

Child and adolescent to parent violence and abuse

Briefing paper 2 of 3

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Child and adolescent to parent violence and abuse (CAPVA) refers to a pattern of harmful, and in some cases, controlling, behaviour by children or adolescents towards parents or caregivers, where abusive behaviour can be physical, verbal, emotional, psychological, economic, property-based or sexual.

Abusive behaviour can be intentionally harmful and controlling, and/or unintentionally harmful, functioning to communicate distress, anxiety or trauma.

Why does CAPVA happen?

CAPVA is a complex and harmful social problem with no one 'cause' or 'factor' to explain it. Instead, violence and abuse towards parents and caregivers comes about due to a multitude of dynamic, co-occurring – and often interconnected – issues, contexts and individual traits. Such explanations for CAPVA can usefully be broken down into those at the individual level, those at the interpersonal level, those at the community level and those at the sociocultural level.

This is known as taking a 'socio-ecological' approach and can be helpful in highlighting the wide variety of influences that may contribute to the development of CAPVA and to child development more broadly. This can also be useful in avoiding placing blame for the issue on any one individual or individuals in the family, as it takes a 'birds eye view' of the problem, as well as helping to explain why not every child within the same family may have this issue.

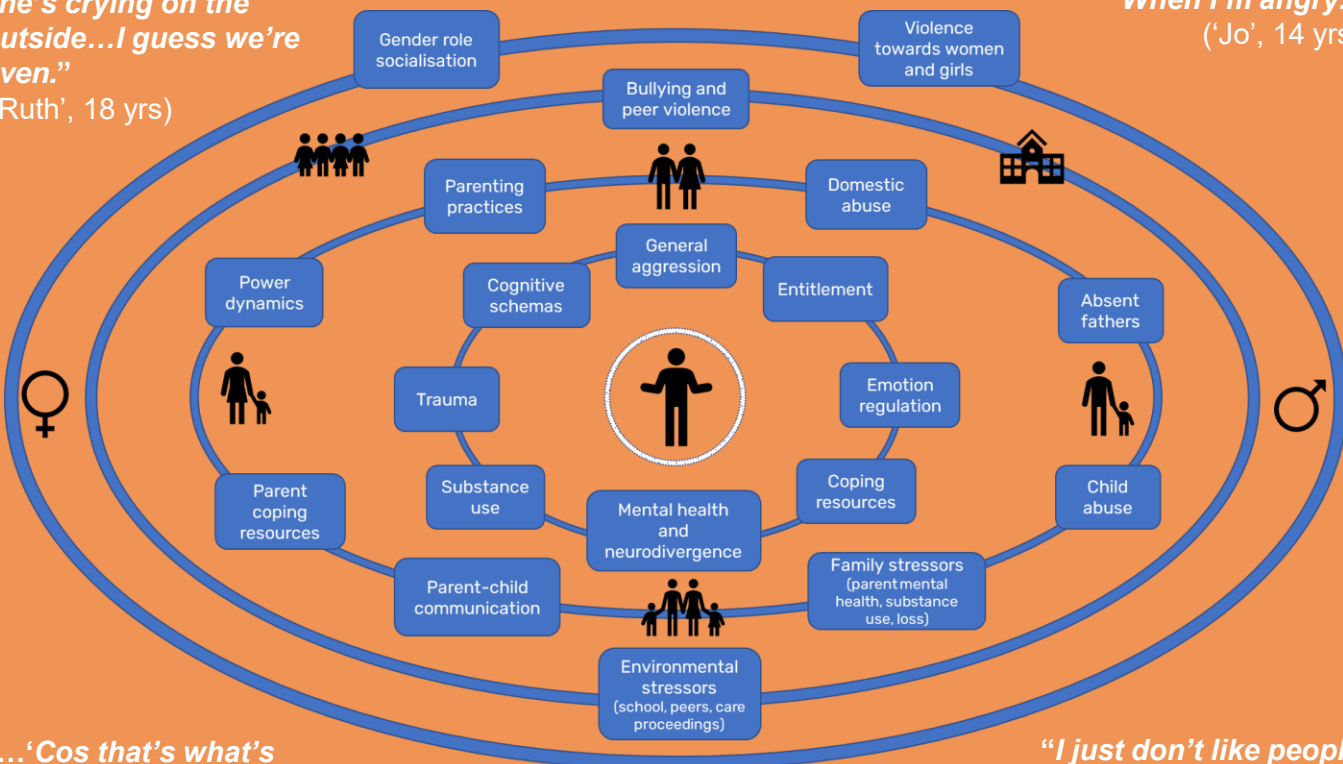
An ecological model of CAPVA

"I'm crying on the inside, she's crying on the outside...I guess we're even."

('Ruth', 18 yrs)

"Cos she's in the way. When I'm angry."

('Jo', 14 yrs)



"...Cos that's what's happened to me. People have been violent to me...that's how it's brought me up."

('Jenn', 14 yrs)

Adapted from Baker (2021)

"I just don't like people shoutin' at me and arguin' with me... it just gets me really angry."

('Dan', 15 yrs)

Contributing factors and contexts

Individual characteristics, behaviours and vulnerabilities



Characteristics at the level of the young person, such as sex/gender, age, personality, and most commonly, behavioural and developmental difference, have all been identified as potential contributors to CAPVA. However, locating the 'cause' of CAPVA solely within the young person is problematic. What seems clear is that young people experiencing poor emotional wellbeing and/or struggling to regulate their emotions are more likely to be those finding it difficult to draw upon positive coping behaviours and resources when managing conflict with parents or carers.

“They don’t really understand mental health too well. And the only way I could make them understand was just by acting up.” (‘Ruth’, 18 yrs)

Family-level factors and contexts



Domestic abuse, child maltreatment, parenting behaviours, and adoption, are some of the most well-investigated family-level factors in the CAPVA literature, with family abuse identified as the most common context for the issue to develop. However, chains of cause-and-effect can be difficult to disentangle when individual, family and situational factors are so closely interconnected. Systemic models are useful in highlighting the interplay of family dynamics, including the role that shared trauma may play in disrupting power, communication and parenting at home.

“He was always hittin’ my mum. And when he hit me, I used to tell my mum and she didn’t used to do anything because she was scared of what he’d do to her.” (‘Dan’, 15 yrs)

School, peers and the community



School, friends and the wider community can represent areas of significant stress for young people, with pressures around achieving academically, navigating the loss of friendships and intimate relationships, or experiencing bullying or victimisation in the community. Such ‘stressors’ can impact negatively upon young people’s wellbeing and make it harder for them to peacefully negotiate their freedoms, rights and responsibilities with parents or carers.

“When I was in Year 10 we had our mocks going on, so it was really stressful at that time. Had a lot going on with friends at that time...and I got quite violent and was punching, kicking...and I smashed her head against the wall.” (‘Penelope’, 17 yrs)

Society, culture and gender



The role that society and culture may play in the development of CAPVA has yet to be properly explored. However, some studies have theorised how social processes of gender role socialisation and the normalisation of violence towards women may shape the dynamic. This is most evident through mothers being the most likely victims of CAPVA due to their perception as “safer” and more available targets.

“Me? Being aggressive towards my dad? Are you crazy?!” (‘Jodea’, 17 yrs)

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Pulling it all together – case studies

The case studies below represent two common contexts of violence and abuse towards parents and caregivers. They are by no means the only two contexts but instead provide a flavour of CAPVA cases and their possible presentation.

Jacob and Alicia



Jacob, aged 15, lives with his mum Alicia and his younger sister Lena. Between the ages of 8 and 14, Jacob, his sister and his mum were victims of abuse from Jacob's father, which included him witnessing the subjugation and undermining of his mother, and his intervening in episodes of physical violence towards her. Although Jacob's father no longer lives with them, he still has some contact with Jacob at weekends. After contact, Jacob is often agitated and sometimes blames Alicia for his father leaving. Over the past year, Jacob has become more and more disengaged from school, often refusing to go altogether. He also spends most of his time

out with friends, refuses to tell Alicia where he is and becomes verbally abusive and threatens physical violence if she attempts to stop him from leaving the home. During arguments, Jacob will often punch and kick holes in doors and damage furniture. Alicia feels constantly on edge, anxious and has very little energy. She now avoids Jacob as much as possible and no longer puts boundaries in place for fear of his violence. Jacob has conflicting feelings towards his mum and dad and often feels as if they put him in the middle of things. He feels angry all the time and wishes his mum would listen rather than shout at him.

Tara, Selene and Abel



Tara, aged 13, has lived with her adoptive parents Selene and Abel since she was 3 years old and says she's been aggressive to them for as long as she can remember. She describes having "rages" since she was around 5 years old, particularly when Selene or Abel would tell her "No" or attempt to control her behaviour. These rages have become more frequent over the past few years, and Selene and Abel find themselves regularly scratched, bitten and bruised from Tara's physical violence. Tara says that she

finds school difficult, particularly staying focused in class and feeling relaxed around her classmates. She only has one good friend and often feels overwhelmed by the school environment. Tara has recently received a diagnosis of ADHD with traits of autism spectrum condition (ASC) but says this makes her feel "different" and "a problem child". Selene and Abel are relieved that Tara's difficulties have finally been recognised and given a name. However, Tara is now more angry and more violent than ever.

In Briefing Paper 3 we'll be looking at what responses are available to address this issue.

About the authors

Helen is an experienced social work practitioner, trainer and CAPVA expert, creating the website 'Holes in the Wall' in 2011 to provide information to parents, practitioners and researchers in the UK and further afield.

Victoria is an experienced academic and third sector researcher, having completed her [PhD thesis](#) on young people's perspectives on violence and abuse towards parents. She also specialises in research on domestic homicide (including parricide) and gender-based violence and harm more broadly.