

Adolescents who use violence in the home

As a mother or carer, you may find that your child starts to use violence or abuse to intimidate and control you, and perhaps other family members as well. It's gone beyond 'normal' teenage temper tantrums and you know something is not right.

You may find it difficult to accept that what your child is doing is abusive. Perhaps you feel like it's your fault that they've turned out this way. Feeling stressed and ashamed, you just try to put up with it.

You are not responsible for the abusive behaviour. But you are very important to the solution. By accepting the seriousness of the situation and seeking support, you may find the confidence and skills you need to regain control and heal your relationship with your child. You and your family are entitled to be respected and to live in safety.

Commonly held myths

- They're just letting off steam, they can't help it
- They're victims themselves
- They must be mentally ill
- There must be a violence gene
- It's because I'm a bad mother

And the reality...

Abusive adolescents can control their behaviour – they choose to use violent or abusive behaviour to control and disempower you.

Abusive adolescents may have suffered trauma or loss – this is an explanation not an excuse. By helping them learn how to handle their feelings better you will be doing them a favour.

Most abusive adolescents do not have a disability or mental disorder. If they do, a diagnosis may help you understand what they're going through but even those with serious mental illnesses can learn to make better choices.

There is no evidence that violence is biologically inherited, rather it is a learned behaviour.

This is more than a parenting problem. As their carer, you are responsible for teaching your children important skills, but they are responsible for their own behaviour and choices.

What is abuse?

Adolescence is the stage between childhood and adulthood – our brains keep developing right up to the age of about 25. During this time it is normal for adolescents to challenge authority and rules as they prepare to become independent and to run their own lives. So how do you know what is healthy anger and conflict and what is abusive behaviour?

Abuse is any act that creates fear and is intended to cause physical, psychological or financial damage to gain power and control over another.

You know when something's not right – listen to the warning bells of your own thoughts and feelings.

Is it my fault?

Mothers can often bare the burden of raising children and blame themselves for their children's behaviour.

They may even feel their children are punishing them for being a bad mother. This can leave mothers feeling like failures and like they can't manage the situation. This is not helpful.

Adolescents may use violence for a variety of reasons. Whatever the reason, using violence is not healthy or respectful. You are not responsible for your children's behaviours.

You are responsible for your own behaviour and for helping your child to find solutions.

Examples of abusive behaviours:

Physical

- Hitting, punching, shoving, kicking, spitting, throwing things
- Breaking things, punching holes in walls
- Abusive and bullying behaviours to siblings
- Cruelty to pets

Emotional

- Verbal abuse, swearing, yelling, put-downs
- Playing mind games - trying to make you think you're crazy
- Making threats to run away, hurt or kill themselves in order to control you or get their own way

Financial

- Demanding money, or purchases you can't afford
- Stealing money or possessions
- Incurring debts you have to pay

Who abuses?

Many toddlers show aggression, and though most grow out of this, some slowly escalate as they get bigger and stronger. Although violence can start at any age, it often becomes a major problem between the ages of 12 and 17. From what is currently known about this problem, it seems that girls are less likely to be abusive than boys and are more likely to use emotional means of abuse while boys are more likely to use physical means.

Risk factors

The following factors may make abusive behaviours more likely, more severe or harder to control. It's important to remember that none of these things 'cause' violence.

Substance misuse

Children may be more aggressive and show less remorse when they are using drugs and /or alcohol.

Mental illness

A diagnosis may help you to understand your child's behaviours and lessen your feelings of guilt but you will still need to insist on more respectful behaviours.

Temperament

Sometimes there is just one 'difficult' child in a family who has personality traits like being stubborn, impulsive and combative.

Witnessing family violence

Greatly increases the likelihood that children will use abusive behaviours. They may begin to see violence as a normal and acceptable style of communicating or resolving conflict. Using violence may help them manage intolerable feelings and gain a temporary sense of control in an out-of-control situation where they feel powerless and worthless. Seeing their mothers as victims can lead children to lose respect for the parental authority of their mothers.

Boys are more likely to copy their father and take out their anger and frustration on the victim, rather than the perpetrator. Some girls may 'hate' their mothers for being passive – they don't want to be submissive like their mums and go too far the other way. See the WIRC information sheet on domestic violence for more information.

Sexist attitudes

Common attitudes in our society allow males, even adolescents, to feel they are entitled to control women and the household. Physical strength and dominance are seen as defining qualities of being a man. This and peer pressure can encourage macho behaviours in boys.

Trauma and loss

If there is a divorce or a death in the family, the child has been abused themselves, or is being bullied at school, this can increase the likelihood of them using abusive behaviours.

Attitude of over-entitlement

Parents sometimes put their energy into giving their children whatever they want at the expense of instilling them with a sense of responsibility. Some children see that their parents' job is to make them happy – at any cost.

Who is abused?

For many reasons, mothers are more likely to be abused. Women are still primarily responsible for parenting and so mum may be the one in charge of 'laying down the law' while at the same time feeling more protective of the children. Quite simply mothers are more likely to be there while some fathers are emotionally or physically absent.

There is no evidence that sole parenting in itself leads to abuse by children (unless there has been past domestic violence or a messy separation) but sole parents may lack support, be more isolated and so find it hard to deal with children's abuse.

Adolescents may also abuse younger brothers and sisters who, where the abuse is persistent or serious, may suffer developmental problems and long-term emotional and relational difficulties. It is important that you intervene. For more information see www.sasian.org

If your child is being cruel to pets or animals, take this seriously as it can be a sign of very serious issues. For more information see www.pet-abuse.com.

Regaining control and healing the relationship

Abuse thrives in silence and isolation. Parental abuse is still a taboo subject, a bit like domestic violence was 20 or 30 years ago. Although it may be difficult and embarrassing it is very important to let others know what is happening.

Breaking the silence by finding a safe place to talk about what's going on at home, whether it be with trusted family and friends or support services, can be the first step on your journey to regaining control and healing the relationship with your child.

It is usually the mother who recognises this problem and seeks help. Gaining the support and agreement of other adults in your child's life to a consistent approach to discipline is very important. This could include your spouse, ex-partner or your child's teachers and school – the school's welfare officer may be a helpful contact for this.

It is very common for the abusive adolescent to blame you and refuse to take responsibility for their own behaviour and refuse counselling or other supports. Don't be discouraged. By getting help for yourself and working on your own behaviour and responses, the situation at home can improve.

Much as they push the limits, children need clear rules and consistent consequences to feel safe and secure. Though an abusive adolescent may appear to enjoy their power, they are usually far happier when their parents take control and provide guidance and leadership.

By holding them accountable for their actions you are not violating their rights – you are teaching them how to behave appropriately.

It is extremely difficult to remain calm and act appropriately in the heat of the moment – they really know how to 'push your buttons.' You might benefit from learning different ways of relating to your children and dealing with negative emotions and conflict.

Gathering information and getting support will help you reflect on your own responses, regain confidence, stay in control, follow through and negotiate what is a long-term process. There is no quick fix, but the sooner you take action, the sooner the situation will improve and you may avoid having to take drastic action later.

What can I do to protect myself?

If your child is using physical violence, you should create a safety plan. This involves thinking about what you are already doing to protect yourself and others, and what works.

Sometimes you may be able to tell when a situation with your child is escalating towards an abusive confrontation. At other times adolescents seem to just 'go off' without warning. There is a limit to how much you can try and reason with someone while they are in a rage. Sometimes the only way to de-escalate such situations is simply to stop interacting altogether and remove yourself.

Have a plan for how you and your other children will leave the house and where you will go. Make sure your other children know how important it is for them to stick to the plan. Keep your wallet and car keys handy and in the same spot.

Inform yourself about legal options

It is important to inform yourself about your legal rights and the rights of your child so that you are clear about the full range of options available to you, even if you choose not to take legal action.

Physical abuse, threats, having weapons, theft and damage to property are criminal offences. For your safety and the safety of others it may be necessary to consider police involvement. A visit from the police will deal with the immediate emergency and may also help your child realise the severity of their actions. However, it is not the job of the police to provide long-term solutions.

It is possible to take out an intervention order to protect yourself from your child's abusive behaviours. You can do this even while your child is still living at home. While an intervention order may serve as a 'wake up call' for your child, you must be willing and able to enforce the order. If you make threats and don't follow through on them, your child can end up feeling more powerful.

Asking them to leave – the last resort

Unfortunately, in some circumstances, the removal of the abusive adolescent from the home on a more permanent basis may be the only solution to ending the abuse. If they are not ready or able to strike out on their own, they may be able to access support through government programs.

It is also important to get support for yourself at this time. It is common for mothers to experience a sense of failure, grief and loss as well perhaps some guilt for their feelings of relief.

Types of support

Anonymous support

Through a phone service like the domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS), Parentline or Women's Information & Referral Centre (WIRC) offers a safe space to talk things through and can help you find resources.

Counselling

Offers a supportive space to explore what's happening. Look for a counsellor who has a family focus in their work.

Family counselling

Treats the family as a whole, but may not be appropriate if your child is intimidating.

Support groups

Are a great way to give and receive support with people in similar situations.

Family violence services

Generally specialise in partner violence but may be able to offer you support, especially if there is a history of violence in your family.

Parenting education

Teaches valuable skills like setting boundaries and handling conflict.

Support of kids

Through peer support programs and providing other adults to talk to, through sporting teams or mentoring programs, can be very helpful. Specialist services exist to address related issues like drug and alcohol problems or mental health issues.

Where to go for help?

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| • Domestic Violence Crisis Service | 6280 0900 24hrs 7days |
| • Police | 000 |
| • Canberra Rape Crisis Centre | 6247 2525 24hrs 7days |
| • Child Protection Services-After Hrs Crisis Service | 1300 556 729 |
| • Domestic Violence Orders and Protection Orders Unit | 6217 4299 |
| • Women's Information & Referral Centre | 6205 1075 or 6205 1076 |
| • Women's Legal Centre | 6257 4499 |
| • Aboriginal Legal Service | 6249 8488 |
| • Legal Aid Service | 1300 654 314 |
| • Centrelink Crisis Payment | 131 021 |
| • Youth Law Centre | 6262 7077 |
| • ParentLine | 6287 3833 |

Contact WIRC

For an up-to-date contact list of the services available:

6205 1075 or 6205 1076

Drop in to the Women's Information and Referral Centre
Ground Level London Court, 13 London Circuit, Canberra City

Email: wirc@act.gov.au

Website: www.women.act.gov.au

References

Information Sheet *Adolescents who use violence at home*, Women's Information Referral Exchange Inc, Victoria

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