

Adolescent-to-parent abuse - the facts

What is adolescent-to-parent violence?

Adolescent-to-parent abuse is any behaviour used by a young person to control, dominate or coerce parents. It is intended to threaten and intimidate and puts family safety at risk.

Whilst it is normal for adolescents to demonstrate healthy anger, conflict and frustration during their transition from childhood to adulthood, anger should not be confused with violence. Violence is about a range of behaviours, including non-physical acts, aimed at achieving on-going control over another person by instilling fear.

Most abused parents have difficulty admitting even to themselves that their child is abusive. They feel ashamed, disappointed and humiliated and blame themselves for the situation which has led to this imbalance of power. There is also an element of denial where parents convince themselves that their son or daughter's behaviour is part of normal adolescent conduct.

“Adolescence” is defined as between 10-19 years and “youth” between 15-24. Because of the complex biological and socio-cultural conditions associated with these two age groups they are often combined to represent “young people”. (WHO, 2006)

So what sort of behaviour could be considered abusive?

Abuse is broadly confined to three categories – verbal, emotional/psychological, and physical

Verbal abuse:

- Yelling, screaming and swearing in an abusive manner
- Making intimidating comments

Psychological abuse:

- Playing mind games – threatening to run away, hurt themselves or telling lies to control parents or the household

Physical abuse:

- Pushing
- Hitting
- Kicking
- Throwing objects around the house
- Breaking family property
- Hurting family pets



How do I know it's abuse? Maybe it's just normal adolescent behaviour

- Behaviour is abusive if you are fearful of your adolescent and change your behaviour to avoid conflict
- You find yourself 'tip-toeing' around your adolescent
- You are constantly creating situations that your adolescent approves of
- Your adolescent engages in 'put downs', or behaviour that humiliates and embarrasses you
- Your adolescent threatens to leave home, hurt themselves or hurt another family member if you do not comply with their wishes

"I have a seven year old with a terminal illness and an abusive 17 year old. My husband and I have separated. I can't get a domestic violence order against my son because he's a minor and he can't move out for the same reason. I love both of my sons and wish I could get some help for my eldest but he is much bigger than me and calls all the shots".

What sort of families have abusive adolescents?


- Loving, financially stable, two parent families
- Single parent families – sometimes in response to mothers trying to make up for what the adolescent has missed
- Families where adolescents have been exposed to family violence either personally or being in the home during violent episodes
- Families where the mother has been abused by a previous partner
- Families where parents have difficulty limit-setting and adolescent entitlement outweighs responsibility

"I had an abusive husband and now my eldest son is abusive too. I'm worried that if I get Youth Justice involved I will be criticised as a bad parent. There just doesn't seem to be any way out".

What an abused parent might be thinking and feeling

- I am totally alone. I am unable to share this problem with even my closest friend
- I love my son/daughter, I just want the violence to stop
- I have been undermined by my abusive adolescent and lost the respect of the rest of my family/friends
- It's my fault. He/she is my child and I have created this behaviour
- How can I admit that one of my children is abusing me? I am so ashamed
- I'm scared. Is this a passing phase, or will it get worse?
- I feel powerless. I can't see how I can fix this problem
- I can't trust my own son/daughter. I have to hide my wallet and keep my bedroom door locked at night
- I am exhausted and depressed. Who can I turn to?
- I'm a failure as a parent





“My son would steal and sell family belongings to finance his drug habit. He would trash the family home and threaten me and other family members with future violence if he didn’t get his own way”.

What a parent who is experiencing abuse should know

- There is no excuse for any type of abuse
- Alcohol and drugs are a catalyst
- You are not to blame. Your adolescent is the person responsible for their violence against you
- There is no simple answer. You will need support outside of your family unit
- Violence toward you and your family may not be continuous. After a violent episode, your adolescent may be remorseful and cooperative until a situation sparks another violent event
- Generally, verbal violence increases or changes to physical abuse over time
- Trust your instincts – you know if your adolescent’s behaviour is abusive and you and the rest of your family are at risk
- Calling the police may be your first step in preventing further abuse to yourself and your family. Naming the abuse enables you and your adolescent to obtain support and assistance
- Violence is a criminal offence
- There is a range of counselling services that are familiar with adolescent-to-parent abuse and able to assist you (see over)

“My son’s behaviour was very violent. He would trash our family home, misuse drugs and alcohol and threaten all family members, including his brother and sister. I spoke to dvconnect and they gave me a contact number for Mensline.”

Some ideas to help parents who are being abused

- Have a safety plan – that may mean having the police phone number keyed into your mobile or a secret code word to alert a friend that you are in danger
- Don’t keep your adolescent’s abuse a secret – talk to the rest of your family so that you have a shared response to your adolescent’s abusive behaviour
- Find out about counselling services in your area. If one counsellor doesn’t provide you with the support you need, visit another
- Abusive behaviour is cyclic. Learn to read the warning signals and remove other children to a safer place
- Don’t take responsibility for the abuse. Protecting your abusive child may contribute to an escalation of violence

Who can help:

Parentline 1300 30 1300

Available 8 a.m. - 10 p.m. seven days a week
<http://www.parentline.com.au>

dvconnect 1800 811 811

Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week
<http://www.dvconnect.org/>

Kinections (07) 3435 4300 (Brisbane)

Available 9.00 a.m. – 8.00 p.m. Monday – Thursday,
9.00 a.m. – 5.00 p.m. Friday
<http://www.kinections.com.au/>

Relationships Australia 1300 364 277

<http://www.relationships.com.au/>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's

Legal and Advocacy Service Phone 1800 442 450

Legal Aid Queensland Women's Legal Aid - Ph 1300 651 188 Available 8.00 a.m. – 5.30 p.m

<http://www.legalaid.qld.gov.au/Women/Womens+Legal+Aid.htm>

Women's Legal Service (07) 3392 0670 or 1800 677 278 outside Brisbane

Available Monday – Friday 9.30 a.m. – 1 p.m. and
Monday, Wednesday and Thursday 6.30 p.m. – 7.30 p.m
<http://www.wlsq.org.au/>

Lifeline 131114

Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week
<http://www.lifeline.org.au/>

Mens Line Australia 1300 789 978

Available 24 hours a day seven days a week
<http://www.menslineaus.org.au>

Immigrant Women's Support Service

(07) 3846 3490 (Brisbane)
Available 9.00-5.00 Monday, Tuesday,
Thursday and Friday. <http://www.iwss.org.au>

Alcohol & Drug Information Service

1800 177 833

Available 24 hours a day - 7 days a week

Police 000

Further information:

1. Adolescent to parent abuse: an overview
Available at <http://www.noviolence.com.au/public/newsletters/readersep2008.pdf>
2. Parents Victimised by their Children by Eddie Gallagher
Available at <http://eddiegallagher.id.au/>
3. Inner South Community Health Service "Adolescent violence to parents"
Available at <http://www.ischs.org.au/portals/0/documents/It%20all%20starts%20at%20home.pdf>
4. Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) 2008, "Statistics show children assaulting parents"
The 7.30 Report, 29/07/2008
Available at <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2008/s2318184.htm>



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