg. <http://news.scotsman.com/news/One-in-ten-calls-to.6009631.jp>) Indeed many discussions include the recommendations NOT to visit social services, as they are “not interested unless it is the parent hitting the child”. (<http://hubpages.com/hub/The-Silent-Suffering-Of-Parent-Abuse-When-Children-Abuse-Parents>). It is not uncommon to find advertisements for books, DVDs or therapeutic programmes placed within the content, either sponsored by advertisers or promoting the author of the website themselves. (eg. <http://myoutofcontrolteen.com>.) Finally, anyone searching on YouTube for ‘parent abuse’ will find a full range of films of toddlers slamming into their unsuspecting parents, youngsters apparently being encouraged to beat up their elders and impassioned pleas for help to the camera.

I would suggest that there are a number of issues, which should be of concern to us here. The range of helpfulness of the advice on offer and the extremes of the abuse on some message boards is far from the standard which we would hope for. The overt and strong criticism of some agencies, particularly of social services, is worrying both because it is not always true – and because it is sometimes true. There are vast opportunities for the exploitation, financially, of already vulnerable people, and finally - not everyone knows about Parentline Plus.

Moving forward

It will take time to counteract the unfortunate reputation of the helping professions in relation to CPV. As specialist services become increasingly available, through growing awareness amongst professionals, and training

possibilities such as the Toolkit, I would suggest we need to be more savvy about how parents access help, being prepared ourselves to exploit the possibilities of the net, and media. Whether through press releases, specific articles, increased advertising, or even acting online to correct concerning entries as we come across them, there is much more that can be done to make parents aware of the help available for those experiencing CPV. Providing services is one thing. Helping parents find them is another thing altogether. Whether or not we believe the figure of 1 in 5 parents, there are still a lot out there in need of help.

References

- Bonnick, H.**, 2006, Access to help for parents feeling victimised or experiencing violence at the hands of their teenage children, unpublished dissertation, University of London
- Cottrell, B.**, 2004, When Teens Abuse Their Parents, Fernwood Publishing
- Gallagher, E.**, 2004, Parents Victimised by their Children, ANZJFT, 25,1
- Office for National Statistics**, 2010 Social Trends 40 (accessed online, see also <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=8>)
- Parentline Plus**, Nov 2009, Parentline Plus helps lift the lid on parents coping with abuse from their children, (accessed online at <http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk/default.aspx?page=articles&module=articles-view&id=296>)

Helen Bonnick
2010

First published in Respect newsletter, Autumn 2010, pp28 -30