



Adolescent to Parent Violence and Abuse (APVA)

Adolescent to parent violence and abuse (APVA) was first differentiated from other forms of familial violence as 'battered parent syndrome' ([Harbin and Madden, 1979](#)), referring to: *"Any harmful act by a child, whether physical, psychological or financial, which is intended to gain power and control over a parent or carer"*. It's a term that has evolved since then, and although there is still a lack of consensus on definitions and terminology, it can be broadly seen as a pattern of habitual, coercive behaviours that reverse the parent/child power dynamic ([Wilcox, 2012](#)).

For some, the term APVA itself is contentious as it is often 'mother', as opposed to 'parent', who is the recipient of APVA—and abuse also defines the child as an 'abuser'. Although there is currently no legal definition of APVA, it may (depending on the age of the child) fall under the government's official definition of domestic violence and abuse ([Home Office, 2015](#)):

"...any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass, but is not limited to psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional abuse." However, APVA has recently been acknowledged in the UK Government's recent draft Domestic Abuse Bill. ([HM Government, 2019](#))

While the peak age has been assumed to be between 13 and 15 years old (Family Lives Report 2011), parents with significantly younger children, including 4 year olds upwards, are now seeking help.

In a study by the University of Oxford (<http://apv.crim.ox.ac.uk/>), practitioners and parents described the abuse as often involving a pattern of aggressive, abusive and violent acts across a prolonged period of time. Parents said that their teenage children had physically assaulted them as well as having smashed up property, kicked holes in doors, broken windows, thrown things and made threats. Verbal abuse and other controlling behaviours were also commonly present. This pattern of behaviour creates an environment where a parent lives in fear of their child and often curtails their own behaviour in order to avoid conflict, contain or minimise violence. The study found no single explanation for this problem. Families described a range of reasons which felt were the cause for APVA, including substance abuse, mental health problems, learning difficulties, or a family history of domestic violence or self-harm. Some families were at a loss to explain why their child was so aggressive towards them, having raised other children who did not display such behaviour.



Many abused parents have difficulty admitting that their child is abusive - even to themselves. They feel ashamed, disappointed, humiliated and blame themselves for the situation that has led to this imbalance of power. There is also an element of denial where parents convince themselves that their son/daughter's behaviour is normal adolescent conduct. Although specific programmes to address APVA are in their infancy, help and support for abused parents is available through local Early Intervention and/or Domestic Abuse services. A quarter of young people exposed to domestic violence go on to demonstrate harmful behaviour within their own relationships.

A young person who is acting in an aggressive or violent way is quite likely to be struggling with their feelings, or it could be a reaction to something that they are going through which they may have kept to themselves. Is this behaviour something that is unexpected or has this been increasing as they have been developing? It is important to try to put a timeline on when and how it started and what triggers could have been the catalyst. Often the young people may have underlying emotional and mental health issues or they may be suffering from depression, anxiety or even harming themselves. Other triggers could include family breakdown, bullying or substance misuse. It is important to acknowledge that no child wants to behave in this way and frighten the people they love. However, when they feel out of control they often struggle to manage their feelings.

[The Information Guide: Adolescent to Parent Violence and Abuse](#) was developed in response to practitioners identifying the need for bespoke interventions that incorporate the specific circumstances of families where there is APVA. The prevalence of this issue has become increasingly apparent in recent years as more and more practitioners are coming across APV in the families they're working with.

Research indicates that the most effective way of addressing this abuse is working with the family as a whole. If other professionals are involved, call a multi agency meeting and work out how you are going to work with the family as a coordinated plan to address this abuse.

Additional Resources:

[Teen violence at home](#)

[Holes in the Wall](#)

[Adolescent violence to parents: a booklet for parents](#)

[Kirklees – Local resource](#)