



## **Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence**

### **Podcast Transcript**

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**Adult Children & DV: What if my Child is the Abuser?**

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and  
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NOUCHEE: Hello and welcome to The Women's Center's Wednesday Workshop, a podcast that shares helpful insight for survivors, community members, and service providers alike. The woman center is based out of Waukesha, Wisconsin. We welcome and serve survivors of all ages, races, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, nationalities, and immigration statuses. The mission of The Women's Center is to provide safety, shelter, and support to empower all impacted by domestic abuse, sexual violence, child abuse, and trafficking. Each episode will feature instruction on healing topic. Today, our topic is Adult Children and Domestic Violence: What if my Child is the Abuser? We are your hosts, my name is Nouchee, and I'm the Dual Domestic Abuse/Sexual Violence Advocate here at The Women's Center.

MARISSA: And my name is Marissa, I'm the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here with The Women's Center. To sort of paint the scene here and get things started, I want to talk about changing dynamics of a family unit. So as parents and children both get older, it's inevitable that your relationship dynamics will change. When children become adults, they will become more independent, likely moving out and starting their own families later down the road. You'll notice these changes likely beginning when your child is a teenager as they'll begin searching for their own independence. They'll begin to need their parents for support and daily tasks less and less, which can sometimes be difficult to cope with.

On the flip side of that, as parents get older, they may begin to need additional support carrying out daily tasks. They may develop health conditions while they're aging that may need more involved care; oftentimes, their children step into the supportive or caregiving roles. This causes the dynamic to feel flipped or reversed, which also can be difficult to cope with sometimes.

In a healthy familial relationship, there's space to talk about these changes openly and renegotiate boundaries. Though it can be difficult, the family will adjust and adapt to these shifts with love and respect. When the relationship is not-so-healthy, these changing dynamics may likely bring about conflict, ignored boundaries, and possibly avoidance or disengagement. Sometimes this shift can be a turning point into a power and control dynamic. Nouchee is going to discuss what this relationship might look like when a child is abusive to a parent.

NOUCHEE: Child domestic violence towards parents is called parental abuse. Parental abuse is when a child engages in behavior that is abusive, whether that be emotionally, physically, mentally, or financially towards a parent or guardian. A 2008 study by the US Justice Department found that "while most domestic assault offenders are adults, about 1 in 12 who come to the attention of law enforcement are minors, and in half of those cases the victim was a parent, most often the mother." So as we can see, parental abuse is often underrepresented and unreported.

Incidents often occur in the home away from witnesses, so many of these cases go unnoticed if they are not reported. In addition, parents may feel a sense of self-blame or guilt, which may prevent them from reaching out to a family member or resources for help. We'll talk more in depth about this later in this podcast.

MARISSA: So, when does parental abuse usually start? Abuse may begin while your child is a teenager, and just to set the record this is more than your average conflict, resistance to rules, or pushing of boundaries to explore their independence and individuality. According to Health Canada, that is called "individuating" and may at times include some defiance or resistance towards authority. They go on to state that "there is a difference however, between resistance and aggression, between separating from a parent and trying to take control of a parent, between normal teenage behavior and parental abuse." Beginning signs of an abusive child may begin earlier but their aggressions may be mistaken for tantrums. Additionally, parental abuse may also begin later on in the life when the parent has become a senior, also known as elder abuse. Nouchee and I will explain this in more detail next.

NOUCHEE: Elder abuse is when abuse, negligence, or exploitation occurs to an older adult by someone who's responsible for their care. So kind of in a rectangle to square analogy; elder abuse can include parental abuse, which again is harm from children. It also encompasses abuse seniors may face from other systems. Elders may experience elder abuse from nursing home staff, scammers, etc. According to the Administration

for Community Living, some warning signs of elder abuse can include bruises, broken bones, abrasions, burns, unexplained withdrawal from normal activities, sudden changes in finances, bed sores, unattended medical needs, unusual weight loss, and more. If you are experiencing elder abuse, please reach out to family and friends for help. You may also contact the National Center on elder abuse at 1.855.500.3537, or the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1.800.799.7233. We will also cover safety planning tips as well.

MARISSA: And so like we talk about often, there is a Power and Control Wheel, specifically geared towards the dynamics that take place in elder abuse. I'll walk through that briefly.

One of the spokes on the wheel is threats and intimidation, so this could be threats to abandon the elder, threats to attempt suicide, to institutionalize them, destroy property, use weapons, or the threat to harm pets. There may also be abuse of dependency, so taking walker/wheelchair/glasses/dentures, denying access to food or medication, causing you to miss medical appointments, or they don't report medical problems, as well as neglect with washing or toileting. There may be a ridicule of values, so the denial of access to religious services or leaders, they make fun of or minimize your values, or they ignore or ridicule religious and cultural traditions. Emotional abuse definitely fits on the power and control wheel by humiliation, degradation, ridiculing, yelling, insulting, calling names, using silence or profanity to manipulate and/or belittle, essentially they can make you think you're crazy or out of touch with reality, also known as gaslighting. There may be a manipulation of family, so they might magnify disagreements, mislead family about the extent and nature of illnesses or conditions, there might even be an exclusion or a denial of access to family, or forcing the family to keep secrets. That goes hand in hand with isolation, so that'll be like controlling what you do or who you see, limiting where you go, limiting time with friends and family, denying access to your phone/email/social media, or they may take away your driving privileges before it's necessary. There's also a misuse of privilege, so they may treat you like a servant, make all of your major decisions, or force a parent into a nursing home. This can also be financial too; for instance, selling your home without your permission. Hand in hand is financial exploitation, which is stealing money/titles/possessions, taking over accounts and bills without consent, spending your money without permission or telling you that you're obligated to financially support them in adulthood, and there may be an abuse of power of attorney or wills. And also encompassing power and control is physical or sexual violence, so that's the hitting, kicking, shoving, throwing or destroying objects or property, holding you down, choking, harming pets, or sexual contact or intercourse without consent.

NOUCHEE: So why might this happen? Sometimes children may mirror behavior witnessed in the home. If you as a parent experienced domestic abuse from a spouse or an intimate partner, they may have learned that abuse is how to get their needs met. If this is your experience, this is not your fault; abuse is often normalized and minimized by an abuser. We also see that some abusive teens themselves have been victims of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, or again have witnessed their parents or even siblings being abused, and may become abusive as a way to gain some of their lost power and control. Usually, these teens who respond with abuse often do not focus their abuse on the perpetrator. Instead, they tend to abuse their non-abusive parents.

This also speaks to the phenomenon of intergenerational trauma, which we discussed in our last episode. Unchecked or unresolved trauma can bring about unhealthy coping tools, and can even continue the cycle of abuse in later generations. Abuse doesn't just get normalized at home, but can also be normalized in our society and culture at large. [There may be a] culture of disrespect towards elders, so seeing them as expendable or out of touch (or overarching ageism and ableism), normalized physical and emotional violence towards loved ones in media, inflated sense of status or entitlement, or power and control tactics seen elsewhere (at school, an adult child's romantic relationship, etc.)

MARISSA: So even though you love your child and have raised them, it's more than okay and even encouraged to build boundaries with them. Having your own boundaries models healthy boundaries for the child and rest of the family, and helps illustrate when accountability needs to be taken for harming others. Some examples of physical and emotional boundaries might sound like "it's not okay to yell or push or hit me," "it's not okay for you to say those things to me," and if your child is not yet an adult this might sound like, "I need to make this decision as your parent; if you cannot do XYZ, I will need to discipline you", whether that's grounding or timeout, etc. An example of some financial boundaries might look like, "I'm sorry, but I do not have the funds to provide this want at this time; do you have any other resources," "if you cannot responsibly use my credit or debit card, I will need you to return it to me," or, "you're welcome to continue to live at home, but I will need you to have a job and contribute to costs."

And so with these putting up boundaries, there might be some guilt and shame [you feel]. Again, this comes up a lot for parents struggling with abusive children. You did not cause this to happen, your parenting didn't necessarily cause this to happen either. As stated previously, as well as all the time in our podcasts, there can be so many different reasons why the abuse is happening, but it's not your fault. And it's okay to have conflicting feelings too, (both loving and fearing your child), but ultimately, you deserve

to feel safe and supported. Resources are available, as we'll illustrate in talking through what safety plans might look like.

NOUCHEE: So the number one priority is of course keeping you safe. So reach out to friends and family to break the isolation. Your friends and family may also be able to support you with more of your safety plans, such as agreeing to watch your teen if you need to leave, or providing emotional support when you feel overwhelmed. Identify safe places to go and escalate situations, again friends and family could be a great support. Also, it may also be a good idea to be familiar with shelters that are close in proximity. If you're in physical danger, we understand that calling 911 on your child can be extremely difficult and in some instances may not be safe to do so. You know your situation best, and we encourage you to trust your gut. Connect with resources; we know that abuse doesn't just occur between romantic partners, your local domestic violence agency can provide safety, shelter, and support if and when you need it. Look up your local organization and try calling their hotline

If your child is a teenager, your child's school counselors or teachers might have additional resources to support your family, and if your child is seeing a therapist or doctor, they may have suggestions or guidance for you as well. If you're experiencing elder abuse, check to see if your state or county has an Adult Protective Services Program. You or someone you know can submit a report for a caseworker to review, and they will provide assistance to determine your needs and help get you to safety. You can find your local program at [napsa-now.org](http://napsa-now.org) by selecting "Help in your Area" under the "Get Help" tab.

MARISSA: And also more on safety planning; if your abusive child is still a teenager, or if you have younger children, they are likely witnessing the abuse too in some capacity. This can also be the case when all of your children are adults, and a lot of what we talked about in our last episode can be applicable here, so give a listen if you haven't. So in talking with your other children, it's important to check in with them and ensure that they feel safe and supported. Let them know that this isn't their fault, that you love them and want them to feel safe, and that they can come to you if they're ever feeling unsafe or need support. Understand that they have a relationship with their sibling too, and it may or may not be abusive. Your child may tell their sibling that you've had this conversation, so be careful with safety planning. Similar to adult children hearing their other parent was abusive, your child may get defensive about their sibling, and possibly accuse you of bad-mouthing them. Remember this is a complex situation, and multiple thoughts and feelings can exist at the same time. Your child may also disclose some abuse that they've endured by their sibling, this will be difficult to hear. Thank them for sharing, ask if there's anything you can do to support them, and find resources.

NOUCHEE: So we wanted to end this topic with the focus on some coping and grounding tools that can counter feelings of being overwhelmed or stressed in this situation. So a great one is square breathing. So inhaling four seconds, holding your breath for four seconds, exhaling for four seconds, and hold again for four seconds. Repeat this as needed, and this can help defuse intense or escalated situations. This can help ground the self to think more clearly, and ready yourself to use a safety plan. You can also ground yourself through the five senses. So naming five things that you see, four things that you can touch, three things you can smell, two things you can hear, and one thing you can taste. Journaling can also be a great way to let out different feelings you may be having, and again, talking with a trusted friend, family member, therapist, or advocate can also be a great coping tool. Coping and grounding tools can even be as simple as practicing your favorite self-care technique, so that could be watching your favorite TV show or movie, cooking, or anything that you really enjoy.

MARISSA: Absolutely, it is so important to, you know, try to stay grounded as much as possible, to fight those feelings of overwhelm or stress, that can be super helpful. Thank you for joining us to learn more about Adult Children and Domestic Violence: What if my Child is the Abuser? Our next session will be about the Secrecy of Abuse, and How Abusers Use Shame.

The Women's Center focuses our work in partnering with clients to overcome barriers and gain a life free from violence. Our work is grounded in equity, upheld by inclusion, accountability, self-reflection, and continual growth. We believe that it's important for survivors to feel seen and heard. We believe that Black Lives Matter because we cannot end violence without addressing the distinct injustices that Black and Indigenous People of Color face. We know that all forms of oppression are ultimately connected, and when we center individuals most impacted, we're also supporting survivors who have faced any form of violence. While we're not experts in anti-racism work, we aspire to be allies in this movement. We all have a responsibility to contribute to unlearning racism and intersecting forms of oppression that take place in our communities.

If you'd like to talk with an advocate about your own experience with abuse, please call our 24 hour hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women's center at [www.twcwaukesha.org](http://www.twcwaukesha.org), and find the resources mentioned on this episode by clicking "Resources," then "Podcasts" on our website. Thank you, and be well.