

What is the Effect on the Family?

The Parents

Denial

All abused parents experience a range of emotions, from fear of their teenager and fear for the safety of their teenager, to guilt about pressing police charges for assault. Most parents have difficulty accepting that their child could be abusive toward them and may initially deny the problem:

He's my kid. You make excuses, you don't see it for what it is.

(A parent)

Failure, shame and blame

Many parents feel depressed and filled with shame that they were not able to produce a happy family. They question their parenting abilities, agonize over where they went wrong, and begin to feel like failures. Women particularly live under the threat of not meeting societal expectations and being condemned as bad mothers. One mother said:

I feel punished. It's like all the mistakes I made in parenting have come back to haunt me.

(A parent)

In this society we do not collectively take responsibility for our children. While parents certainly play a major role in their child's development, they are usually blamed for everything that goes wrong. They, along with everyone else, buy into this belief and often take full responsibility for their abusive child's actions.

Ambert challenges this narrow perspective of the parent–child relationship:

[The] public still sees parents as the prime, and often only, influence on their children. Even if they perceive that peers can be very important, they still feel that, if their adolescents suffer from the effect of the detrimental influence of their peer group, the negative consequences are still the parents' fault.

(1992: 3)

Challenging the belief that parents are the sole influence on their children can be a refreshing perspective for parents, especially those struggling with guilt and shame over the actions of their children. The idea that parents are the sole influence on their children negates the effect of other social influences in the child's life and places an impossible load of responsibility on the parents' shoulders. When they seek help they frequently encounter messages of blame. This feeling of being blamed and the sense of being solely responsible sometimes makes it difficult for parents to hear positive and useful suggestions to change their behaviour as a possible solution to difficulties with their children:

It is so hard to ask for help because you don't want to define yourself as a failure. You don't want to admit you didn't succeed with this child.

(A parent)

All adults are parenting the next generation, and community members of all kinds, including neighbours, relatives, teachers, ministers, social workers and the police, all share responsibility for what happens to our children.

(Jacqueline Barkley, in a talk to parents, 1999)

Despair and isolation

In addition to feeling solely responsible, parents often feel unsupported and isolated. They feel hopeless and helpless because they are unable to control the situation, either because of physical danger or their own emotional turmoil. Despair at not having a harmonious family life and feeling isolated in the situation makes change all the more difficult. The psychological abuse parents

experience is as unnerving and soul destroying as physical abuse. As Jerome Price, in his book *Power and Compassion: Working with Difficult Adolescents and Abused Parents*, says:

The greatest roadblock to change is the hopelessness that abused parents feel and the inertia that results from their despair. Parents of aggressive adolescents appear to be either paralyzed into an emotionless stupor or activated to perform a set of ritualized reactions in which they helplessly rage against the tyranny of their children.

(1996: 76)

Strained relations

Teens' abusive behaviour often leads to arguments between adults in the home as to how the teen should be disciplined. This limits the amount of quality time the adults are able to spend together. Many couples' relationships undergo a tremendous amount of strain and are sometimes torn apart because of the teen's behaviour:

It drove a wedge between my wife and me. I had to decide between being a father to my children or a husband to my wife. It was impossible to see my child as the culprit – she was always quiet and docile when I came home, and it was my wife who was “freaking out.”

(A parent)

Trust

Almost all abused parents feel unable to trust their teen, especially when they are left unsupervised at home. The uncertainty of what will confront them when they return is always on the parents' mind. Some wonder whether the child will be home at all, or if their home and possessions will be damaged, while others just dread having to deal with their teen:

It was so bad I'd be glad to go to work and I'd dread coming home. My first fear was she wouldn't be home, my second was that she would be home. I'd go home on the bus worrying about what she'd do to hurt me tonight.

(A parent)

Health

The stress of dealing with an abusive teen can have a negative impact on parents' health, sometimes making existing health problems worse, sometimes causing new problems. A number of parents told us that they use prescribed medication to help them deal with the tension and stress of the situation. Some parents also turn to alcohol or drugs to help them cope.

Loss

When the teenager has had to leave the house, some family members experience a strong sense of loss: siblings no longer have their brother or sister, and parents grieve for the loss of their child. They are also grieving for the loss of the family as a unit. This experience is especially traumatic in single-parent families where the teen is an only child. In cases where the teenager has a child, parents lose not only their child, but also their contact with the grandchild.

Siblings

Adolescents' abusive behaviour affects other children in the home and parents fear for their safety. Some parents are concerned that observing a sibling's dangerous activities (drugs, alcohol, prostitution) may affect the other children and put the rest of the family at risk. In addition, focussing on the abusive teen often leaves little time and energy for parents to pay attention to the other children. Parents reported that the children who are being ignored sometimes act out in order to get attention, or become depressed.

Other relationships

The parents' and child's relationships with friends and extended family members can be jeopardized by the abuse. Teens also manipulate other family members into believing the abuse is the parents' fault:

She'd tell her father I'd done things to her, call my sister and mother and tell them all things I hadn't even done. She slowly eroded my relationship with my mother.

(A parent)

The workplace

The stress of dealing with the abuse spreads beyond the home. Parents take their concerns and anxiety with them to the workplace.

The worry experienced by parents whose teenagers are skipping school, or who have run away from home, can make it difficult for them to concentrate at work. Their concern about the child's whereabouts, whether the child is in trouble or in danger, can lead to anxiety about their jobs and even about the security of their job.

Some parents also worry about the number of phone calls they receive at work concerning their teenager, as well as the amount of time they have to take off to deal with emergency situations or court appearances. The cost of counselling the family when public services are inadequate or unavailable can cause an added financial strain that makes it even more imperative that parents keep their jobs.

Why is the Abuse Happening?

There is no definitive explanation for parent abuse; there are, in fact, a multitude of interconnected dynamics contributing to the behaviour. However, several contributing factors have been identified.

Family Dynamics

Parental authority

There is a need for clear structure and leadership in families. Parents need to know how to be in charge, to realize they have the right to set limits, and to say, “This is my house and you can’t behave that way in it.” They are sometimes afraid of losing the love of their teen by enforcing rules and standards of behaviour. Sometimes parents are so intimidated they try to avoid confrontation by allowing the adolescent to rule the household.

When teens feel their parents are not in control, they act out because they don’t feel safe. The developmental tasks of adolescents are typically complex and can be difficult. For most teenagers, it is an added burden to cope with power over their parents.

Enforcing the rules

It is normal for adolescents to go through a period of “I hate your rules,” but the parents’ job is to rein the children in tighter and impose the rules. Sometimes parents’ attempts to enforce house rules are successful. However, some children become even more abusive and refuse to obey the rules when their parents make it clear that the teen’s behaviour is not acceptable, and they impose appropriate consequences.

Now my daughter decides she’s not going to follow the rules around curfews or helping with housework. I don’t think those rules were unreasonable.

(A parent)

Changes in the family structure

In situations in which parents have separated, the children sometimes resent the parent they live with (usually the mother) for changing their home, community, school, friends or lifestyle. Teenagers are sometimes jealous of the loss of attention from their mother or father when new partners become involved. When the mother is a single parent, teens sometimes vent all their anger and frustration on her simply because she is present. One teen, when asked why she abuses her mother, said “Because I have no one else.”

Social isolation

Feelings of isolation and alienation from families, schools and society can be experienced by teenagers in North American culture. Feelings of disconnection do not lead most adolescents to act abusively, and are not the sole basis of violent teenage behaviour, but there may be a link between this isolation and teenage aggression.

Modern-day pressures of work and finances create additional stress and problems for the family and leave parents with little time to spend with their teens. When children are younger, parents take the responsibility of planning their activities, but when they begin to reach adolescence this becomes increasingly more difficult.

Teens who feel alienated from their parents often crave for their attention and will often act out abusively as a means of expressing their frustration and anger. Further, adolescents may lack the maturity to exercise self-control, and this can lead to other forms of socially deviant behaviour. These teens need adult guidance and leadership.

History of Abuse

In our society, violence and aggression are commonly used to achieve goals and maintain control. Parents shout at their children, the police pepper spray protesters, and Hollywood’s good guys shoot and kill to save the world. Aggression and violent images invade most corners of our lives. In some families or communities, physical, emotional or verbal abuse is an accepted method of communication. If it has been occurring for years or generations, it may have become customary behaviour.

Some abusive teens have themselves been the victims of physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or have witnessed their parents or siblings being abused and may become abusive as a way to regain some of their lost power and control. According to Shuman and Seiffge-Krenke:

Many studies have provided evidence to support the hypothesis that adolescent violent behaviour is a function of having experienced or witnessed child abuse. Wisdom (1989) reviewed the findings of such studies and determined that boys exhibiting violent behaviors were more likely to have experienced abuse or witnessed extreme physical abuse than non-violent boys.

(1997: 176)

Unfortunately, the teens who respond with abuse often do not focus their retaliation on the perpetrator – instead they abuse their non-abusive parent.

Shuman and Seiffge-Krenke also state that boys, more than girls, tend to identify with their fathers and are likely to possess their fathers' negative and positive traits. This has serious implications for boys who have witnessed their fathers' abusive behaviour toward their mothers. In this 1984 study,¹ it was found that 23% of the fathers of violent youths had battered their wives. The authors conclude that “a combination of paternal aggression, inadequate discipline and negative attitude toward the child fosters aggressive and delinquent behaviour” (1997: 181).

Sex role stereotyping and violence against women

The continued devaluation of women means that women still earn less money than men and are under-represented in positions of power. As the victims of ongoing violence and denigration, many women lack confidence in themselves as human beings and as parents. Yet, women are still primarily responsible for parenting our children. Although many fathers are equally concerned about their abusive children and share responsibility in seeking help for the problem, some are emotionally or physically absent, or abusive.

¹ Cited in Shulman, Shmuel and Inge Seiffge-Krenge. *Fathers and Adolescents: Developmental and Clinical Perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge. 1997.

In the past few decades, an increase in aggressive behaviour among teenage girls has been observed. Some people have suggested that young women today are rebelling against the traditional concept that “girls are timid, passive and fearful.” Many young women want to be powerful and recognized and their anger can sometimes be understood as justified and constructive, a response to social injustice and dominance. However, their anger is sometimes unjustified and inappropriately expressed.

Some professionals report that girls express hatred toward their mothers for being submissive, and for subjecting themselves and their children to the violence of their husband or partner. These girls are wary of the passivity and abusively, often imitating the aggressive behaviour of males. One mother reports that her teenage daughter contemptuously yelled at her, “You’re nothing but a coward!” Strategies such as submission, which women use to cope with abuse, often lead to further victimization.

Traditionally, women have been aware of and been receptive to the feelings and emotions of those around them. In our interviews, many teens agreed that it was easier to share their emotions with their mothers. They’re not as afraid of their mothers as they are of their fathers, who have been socialized to respond to teens’ feelings more aggressively. Teens said things like, “I’d never dare hit my Dad.” As a result, adolescents can express a whole range of feelings toward their mothers, including anger.

You can get over a fight with your mom quicker than with anyone else. If you fight with a friend, you don’t talk for a long time. Teens take their parents for granted. They take out their aggression on their parents because parents will forgive them.

(A 15-year-old teen)

The Role of Schools

Youth are under a great deal of pressure from schools and from their peers. The school environment can be violent, unsafe and disrespectful. Teens experience violence and the threat of violence at the hands of other students. The threat of violence and the pressure to be “cool” at school makes many teens feel vulnerable and lowers their self-esteem. They feel they have to be in control to avoid being victimized and learn not to show weakness in front of their peers. Teachers often feel as powerless as any other adult to deal with teens’ aggression.

School is really violent and abusive. You should hear the way the kids talk, they say, "Don't mess with me" and they mean it. My friend was walking along one day and some guy comes up to him and says, "Where's that \$20 you owe me?" If you're half-ways nervous, if you're not a cool person, you'd have to get the money for him even if you never borrowed it, otherwise you live in fear of being beaten up.

(A teenager)

There are few outlets for adolescents to deal with the stress they experience at school, and many teens act out their victimization and rage in severely violent ways at home. Parents who are being abused reported rarely feeling supported or helped by the schools their children attend. While every situation must be assessed on its own merits, as this parent says, communication with the school is essential.

Parents need to stay connected to the school. The school needs to know that there is a family for these kids, the school will be less likely to see the parents as the cause, and it will keep them from simply expelling the kids, and will help the situation.

(A social worker)

Drugs and Alcohol

Alcohol and drug abuse is commonly linked with teenagers' violent behaviour. According to a 1994 survey,² use of illicit drugs is primarily a teenage phenomenon. The highest use of cannabis was reported by males age 15-24 (26%–28%). It was estimated that in the 15 to 17 age group, 27% of males use cannabis; 31% have used at least one illicit drug in their lifetime; and 27% of males use at least one illicit drug. The statistics for young women are only slightly lower: 24% of females in the 15 to 17 age group use cannabis; 29% have used at least one illicit drug in their lifetime; and 24% use at least one illicit drug.

² "Canada's Alcohol & Other Drugs Survey, 1994," reported in the 1999 *Statistical Report on the Health of Canadians* prepared by the Federal, Provincial & Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health, Published by Health Canada, 1994.

A series of surveys on Canadian youth aged 11, 13 and 15³ has found that, since 1994, there has been a sharp increase in youth who by Grade 10 had used marijuana three or more times. According to the report, in 1994 30% of boys and 27% of girls used marijuana. In 1998, this had risen to 44% of boys and 41% of girls. There is also a slight increase in the adolescent use of solvents. In 1994, 7% of boys and 5% of girls were users; in 1998: 9% of boys and 6% of girls. Cocaine use also rose slightly, from 3% to 6% for boys, and 3% to 5% for girls.

The report concludes that, since the 1994 survey, there has been a strong relationship between use of marijuana and other health-risk behaviour, and those who use marijuana are also more likely to use alcohol, smoke cigarettes, and spend a great deal of time with other adolescents who engage in the same behaviour. They're more likely to feel pressured at school, skip classes and bully others.

Although substance abuse does not cause violent behaviour, parents report that when their teen is using drugs, their behaviour is more severe and the teen shows no sense of remorse.

Her anger was much worse when she was on drugs. There was a cutting edge to her. There was no feeling. The drugs wiped out all her feelings.

(A parent)

Price (1996) notes that drug abuse is often perceived as the cause of a child's problematic behaviour and cautions that drug abuse, moodiness and dropping grades are often symptoms of other serious problems.

Substance abuse by parents can contribute to the problem of parent abuse. Teenagers may be angry with their parents for being unavailable and emotionally abandoning them, and may attempt to control the parents by threatening to reveal their substance abuse.

³ Health Behaviours in School Aged Children (HBSC) surveys. Conducted in Canada in 1989-90; 1993-94; and 1997-98. These surveys are administered every four years to a representative sample of youth (11, 13 & 15 years of age) in participating countries. In the 1998 survey, 28 countries participated. The report summarizes trends in the health of Canadian youth over three surveys between 1990 and 1998.

Mental Health and Medical Issues

Serious mental disorders

In some rare instances, adolescent violence is a symptom of a serious mental disorder, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Unfortunately, these disorders are often difficult to diagnose.

I dragged myself and him around to every specialist and expert trying to get help. I was told I was over-controlling or under-controlling. Their main message was I should tighten the boundaries. I went to a number of very good people in this city, but they all missed the point. After years of hell he was diagnosed as schizophrenic.

(A parent)

Although such a serious diagnosis may explain some behaviour, Price cautions:

The greatest roadblock to change is the hopelessness that abused parents feel and the inertia that results from their despair. Parents of aggressive adolescents appear to be either paralyzed into an emotionless stupor or activated to perform a set of ritualized reactions in which they helplessly rage against the tyranny of their children.

(1996: 76)

Price also cautions that parents should not let labels or diagnoses frighten them into believing they cannot expect to be treated respectfully by their children.

However, until mentally ill children are properly diagnosed, parents struggle to understand their behaviour.

I thought he was being manipulative, but now I realize he was in a state of psychosis. I was full of anger and blamed him, but he had to get practically sick unto death before he could get help from professionals. These young men are not stupid or evil. They are very alone and are very difficult people to deal with.

(A parent)

Not all mental health professionals address the child's abusive behaviour toward the parents.

We worked with one psychiatrist who did not in any way address the abuse issues... We repeatedly brought up the issue of violence because it was escalating. As the violence continued to worsen, I was told to call the police and the situation was never looked at comprehensively and in depth. Not only do they not get it, but they make it worse. We started working with another psychiatrist, but she didn't address the abuse issues either. At that point my daughter was locking me in closets, putting her fists through walls and raging on a daily basis. And that went on for a year and a half.

(A parent)

Medical diagnoses give parents relief from guilt and blame, and the prescribed medications often help control aggressive behaviours. While a diagnosis brings some relief, it can also harness the parent to caring for a mentally ill child for life. After an adolescent is diagnosed, parents need support.

Parents also need to know what they are dealing with. They need to know that if their child has a severe mental illness like schizophrenia, they are isolated and withdrawn and suffer from terrible loneliness.

(A parent)

Less serious mental disorders

Some teens who exhibit violent or aggressive behaviour toward their parents or others are diagnosed as having:

- Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD or ADD)
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder
- Conduct Disorders, including Adolescent Adjustment Disorder.

While these diagnoses identify a problem, some parents and professionals believe that doctors do little more than label the symptoms and prescribe medication where they deem it appropriate. Parents and professionals are concerned about widespread prescription drug use among teens, and with the impact of labelling a child. Some parents believe that this labelling is used to excuse certain behaviours and this creates further problems:

She possibly had a mental illness or emotional problem, but that's not the issue; it's not an excuse. It was her behaviour we needed to look at.

(A parent)

Parenting practices

We are a generation who put our energy into making teens happy and comfortable instead of responsible. We have attempted to change the role of the parent from authoritative disciplinarian to partners in a more equal relationship in which parents are “friends” with their children. The result is that children develop images of parents as the people whose job it is to make them happy.

Sometimes, this results in inappropriate and unhealthy parent–child relationships in which parents treat their children as companions or partners. This places an unfair burden on the teen.

We wanted to be the kids' friends, but we now realize that we have to be their parents; they have lots of friends out there.

(A parent)

In the first half of the 19th century, children were considered the property of adults. They were expected to “be seen and not heard,” and were often treated disrespectfully, sometimes cruelly, by adults both at home and in school. Children had few rights and parents were seldom held responsible for harming their children. The permissive 1960s and the work to end child abuse changed much of that. While few dispute that children’s rights must be recognized, attempts to protect these rights have led to a severe crisis in leadership within families.

The “new ethics in child rearing” that began in the 1960s shifted focus away from the need for structure and leadership within the family in an attempt to recognize children’s basic need to have their feelings and opinions valued. Kindness, leniency and an emphasis on the importance of a child’s free expression of feelings became the central themes of positive parenting.

The rule that has come to dominate today’s theories of child rearing is that parents must be lenient.

(Price, 1996: 18)

Price lists familiar catch phrases and popular notions that discourage parents from taking control of their children:

- Children must make their own mistakes.
- If parents take charge, young people will never learn responsibility themselves.
- It’s their life.
- Children must be trusted (whether they’ve earned that trust or not); otherwise, the growth of the inner self will be stunted and creativity and self-expression thwarted.
- Young people have to make their own decisions (therefore, parents shouldn’t force their judgement on young people.)
- A child’s ego will be harmed if his or her right to total privacy is violated.
- It’s intrusive to punish without giving advance warning as to the consequences.

The “**Parenting practices**” section above is based on the work of Jerome Price (1996: 18, 19).

Parenting has been stolen from parents

The parental role has become professionalized as parents are pressured to consult experts for advice and direction. Writers, psychologists, social workers and consultants set themselves up as “experts” on child rearing. Freud and Dr. Spock were but two of the “experts” who became famous for telling parents what they should and should not do. A huge and profitable publishing industry flourishes as books and magazines describe the terrible, lifelong impact of poor parenting on our children. Some parents are coerced into buying these books out of a fear of damaging their children forever. This results in parents losing their confidence in their ability to parent and in taking the leadership role in their families. They then lack the confidence necessary to exert reasonable parental authority and consequently some children lack the boundaries they need for their moral and spiritual growth.

Popular culture also exposes children and youth to increasingly violent images. “Attitude” – that is, a stance of being rude, hostile, detached and aggressive – is cool. Without the necessary boundaries, this attitude is sometimes directed at parents.

Most parents and professionals believe that children’s basic rights must be recognized and respected. However, most also believe that a balance must exist between young people’s rights and their responsibilities; teenagers are responsible for their own actions and behaviour and must be held accountable for their conduct. Although they may strongly resist it, adolescents need leadership from their parents, and the adults in charge of the culture adolescents are living in must be held accountable for the world we have created for them.

⁴The section “**Parenting has been stolen from parents**” is based on the work of Jacqueline Barkley and Anne-Marie Ambert.