

**Exploring adolescent violence and abuse  
towards parents: the experiences and  
perceptions of young people**

**by**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Adolescent-to-parent abuse is a harmful social problem that has received increasing academic and media attention over the past decade. Despite a number of high-quality studies from the UK and overseas drawing on parent and practitioner accounts, the voices of young people are relatively absent, with scant attention to how they perceive and experience this type of family abuse. This study represents the most in-depth examination of young people's accounts of violence and abuse towards parents to date, exploring the forms it takes, the people involved, its causes and contexts, and its impacts. It also generates new insights into how it might be prevented or addressed.

This mixed methods study generated data from 221 self-report surveys on conflict behaviours, analysed descriptively, and 21 in-depth interviews, analysed using a thematic and discursive approach. Participants were aged 14 to 18 years attending a college in south-east England and a youth offending service in north-west England. This is the first UK parent abuse study to interview young people within an education and youth justice context and the first use a self-report survey as a screening tool.

Ten percent (10%) of the student sample met at least one of the devised parent abuse thresholds, with only 7% and 2% reporting a pattern of 'minor' or 'severe' physical aggression over the previous 12 months, respectively. Interviewees gave rich insight into the impact of their abuse, as well as the pathways through which it developed, including experiences of past and ongoing child abuse, domestic abuse and peer violence, as well as pre-existing behavioural difficulties. Importantly, the study developed an ecological framework for explaining how factors relating to stress and coping, trauma, emotion regulation, gender, and communication interacted to shape the dynamic. The gendered nature of both parenting and family violence resulted in mothers being the most likely victims, although the study was limited in its analysis of adolescent gender or violence towards fathers. As other studies suggest, aggression was described as being both reactive and instrumental, framed as a form of emotional release, a way of hurting or punishing mothers, gaining control over privileges, space and movement, expressing distress, and defending or retaliating. New insight revealed that some young people's accounts of their behaviour mirrored those of adult male domestic abuse perpetrators by justifying, minimising, and shifting blame.

Practice recommendations include providing sustained keyworker support to improve adolescents' and mothers' well-being, parent-child communication, and address trauma. The ecological framework has potential to inform practice assessments and prevention/early intervention in schools and domestic abuse services.

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# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## Background

### Why study parent abuse?

My interest in adolescent-to-parent abuse first arose during my work as a researcher for the charity Dartington Social Research Unit<sup>1</sup>. While working on an article for their online publication 'Prevention Action', I had explored the use of trauma-focused narrative therapy with former child soldiers in Northern Uganda, which highlighted their ongoing struggle with holding dual 'survivor' and 'perpetrator' identities. Carrying out case-file research into the needs and circumstances of children within England's care system further exposed me not only to a wide range of 'childhoods' but, specifically, to the role of child violence in foster and adoption placement breakdown. Exploring this issue further, I realised this research area was in its infancy and was hampered by a lack of young people's voices.

### A brief introduction

Originally identified in the literature as 'battered parents syndrome' by Harbin and Madden (1979), adolescent-to-parent abuse or 'parent abuse' as it is referred to interchangeably throughout this study, can be defined as 'any act of a child that is intended to cause physical, psychological or financial damage to gain power and control over a parent' (Cottrell, 2001, p. 3). Key characteristics that distinguish it from 'typical' teenage rebellion are that it is 'deliberately harmful to the parent and used as a form of control' (Cottrell, 2001, p. 4) and that it represents a *pattern* of harmful behaviour (Holt, 2013). In this sense, it shares several characteristics with other forms of family abuse, including its gendered nature, being disproportionately experienced by mothers (Simmons, McEwan, Purcell, & Ogloff, 2018). Parent abuse takes various forms, including physical violence, verbal abuse, abuse with an emotionally harmful aspect or which is intended to impact a parent psychologically (explored in depth in Chapter Two on *Defining parent abuse*), and abuse of a financial nature, including the

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<sup>1</sup> Now known as *Dartington Service Design Lab*.

destruction of property (Holt, 2013). Evidence from a range of survey and interview studies with parents (Haw, 2010) and practitioners (Condry & Miles, 2012) point to parent abuse as a harmful social problem that is increasingly appearing on practitioners' caseloads but with very little policy or evidence-based practice to help support intervention (Holt, 2013; Holt & Retford, 2013). As with any form of abuse, it is also characterised by secrecy, shame and stigma (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Paterson, Luntz, Perlesz, & Cotton, 2002). This has contributed to it being a particularly 'hidden' and 'hard to reach' form of family violence (Haw, 2010; Nixon, 2012), with parents often denying or minimising the abuse to protect themselves from judgement or retaliatory abuse, or to protect their child from criminalisation or being taken into care (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Howard & Rottem, 2008).

### **The current state of the literature**

The literature on adolescent-to-parent abuse is sparse in comparison to other forms of family violence (Holt, 2012b; Hunter & Nixon, 2012), with variations in the methods, samples, and definitions used creating inconsistency and contradiction in findings (Holt, 2012b; Simmons et al., 2018). However, over the last few years, this body of work has grown significantly, reflecting a growing recognition that parent abuse is a harmful social problem demanding attention. Research in this area is diverse and includes analyses of clinical/service (e.g. Laurent & Derry, 1999; Parentline Plus, 2010; Routt & Anderson, 2011) and police/judicial records (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Kethineni, 2004), national policing datasets (e.g. Condry & Miles, 2014; Snyder & McCurley, 2008; Walsh & Krienert, 2009), secondary analyses of population surveys (e.g. Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Brezina, 1999; Peek, Fischer, & Kidwell, 1985), clinical case studies (Charles, 1986; Gallagher, 2004a), programme evaluations, as well as surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews with young people, parents and practitioners. There is also a significant amount of practice literature drawing on the experiences of those working on the front line with families (Bonnick, 2019; Holt, 2016b), as well as, particularly in the UK, articles that explore tensions in definition and conceptualisation (Holt, 2016a; Wilcox, 2012) and their implications for policy and practice (Holt, 2009; Miles & Condry, 2015). In the main, however, research is quantitative and cross-sectional, utilising youth- and (less commonly) parent-report surveys to measure the prevalence, risk factors and correlates of violence and abuse towards parents in clinical/service, youth justice, 'at-risk', and community samples. As the majority of these studies represent community populations in Spain, where parent abuse is

particularly prevalent (Ibabe, Arnoso, & Elgorriaga, 2014), this unfortunately provides little insight into parent abuse in other countries, including the UK.

## **Filling a gap: the experiences and perceptions of young people**

The majority of qualitative research into adolescent-to-parent abuse tends to privilege parents' – particularly mothers' – and practitioners' experiences and perceptions of the issue (Holt & Retford, 2013; Williams, Tuffin, & Niland, 2017), with only a few studies prioritising the voices of young people themselves (e.g. Papamichail & Bates, 2020). Although representing the voices of parents and practitioners is crucial – focusing on the harms caused to victims, as well as highlighting the constructions of those in supporting roles and the policy frameworks within which they operate – this leaves big gaps in understanding as to why young people may be using violence and abuse at home, how it might be impacting them, and what they think might help them to desist. As argued by Stamp and Sabourin (1995) on the issue of men's violence towards women, abuse is perceived differently by its victims, victimisers and observers. Only by understanding young people's perceptions of their use of violence and abuse towards parents can we begin to understand why it might be taking place and move towards practice that 'may be better equipped to create lasting change' (Stamp & Sabourin, 1995, p. 285). This study seeks to address these particular gaps in the literature.

## **Methodology**

### **Research aims**

This research aims to address the current gap in our understanding of how young people experience and perceive the use of violence and abuse towards parents. The following primary and secondary research questions were designed to steer the study.

1. What is the nature of adolescent-to-parent abuse?
  - a. How common is it?
  - b. What forms and patterns of behaviour does abuse take?
  - c. What are the characteristics of the parents and young people involved?

2. How do young people understand, explain, and experience adolescent-to-parent abuse?
  - a. What are the causes, contexts and motivations involved?
  - b. What are the impacts on young people and their families?
  - c. How might it be prevented or addressed?

## **Methods of investigation**

To answer these questions, the study employed a mixed methods design underpinned by critical realist philosophy and childhood theory. Data was generated from a quantitative self-report behaviour survey and in-depth interviews with a smaller sample of purposively selected young people.

The final sample comprised 221 young people aged 14 to 18 years, with all participants completing the survey and a subsample of 21 young people aged 14 to 18 participating in the interviews. Participants came from one sixth form college in south-east England (210) and a youth offending service (YOS) in north-west England (11).

## **The thesis structure**

The thesis comprises 10 chapters, this introduction representing *Chapter One*.

*Chapter Two* explores what is currently known about adolescent-to-parent abuse in the literature, the gaps in understanding around young people's experiences and perspectives, and the framing of the issue through UK policy and practice responses. It also outlines a theoretical framework for the study that is child-centred, feminist and ecological.

*Chapter Three* details the study's mixed methodology, its rationale and underpinning critical realist philosophy and the methods for ethically capturing young people's authentic voices. The thematic and discursive analytical approaches are also detailed, alongside the development of the ecological framework for analysis.

*Chapter Four* details the sample characteristics by method and research site and sets out the structure for the forthcoming findings chapters.

*Chapter Five* combines survey and interview data to explore the prevalence and profiles of abusive behaviour and the application of parent abuse 'thresholds'. It also examines,

in-depth, the gendered nature of the phenomenon and how young people explain the predominance of violence towards mothers, an original contribution to the field.

*Chapter Six* details the interview findings on the causes and contexts of parent abuse. The chapter is broken down into six key themes: *violence, abuse and trauma; power, control and agency; communication; stress; anger and emotion regulation; and blame*. The findings highlight how contexts of victimisation, emotion dysregulation, stress and poor communication contribute to the dynamic. The chapter also explores the language interviewees use to frame, and in some cases justify, violent events, which sometimes mirror that of male perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse.

*Chapter Seven* details the interview findings on young people's understandings of the physical, property, financial, emotional, relational and legal harms caused by parent abuse – another original contribution to the field.

*Chapter Eight* details the interview findings on young people's perspectives on preventing and addressing parent abuse. The themes point to the importance of *communicating and understanding; space; quality time; managing anger; understanding consequences; punishment and (re)establishing authority; professional help: confidants, challengers and advisors; and barriers*. This is the first time hearing young people's thoughts on how parents, practitioners and young people themselves might address the dynamic. Insights highlight the need for support that attends to the experiences and traumas of young people, respects their developing agency, and helps young people and parents to communicate openly and calmly.

*Chapter Nine* presents an in-depth discussion and ecological analysis of the findings, using the systemic method of causal loop diagramming to aid understanding. The chapter is organised according to each of the six secondary research questions.

The concluding chapter, *Chapter Ten* details the study's original contributions to knowledge and their implications for policy and practice. Key areas include the need for support that attends to difficulties at all levels of young people's (and families') social ecologies, is needs-led and draws on the perspectives and experiences of both young people and parents.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

This study explores young people's experiences and perceptions of violence and abuse towards parents. This exploration aims to shed light on the nature of abusive behaviour, the causes and contexts involved and the impacts on young people and their families. The ways in which it might be prevented or addressed are also investigated. To this end, this chapter details what is already known about adolescent-to-parent abuse, how it is currently defined and constructed in the literature, how these definitions and constructions have changed over time, and where this research is positioned in relation to them. Initially, the chapter begins by exploring the meaning of the phrase 'parent abuse' before discussing how prevalent a social 'problem' it is. An outline of the study's theoretical framework will then highlight those key areas of theory used to explain the issue. The chapter moves on to explore the deleterious impacts of this form of family violence and thus its importance as a topic of enquiry. Lastly, as a study looking to create a 'more informed dialogue' (Williams et al., 2017, p. 9) between those young people using violence and abuse towards parents and those seeking to prevent or address it, the chapter explores the policy, practice and legislative frameworks that shape our current responses to families experiencing this issue. There are reflections throughout the chapter on how the research methods used have shaped the knowledge generated thus far and, importantly, the gaps that remain unexplored. As a study focused solely on young people's voices, the chapter pays particular attention to the study of children and childhood and their construction as legitimate contributors of knowledge.

### Literature search strategy

Relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, books and reports were identified using the abstract and citation databases Web of Science, Scopus, and ProQuest, supplemented by searches of key journals, including the *Journal of Adolescence*, *Journal of Family Violence*, and *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Boolean searches used various combinations of the terms: 'child-to-parent', 'adolescent-to-parent', 'parent abuse',

'mother abuse' (AND) 'abus\*', 'violen\*', 'aggressi\*'. Searches using the Google online search engine helped to identify grey literature, most commonly evaluations or research relating to small-scale parent abuse interventions – both locally and globally. Key texts, such as Holt's (2013) *Adolescent-to-parent abuse: current understandings in research, policy and practice* were used in the initial stages of the review when scoping the subject and were referred to throughout. Key reading pertaining to the areas of domestic violence, child abuse and childhood theory were also suggested by my supervisory team. Lastly, new references were identified by examining the reference lists and bibliographies of all reading material.

## **Defining parent abuse**

Adolescent-to-parent violence and abuse (APVA) is a serious and significant social problem (Brezina, 1999) which, despite receiving greater media and academic attention over the past 15 years, is still relatively unacknowledged and under-researched (Hunter & Nixon, 2012; Simmons et al., 2018). Identified initially as 'battered parents syndrome' by Harbin and Madden (1979) through their clinical work with families in the late 70s, early research sat mainly within the fields of family violence and clinical psychology in the US, using population surveys to identify the prevalence of physical violence towards parents and clinical case studies to create typologies of abuse and 'deviant' children. These early constructions of parent abuse focused mainly on physical violence, being heavily reliant on survey instruments not specifically designed for capturing data on the phenomenon (Edenborough, Jackson, Mannix, & Wilkes, 2008).

Multidimensional definitions of parent abuse encompassing non-physical forms of abuse arose much later through the work of Barbara Cottrell (2001) which, although still positioned within the field of family violence, focused less on family conflict and physical violence and more on characteristics common to domestic abuse, such as power, control and 'emotional terrorism' (Cottrell, 2001). Cottrell used qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups with parents and practitioners (Cottrell & Monk, 2004), to highlight the harmful nature of abuse and to centre victims' experiences. Although the accounts of young people were also drawn upon, they were not explored extensively.

Current social attitudes towards parent abuse mirror that of past attitudes towards 'wife abuse' in the sense that victims are blamed, it is seen as a private family matter, and there are few supports to help those affected (Cottrell, 2001). Unlike child and partner abuse, however, parent abuse has only been recognised as a social 'problem' fairly recently, likely due to societies' reluctance to accept an issue involving a reversal of normative power structures (Gelles & Straus, 1979). For this reason, the research base is less developed than those of domestic or child abuse. Establishing clarity around the conceptualisation of the phenomenon is vital to produce a more coherent corpus of research that can inform effective service responses. Furthermore, greater clarity will help to make this a more visible, better understood and less stigmatised social problem.

## Terminology

Defining adolescent-to-parent abuse is difficult. Definitions and the terminology used vary significantly, much to the detriment of the collective research underpinning our understandings of it. From terminology such as 'child aggression' used within conflict-oriented research, to the 'mother abuse' of feminist studies, and the 'parent assault' of criminological studies, terminology typically reflects the theoretical frameworks, samples, or focus of the studies within which they are used<sup>2</sup>. For this reason, 'adolescent-to-parent violence and abuse', 'adolescent-to-parent abuse' or simply 'parent abuse' are the terms used in this study, reflecting a dynamic that involves a pattern of harmful, 'intentional'<sup>3</sup>, and controlling behaviour by (typically) adolescent children towards their parents. Abusive behaviour can be physical, verbal, economic or material, emotional or psychological (see Table 2.1). In some rare instances (although reported with increasing frequency - Bonnicksen, 2019), it can also be sexual in nature. Multidimensional definitions emphasising *power*, *pattern*, *intention* and *harm* have been used by several parent abuse researchers to date, including Barbara Cottrell (2001) and Amanda Holt (2013). They move away from considering abuse as merely the sum total of the behaviours and 'acts' involved, towards a more contextualised understanding in

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<sup>2</sup> Where studies use terms other than 'parent abuse', 'adolescent-to-parent abuse' or 'adolescent-to-parent violence and abuse', these are captured and reflected by the use of single inverted commas, e.g. 'child aggression'. Within this study, physical parent abuse is specifically referred to as 'physical violence/abuse'. All forms of abuse are referred to collectively as 'parent abuse', 'adolescent-to-parent abuse', or 'adolescent-to-parent violence and abuse'.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of 'intentionality' is highly contested in the parent abuse literature. Within this study, 'intentional' behaviour is that which has an intended *function*, be that to harm parents, to communicate distress, or to control the home environment. 'Intent' therefore, does not always equate to *malicious* intent.

which fear of future behaviour is understood as a mechanism of control (Holt & Retford, 2013; Selwyn & Meakings, 2016). Further, mirroring developments in the domestic abuse field, such definitions place greater emphasis on psychological and coercive forms of abuse and their serious emotional and mental health consequences. This is important as, historically in the parent abuse literature, there has been an overemphasis on physical violence towards parents.

Although the most common term used in the literature is 'child-to-parent violence', 'adolescent' is favoured here as it recognises the age range during which parent abuse is most prevalent, as well as acknowledging adolescence as a developmental period characterised by changes within the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social arenas of a young person's life (Coleman, 2011). As discussed throughout the thesis, these are important factors shaping the dynamic.

Within this study, parent abuse is understood as a gendered phenomenon primarily affecting mothers (Simmons et al., 2018), with gender shaping who is involved, how and why it manifests, how it is experienced, and how it is perceived and responded to by society. However, the gender-neutral 'adolescent-to-parent' (as opposed to son-to-mother, for example) is used, as both sons and daughters abuse mothers and fathers.

The word 'parent' in 'adolescent-to-parent' refers not only to biological parents but to any adult who has a child caregiving role, including step-parents, non-biological mothers and fathers within same-sex or polygamous relationships, foster and adoptive parents, and others, such as extended family acting as primary caregivers, including kinship carers. Indeed, the terms 'mother', 'father' and 'parent' should be acknowledged as contested terms, often reflecting heteronormative, essentialist and bionormative constructions of what constitutes 'authentic' motherhood, fatherhood and parenthood (Hequembourg, 2007; Park, 2013; Suter, Baxter, Seurer, & Thomas, 2014; Suter, Seurer, Webb, Grewe, & Koenig Kellas, 2015). Within this study, 'mothers' and 'fathers' (and indeed, their alternatives) represent those caregivers who are identified as such by the young people participating. It is, however, important to recognise that the majority of studies to date have tended to limit their samples to children living with biological parents (e.g. Fawzi, Fawzi, & Fouad, 2013) and it is possible (although as yet unexplored) that abuse may play out differently depending on variations in the child-caregiver relationship. For instance, being an adoptive parent may add an additional

layer of relational complexity that could have implications for how abuse is experienced and responded to (Selwyn & Meakings, 2016; Thorley & Coates, 2020). In a society where the family structure is becoming increasingly diverse (ONS, 2019b), limiting research to the archetypal family unit can obstruct more nuanced understandings. Consequently, the current study includes all caregivers with whom the young person lives or has contact with.

## **Forms of abuse**

Adolescent-to-parent abuse can take many forms (see Table 2.1), but typically involves the *repeated* use of physical, verbal, emotional/psychological, and/or economic/material abuse towards one or both parents (Holt, 2013). It can also extend to other family members such as siblings or grandparents (Holt, 2013). In rare cases, abuse may also be sexual in nature. Evidence on the forms abuse takes comes from a range of quantitative and qualitative research, including studies involving parent and adolescent surveys (e.g. Agnew & Huguley, 1989), interviews and focus groups with parents and practitioners (Biehal, 2012; Cottrell, 2001; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Selwyn & Meakings, 2016), and data from analyses of clinical case files and police reports (e.g. Condry & Miles, 2014). The sources of data used typically determine the severity of the abuse identified, with studies drawing on police or clinical data often highlighting more severe forms of behaviour. Importantly for this study, young people's qualitative accounts have rarely been used to describe the behaviours typical of the dynamic – something this study addresses through its interviews with young people.

Although listed as distinct forms of abuse, behaviours typically fall across a number of categories. For example, humiliating parents through degrading comments can be categorised as both verbal and emotional/psychological abuse, and the destruction of property as both economic/material and emotional/psychological abuse. Importantly, the specific contexts, individual characteristics and family histories involved all interact to determine the specific presentation, meaning there is no 'one size fits all' (Condry & Miles, 2012, p. 245). Lastly, as Holt (2013) explains, the form that abuse takes is often specific to the parent-child relationship. For example, children undermining the parental role by threatening to call the police or social services with false claims of abuse (Cottrell, 2001; Eckstein, 2004; Selwyn & Meakings, 2016), repeated verbal attacks on parental capacity, and manipulating the close parent-child bond by threatening or

carrying out self-harm in acts of 'self-sabotage' (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014). Although some of these acts may happen occasionally as part of typical teenage behaviour, what makes them abusive is their repeated nature (Holt, 2013), with parents reporting that the continual use of such tactics undermines their sense of self and well-being, while forcing them to alter their own behaviours to avoid abuse (Selwyn & Meakings, 2016).

Table 2.1: Forms and features of abuse

Abuse type	Typical behaviours involved
Physical	Punching, kicking, pulling hair, pushing, throwing or pinning, trapping, biting, throwing or hitting with objects.  In more extreme cases, strangling, using weapons such as knives, the use of poison/gas, and burning/scalding.
Verbal	Shouting and swearing to argue, challenge and intimidate. Demeaning, sarcastic and critical language used to humiliate, hurt, and undermine parents' sense of self.
Emotional or psychological	Derogatory names, withholding affection, manipulation, threats, intimidation, blackmail and coercion to obtain control over the household, psychological tactics, e.g. hiding household objects, using 'silent treatment' and other 'mind games', social/obstructive tactics.  The use of sexualised language to demean and humiliate.
Economic or material	Destruction of property, e.g. smashing up rooms, kicking or punching holes in walls and doors, smashing windows, destroying parents' personal possessions. The demanding or theft of money and goods, the selling of property, endangering employment, incurring fines, endangering tenancies.

### The onset of abuse

Adolescent-to-parent abuse tends to develop and escalate gradually, increasing in frequency and intensity, often beginning with verbal, emotional and economic/material abuses (the most common forms) and escalating to physical abuse (Bonnick, 2019; Cottrell, 2001; Holt, 2013). Although the evidence on gender and abuse is inconsistent, several studies have highlighted differences between the types of abuse carried out by

adolescent sons and daughters, with physical abuse more likely to come from sons and emotional/psychological abuse more commonly attributed to daughters (for a review see Simmons et al., 2018).

In many families, what triggers the onset of abuse is unknown, appearing to come from nowhere (Parentline Plus, 2010; Selwyn & Meakings, 2016). However, some children identified as abusive have histories of early onset oppositional and aggressive behaviour (Selwyn & Meakings, 2016), only labelled 'abusive' once they reach a physical stature where harm becomes more likely (Cottrell, 2001).

### **What 'counts' as abuse?**

It is important to comment on the use of the word 'abuse' within this definition. As Fawzi and colleagues (2013) and Gallagher (2008) state, violence and aggression by adolescents is not always abusive, sometimes representing behaviours used in self-defence or in protection of others. It can also be reactive behaviour characteristic of a neurodevelopmental condition such as autism, or a one-off event arising from extreme stress. Indeed, the definition of 'filio-parental violence' used by the Spanish Society for the Study of Filio-Parental Violence (SEVIFIP) emphasises this (Pereira et al., 2017), stating that outside of the definition are:

one-off aggressions that occur in a state of diminished consciousness which disappear when upon recovery (intoxications, withdrawal syndromes, delirious states or hallucinations), those caused by (transient or stable) psychological disorders (autism and severe mental deficiency) and parricide without history of previous aggressions. (p. 220)

Although clearly these forms of violence and aggression towards parents can be both harmful and distressing, the key characteristic of parent 'abuse' is that it involves a *pattern of intentional, harmful* behaviour, used to gain *power and control*. However, the extent to which such nuances can be identified when assessing the behaviour of young people (particularly through methods such as surveys) is unclear and will be a focal point in this study. Further, differentiating between behaviour that typifies the Western idea of adolescence (i.e. silent treatment, shouting, swearing, storming out of rooms)

and behaviour representing a pattern of abuse, is a difficult one (Bobic, 2002). Cottrell (2001) provides useful guidance here, stating 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 behaviour and "parent abuse"' (Cottrell, 2001, p. 3). In this way, 'typical' adolescent behaviour involving defiance, resistance and conflict can be differentiated from 'threats, force or manipulation to gain power over the other' (Cottrell, 2001, p. 3).

Although for some families, parent abuse can sit within a wider pattern of adolescent violence (Biehal, 2012) and, in some cases, can develop from early-onset persistent (EOP) behavioural difficulties and temperamental hyperactivity (Biehal, 2012; Pagani et al., 2004), parent abuse is a distinct form of abuse that often sits outside of more general patterns of adolescent aggression and, for some parents, can sit in stark contrast to the behaviour demonstrated towards teachers, peers, or even other family members (Biehal, 2012). That said, although parent abuse should be seen as distinct from broader forms of adolescent violence, it can still be seen as a potential risk factor.

## **Power**

Power is central to conceptualisations of parent abuse, evidenced by its inclusion in the most widely used definition by Cottrell (2001). Indeed, much of the literature frames the phenomenon as a reversal of normative hierarchical power relations (Harbin & Madden, 1979; Tew & Nixon, 2010), with some using constructs of power and control as a conceptual framework to explain it (Holt & Retford, 2013). This seems appropriate since parents often report a tapering and relinquishing of parental control, often as a means of avoiding escalation to violence (Selwyn & Meakings, 2016). Unfortunately, this often results in patterns of coercive control, where adolescents understand that violence (or the threat of it) can be used as 'a successful means of coercing parents into compliance' (Cottrell & Monk, 2004, p. 1085). In their study of practitioner understandings of parent abuse, Holt and Retford (2013) highlighted practitioners' experiences of abuse as involving manipulation, power, and control, with the intersection of adolescence shaping its development.

*I think in terms of the power balance, the parent and child relationship is never equal...but then that power imbalance changes, and that young person starts to subjugate his mother. And that child, in his head, is taking control back. (DV-N) (p. 5)*

Calvete and colleagues (2014) echo this, suggesting that parent abuse is an attempt by children to gain power within a family context in which parents lack the ability or capacity to maintain control. They expand on this, positioning parent abuse as being a power relation – i.e. a power struggle between ‘us and them’ with ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ (p. 349). In contrast, the family violence perspective suggests parent abuse can be seen as a means of gaining power over a parent as a protective measure (Baker, 2012) – an idea explored in greater detail later through young people’s interviews.

This view of parent abuse as a reversal of normative hierarchical power relations opposes the traditional conceptualisation of abusive relationships, which typically feature a ‘perpetrator’ who holds a position of greater power (e.g. physical, economic, and/or political power) in relation to the ‘victim’ (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Holt & Retford, 2013). Normative constructions of the parent-child dyad, however, infer parents command greater power in relation to the child, making parent abuse at odds with both normative constructions of parenthood and abusive relationships. For this reason Peek and colleagues (1985) questioned the utility of theories ‘predominantly concerned with violence of the more powerful toward the less powerful’ (Peek et al., 1985, p. 1052) in helping to explain the phenomenon of ‘child-to-parent violence’. Speaking to such a concern, this study observes the parent-child relationship from a transactional perspective, drawing on the bilateral model of parent-child relations (Kuczynski, 2003), which emphasises the interdependent nature of the parent-child relationship, viewing parents and children as active agents, where power is dynamic and negotiated within a specific context, rather than static and determined solely by the parent. As a transactional model of causality, it can also account for how power dynamics change over time. This is particularly relevant for a phenomenon involving the developmental period of adolescence, when children’s growing desire for independence and agency can result in a shift in power. Such a framework can also more readily accommodate the issue of adolescent-to-parent abuse, which transgresses normative understandings of parent-child power relations.

## Intentionality

Parent abuse, as defined in this study, involves a pattern of acts *intended* either to cause harm, and/or to gain some form of power or control over parents (Cottrell, 2001). This contrasts with those studies employing an act-focused definition (e.g. Paulson, Coombs, & Landsverk, 1990), or those focusing solely on how abuse is perceived by its victims (e.g. Paterson et al., 2002). Although definitions based on the harms caused to victims are beneficial – particularly since acts may be experienced as threatening, even when not intended to be – this study focuses on the perceptions of young people using violence and abuse rather than those who are victims of it. Very rarely in the literature have young people’s intentions for using violence and abuse towards parents been sought and made explicit – a gap this study addresses. Indeed, only by understanding young people’s intentions can we hope to develop meaningful and effective responses to the issue.

Within the literature *intentionality* is a contentious issue (Bonnick, 2019; Iwi, 2018; Thorley & Coates, 2020). It is investigated most commonly via the concepts of reactive/impulsive versus instrumental/proactive aggression and more recently via ‘trauma informed behaviour’ within the adoption and fostering literature (Thorley & Coates, 2020). Whereas reactive aggression is defined as ‘a reaction to a perceived threat... characterized by intense anger’ (Calvete, Orue, & Gamez-Guadix, 2013, p. 758), proactive aggression is defined as ‘deliberate actions aimed at achieving a desired goal’ (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013, p. 758), such as avoiding household tasks or obtaining money, goods, or freedoms. Studies into intentionality differ in their findings, with some claiming that parent abuse involves reactive and impulsive aggression (Nock & Kazdin, 2002) and others proactive and instrumental aggression (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013). However, it seems likely that parent abuse can involve both forms (Thorley & Coates, 2020), determined by the characteristics of the child/adolescent, the family/child history and context, and relational dynamics (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013). Examining this further using practitioner focus groups, Calvete and colleagues (2014) propose that what might begin as reactive aggression due to distress could, over time, develop into more instrumental aggression characterised by a lack of empathy. This study provides more contextualised insights through its examination of young people’s accounts.

## **Secrecy, shame and minimisation**

Like all forms of family abuse, parent abuse is characterised by the secrecy, shame and stigma surrounding it (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cottrell, 2001; Holt & Retford, 2013; Tew & Nixon, 2010), with family members less likely to report violence by other family members than they are violence by strangers (Nordstrom & Kullgren, 2003). This 'veil of secrecy' (Paterson et al., 2002, p. 90) makes parent abuse particularly well hidden and hard to reach (Haw, 2010; Nixon, 2012), with parents feeling too embarrassed and ashamed to report abuse, often blaming themselves as 'failed parents' (Cottrell, 2001; Selwyn & Meakings, 2016), or fearful as to what may happen to their child if they do come forward (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Jackson, 2003). Unfortunately, in many cases, parents who do disclose can often be met with a lack of understanding – both by extended family (Howard & Rottem, 2008) and by the support services intended to help (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Selwyn & Meakings, 2016). Such 'parent-blaming' is often highly gendered, representing a form of structural victimisation towards mothers (Holt, 2016a).

Denial and minimisation is also characteristic, with mothers reported as describing their sons' physical violence as "playfulness", "mucking around" and "affection" (Howard & Rottem, 2008, p. 37), potentially to maintain the 'myth of family harmony' (Harbin & Madden, 1979, p. 1290). As a result, the issue is considerably under-reported and, as such, often goes unaddressed (Tew & Nixon, 2010). As one mother in Haw's (2010) study said: "*It is very difficult to deal with abuse that cannot be seen*" (p. 2). Methodologically, this is also problematic, with research tending to represent those families who have sought support and are willing to discuss their experiences. This study addresses this shortfall by speaking to young people within an education setting, potentially tapping into those cases that are less visible and less understood.

## **Difficulties in researching and measuring parent abuse**

A number of conceptual and methodological difficulties act as barriers to the effective study of parent abuse and contribute to its status as 'the most under-researched form of family abuse' (Holt, 2012b, p. 289). First, variation in definitions and terminology impede cross-study comparison, making effective theory generation and interrogation difficult. For example, the words 'violence', 'abuse' and 'aggression' are often used

interchangeably or without explanation, when they are not conceptually equivalent (Gelles, 1980). Even when explained, there is no consensus on how to operationalise abuse, meaning that its identification and measurement are inconsistent and, at times, misleading. For example, whereas some studies do not differentiate between single incidences and patterns of violence towards parents (e.g. Browne & Hamilton, 1998; Peek et al., 1985), others only categorise cases as 'abuse' where there has been repeated behaviour over several months (e.g. Laurent & Derry, 1999; Perera, 2006). Such differences can result in both over- and underestimation within prevalence studies, with confusion over what exactly is being measured. What is clear is that 'acts' of physical violence are much easier to operationalise than 'abuse', having clearer and more tangible definitional boundaries. As Gallagher (2008) and Stewart and colleagues (2006) explain, this is partially due to the fact that the line between what is acceptable teenage defiance and what is 'abuse' remains unclear. However, attempts have been made to differentiate between abuse and typical teenage rebellion (e.g. Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2013). This is explored further in the current study, comparing survey and interview data to identify whether and how surveys might meaningfully measure abuse.

Second, as mentioned previously, the samples and research methods used often determine the findings reported, rather than representing 'accurate' reflections of the issue as a whole (Holt, 2012b). This is particularly pertinent when exploring the gender of victims and victimisers, which varies according to the specific methods of data collection. For example, criminal justice data is often biased towards son-mother dyads and, more often than not, represent what Holt (2012b) terms 'the "thin end" of the wedge' (p. 290). This means that cases often involve more severe violence, perpetrated by adolescent boys who are already involved with the criminal justice system, from families without the resources (financial or social capital) to address the difficulties outside of legal means. Further, as with epidemiological data, crime data focuses much more on the *who* and *what* of parent abuse and less on the *how* or *why* (Holt, 2012b). In terms of epidemiological data, this is mostly because the majority is cross-sectional, limiting insights to only snapshots of the phenomenon rather than an observable process over time in which predictors and 'mediators' of abuse can be identified. Although the current study cannot address all these limitations, the use of both youth offending and further education samples provides an opportunity to compare parent abuse across populations, to determine whether it may present

differently. Further, the use of in-depth interviews should provide greater insight into the *how* and *why* of parent abuse within these groups.

## **Prevalence and incidence**

Parent abuse is becoming more widely recognised, in the UK and abroad, as a 'growing social problem' (Walsh & Krienert, 2009, p. 3), by both practitioners working with young people and their families (Condry & Miles, 2012; Home Office, 2015) and by researchers investigating the complexities and difficulties of family life. Unfortunately, robust evidence on prevalence and incidence is lacking, with existing evidence producing wildly varying estimates (Holt, 2013). As highlighted previously, this has much to do with how parent abuse is conceptualised and operationalised, in terms of the types of abuse being measured, their severity and their frequency. Furthermore, as evidence on population prevalence predominately comes from North America, there is a gap in understanding around the extent of the problem here in the UK, what forms it takes, and who is involved. Despite this, as this chapter shows, the problem of parent abuse is significant, both in terms of the numbers of families affected and the impact it has on them, making it a social problem worthy of attention. This section begins by presenting the most reliable international evidence on prevalence, before moving on to reported incidence, a discussion of the UK evidence base, research findings relating to clinical and high-need groups, and lastly, a summary of parent and child/adolescent characteristics.

### **Evidence from population surveys**

Population studies from the US (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Brezina, 1999; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Peek et al., 1985; Ulman & Straus, 2003) and Canada (Pagani et al., 2004, 2009) currently provide the most robust data on the prevalence of child and adolescent physical aggression towards parents. Population studies are robust as they use randomised probability sampling to generate large, nationally representative samples – i.e. samples that can be confidently assumed to be similar to the wider populations from which they are drawn (Meinck et al., 2016). However, due to an historic lack of information relating to *pattern* and *harm* (essential to this study's definition), the extent to which these rates actually represent parent *abuse* is questionable. Consequently, the

term 'aggression' rather than 'abuse' is used throughout this section. Also, in some cases, population data is over 50 years old, meaning it may not be representative of the picture today. Apart from one study measuring both physical and verbal 'aggression' (Pagani et al., 2004, 2009), data for the most part focuses on physical aggression towards parents, with the term 'hitting' most commonly used, as well as those physical behaviours listed in the *Conflict Tactics Scale* (CTS) (Straus, 1990). This limits the population-level data on non-physical forms of adolescent-to-parent aggression to Canada alone, with no insight concerning emotional/psychological or economic/material forms.

Data from these studies on 11- to 18-year-olds identified youth-reported rates of 5-11% for physical aggression (defined as 'hitting' a parent at least once) (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Brezina, 1999; Peek et al., 1985), with the lowest rate of 5% obtained by removing 'trivial' incidents (defined as playful, accidental, or so minor that the parent did not realise) (Agnew & Huguley, 1989). This is important as it could indicate that rates at the higher end of the range could have been inflated by including such trivial incidents. Recall periods varied in the youth report studies from one to three years, with longer recall periods reflecting higher rates (Peek et al., 1985).

Parent-report data on physical aggression from 10- to 17-year-olds (using CTS1 items) (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Ulman & Straus, 2003) comes from the *1975 National Family Violence Survey*. It found that 9-10% of parents had reported some form of physical aggression over the previous 12 months, with 3% having experienced 'severe' aggression (kicking, punching, biting, hitting with an object, and either threatening or using a gun or knife). However, as one-off incidences were included in these rates, the extent of patterned aggression is unclear.

The most convincing evidence to date comes from the *Quebec Longitudinal Study of Kindergarten Children*, a longitudinal population study assessing 1,175 children aged from six years up to 15/16, and combining both youth and parent reports (Pagani et al., 2004, 2009). Follow-up assessments at 15/16 years comprised interviews and questionnaires with both parents and adolescents, providing rich data on their verbal and physical aggression towards parents. Average scores were created from parent- and youth-reported scores on scales which included verbal aggression, such as yelling, screaming and swearing, and physical aggression, such as pushing, punching and

threatening. Pagani and colleagues (2004) found that 64% of adolescents had been verbally aggressive and 13.8% physically aggressive towards their mothers over the previous six months. This compared to rates of 56% and 11%, respectively, for fathers – slightly higher physical aggression rates than those in the US studies, potentially due to the inclusion of threats. In terms of severity, more serious violence such as punching, kicking and biting, were found in around 3% of cases, reflecting the rates identified by Cornell and Gelles (1982). Although the lower rates of 3-5% for serious violence may not seem high, even a rate of 5%, when scaled up to the whole US population, would represent over a million cases of ‘non-trivial’ assaults on parents per year (Ulman & Straus, 2003). In the UK, this would translate to around 246,100 households reporting adolescent-to-parent physical violence each year<sup>4</sup>, or 364,700 if applied to the total UK population of those aged 10 to 19.

It is important to note, however, that for several reasons these studies should be seen as conservative estimates of severe violence from adolescents to parents. First, the use of narrow and recent recall periods means that only those parents affected at the time of the studies are reflected in the rates. Also, differential attrition in studies such as Pagani and colleagues (2004, 2009) meant that more disruptive (and potentially more violent) adolescents were removed from the sample. Lastly, adolescent-to-parent aggression, as with all forms of family abuse, is a hidden problem which often goes unreported and denied (Calvete, Orue, Gamez-Guadix, & Bushman, 2015), with parents rarely over-reporting their children’s violent behaviour (Agnew & Huguley, 1989).

## **Evidence from school surveys**

School surveys carried out in Spain provide insight into the prevalence of both physical and non-physical forms of aggressive behaviour towards parents, drawing primarily upon the standardised self-report surveys of young people aged between 12 and 18 years, reporting on their behaviour over the previous 6 to 12 months. Unlike the population studies, they only provide insight at a local, rather than national level. However, they do still use random probability sampling and are fairly large, comprising between 485 and 2,719 participants – larger, in some cases, than the older population studies. Importantly, some of these studies measure frequency of aggression, meaning

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<sup>4</sup> Based on 5% of the 4,922,000 households reported as having at least one 10- to 19-year-old living with them and 5% of the total population of 7,294,000 10- to 17-year-olds (ONS, 2017).

that, unlike the population studies, they provide insight into patterned aggression towards parents – more closely representing this study’s definition of parent abuse.

These studies identified rates of physical aggression (e.g. punching, hitting) of between 4.6 and 11.3% (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, & Garcia-Salvador, 2015; Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2013; Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013; Calvete, Orue, Gamez-Guadix, & Bushman, 2015; Calvete, Orue, & Sampedro, 2011; Jaureguizar, Ibabe, & Straus, 2013), verbal aggression (e.g. yelling, cursing) of between 62.7% and 66% (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013; Calvete et al., 2011), and psychological aggression (e.g. threatening, blackmailing) of between 89.9% and 96.1% (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2015; Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2013; Calvete, Orue, Gamez-Guadix, & Bushman, 2015). Unfortunately, these surveys differentially combined verbal, psychological and economic forms of abuse, making it difficult to compare studies. Further, although two of the studies (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2013; Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013) identified rates of more ‘severe’ aggression – where ‘severe’ meant psychological aggression had taken place at least six times over the past year or ‘often’; verbal aggression had taken place ‘often’; and physical aggression had taken place at least three to five times or ‘often’ – a number of the psychological aggression items used (e.g. annoying, shouting), even if taking place more than six times per year, would not necessarily be considered ‘severe aggression’, but could be experienced by parents as typical, non-harmful teenage behaviour. However, these lower rates of between 0.1% and 3.3% for physical aggression (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2013; Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013), 0.4% and 7.5% for verbal aggression (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013), and 14.2% for psychological aggression (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2013), potentially start moving us closer to an understanding of the prevalence of parent abuse within non-service samples of adolescents.

### **Reported incidence studies**

Evidence on reported incidence rates of adolescent-to-parent violence and abuse – typically referred to as ‘juvenile domestic assault’ – provides additional insight into the size of the problem. However, as with all types of violence in families, reported rates typically under-estimate the scale of the problem, representing only those parents willing to approach services for support or those young people willing to admit to offences. However, a number of studies based on crime statistics in the US – and more

recently, Australia – have identified adolescent-to-parent ‘assault’ as a significant social issue (Walsh & Krienert, 2007), with analyses of family violence reports finding that between 3.9% (U.S. Department of Justice, 1980) and 5.2% (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988) of cases in the US and between 1% and 7% of cases in Australia (Moulds, Mayshak, Mildred, Miller, & Day, 2019) involved adolescents aggressing against one or both parents. In the crime survey by the U.S. Department of Justice (1980), this equated to around 47,000 assaults by adolescents against parents, around half of which were never reported to the police, emphasising just how conservative rates generated from police reports can be. A more recent study of ‘juvenile domestic assault offenders’ in the US (Snyder & McCurley, 2008), found that just over half (51%) had victimised a parent in 2004, and that the most common weapon used by offenders was a knife, highlighting the potentially serious nature of the issue. Such figures are similar to those identified through court records in Spain, which identified 66% of all ‘juvenile domestic offenders’ between 1999 and 2006 as having a history of assaults against parents (Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2010). It is important to note here that the context in which these ‘assaults’ take place are largely unknown to these studies, with minimal information as to whether the violence was initiated by adolescents or was in response to violence *from* parents. Lastly, studies from both Australia and Spain have highlighted increases in reports of violence towards parents, with Moulds and colleagues (2019) reporting increases of between 42% and 71% over a five year period (2009-2013) and the General State Public Prosecutor’s Office in Spain reporting a 230% increase, also over five years (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2013). However, increases in Spain have partly been attributed to greater public visibility and changes in reporting (Pereira et al., 2017).

## **Evidence from the UK**

Although in the House of Commons, adolescent-to-parent abuse has been described as ‘a growing problem’<sup>5</sup>, evidence on the scale of the issue in the UK is sparse, with a handful of studies providing insight from police incident reports and data requests, national parenting helpline data, crime survey data, and cross-sectional surveys using opportunity samples. As regard police reports, an analysis of the Metropolitan Police Service’s statistics on ‘adolescent-to-parent violence’ (Condry & Miles, 2014), found 1,892 cases involving 13- to 19-year-olds reported by parents between 2009 and 2010.

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<sup>5</sup> HC Deb 21 Feb 2018, vol 636, col 143WH

Incidents included physical violence, threats of violence, sexual assault, robbery, and criminal damage to the home. Of these, 69.6% involved no injury to parents, with 25.4% resulting in minor injury, 4.5% moderate injury, and 0.5% serious injury. More recent evidence comes from a freedom of information request reported by *The Guardian* newspaper (Clough, 2018) which found that 'in the year 2015/16, 10,051 cases of domestic violence against adults by children were investigated by 35 of the 43 police forces in England and Wales.' Data on parent 'assault' in the UK has also been collected from young people themselves in the *2005 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey* (Wilson, Sharp, & Patterson, 2006). This self-report survey asked 4,980 males and females aged 10 to 25 living in England and Wales about their own offending behaviour over the previous year. The survey found that 3% of the 593 assaults reported by young people were towards parents – less than assaults to partners (7%), siblings (22%), or friends (47%).

Although now over 10 years old, evidence from the third sector highlighted an increase of calls regarding parent abuse made to the parent support helpline 'Parentline' (run by the UK national charity Family Lives) – increasing from just over 2,000 reports of child-to-parent physical violence between 2007 and 2008 (Parentline Plus, 2008) to 7,000 over the following two years (Parentline Plus, 2010). Furthermore, reports of aggression towards parents, including non-physical aggression, was reported in 22,537 of cases, demonstrating that the problem extends beyond just physical violence. Although not a robust study of the prevalence of parent abuse, it does provide an indicator that adolescent-to-parent abuse is an issue experienced by an increasing number of families living in the UK, be it in actual, or reported terms – a finding also supported by practitioner reports (Nixon, 2012).

Although no population studies of parent abuse have been carried out in the UK, two cross-sectional survey studies utilising education samples – one involving 469 university students aged 18 to 21 (Browne & Hamilton, 1998) and a second, more recent study, comprising 890 secondary school students aged 11 to 18 (McCloud, 2017) – provide useful insights into the UK picture. Both studies used versions of Murray Straus' CTS (Straus, 1990; Straus & Fauchier, 2008) to gain past 12-month (Browne & Hamilton, 1998) and past six-month (McCloud, 2017) rates of physical and psychological aggression towards parents, as well as rates of positive conflict behaviours. In Browne and Hamilton (1998), 14.5% of participants reported having

used physical aggression and 3.8% severely violent tactics (hitting with a fist or object, kicking, beating up, and threatening with a knife or weapon). Such rates are similar to, although slightly higher than, those identified in the Spanish school surveys, although participants in the Browne and Hamilton study were older. Although the study only discussed physical aggression, rates of non-physical forms of aggression were also reported, with threats to hit or throw something at mothers and fathers mentioned in 5.3% and 4.7% of cases, respectively, and throwing, smashing or hitting something in 12.1% and 7.2% of cases, respectively. Significantly, rates of physical aggression *from* parents were twice as high as those *towards* parents, with parent aggression predictive of parent-directed aggression. Further, rates of positive conflict behaviours were much more prevalent than those behaviours deemed aggressive, helping to provide a more balanced picture of the behaviour of young people.

In the study by McCloud (2017), any physical aggression towards parents (slapping, hitting with an object, punching or kicking) over the previous six months was reported by 4.3% of students, with threats to hit parents reported by 4.6%. Although the proportion of students reporting threats to parents was similar to Browne and Hamilton (1998), physical aggression was much lower, likely reflecting the shorter recall period and lower number of behaviours covered by the adapted CTS-CP (Child-Parent). Item-level rates for aggression that had happened 'often' were also reported: with between 1% and 1.3% for physical aggression items; 1.7% for threats to hit; and between 4.6% and 10.4% for verbal aggression items. However, as rates of patterned aggression were only reported at the item-level (and not as composite variables), the study does not provide or discuss total proportions of respondents who used any form of physical or verbal aggression 'often'. This study aims to address this by providing a more focused analysis on patterned aggression towards parents.

It is clear from the reported cases of adolescent-to-parent abuse that this issue is relevant to the UK context and is potentially on the rise. However, rates do not appear to be as high as other forms of reported abuse – with 746,219 domestic abuse-related crimes (ONS, 2019a) and 227,530 child abuse offences (ONS, 2020) reported in England and Wales in the year ending March 2019. The importance of gender must also be taken into consideration. Where the school and population surveys tend to identify more gender neutrality, reported incidents overwhelmingly involve sons-to-mothers, a finding which could be partly due to the under-reporting of abuse by fathers,

although further investigation is required to draw firm conclusions. Lastly, as with other evidence on the prevalence and incidence of adolescent-to-parent abuse, definitional issues within police and service reports make it difficult to draw conclusions or make comparisons across studies. In the UK, this is partly due to the lack of a government-ratified definition, which means that organisations lack an agreed framework against which to define then record cases when they do occur (Home Office, 2015), making it difficult to estimate the size of the problem.

### **Evidence on high-risk populations**

Research based on clinical populations, such as young people with mental ill-health or neurodevelopmental conditions, can provide insight into groups where parent abuse may be more prevalent, while also indicating the upper estimates of prevalence. However, the figures provided in these studies vary considerably, with rates of 3.4% for 'parent battering' (defined as repeated physical aggression towards parents lasting at least three months), identified in 645 psychiatric in-patient records in France (Laurent & Derry, 1999), 12.2% for 'parent-directed physical aggression' (any therapist- and family-identified intentional physical aggression towards a parent) in a US sample of 606 2- to 14-year-old outpatients and their families receiving therapy for child conduct problems (Nock & Kazdin, 2002), and 17% for 'physical abuse' in a US study of 200 child inpatients and 100 adult outpatients (Charles, 1986). These figures, although variable, are not too dissimilar to those identified in the population and school survey studies. However, information on the severity of reported behaviour indicates that the nature of the abuse may be more severe, with one study finding that acts of physical aggression tended to happen 'pretty often' (five to six times per year) and were of moderate severity – meaning that they involved 'a somewhat extended episode, resulting in marked pain and minor injury such as bruises' (Nock & Kazdin, 2002, p. 199). This again highlights the difficulties in making cross-study comparisons of prevalence rates.

Young people on the 'edge of care' in the UK potentially represent a particularly high-risk group for parent abuse, with 54% of social worker assessments in a self-referred family support intervention identifying significant violence towards parents (Biehal, 2012). In this particular study, families were experiencing such difficulties that parents were requesting their child be accommodated, indicating the serious nature of the

abuse taking place. However, one of the main problems of clinical and service data is that it only represents those cases where parents are seeking help. This means that cases may not be representative of the wider population of young people experiencing these difficulties, or indeed, those more vulnerable families not in receipt of support. Lastly, in more recent years, studies have identified adoptive families as being at higher risk for adolescent-to-parent abuse, with 16% of 390 adoptive parents surveyed reporting behaviours fitting the definition of parent abuse (Selwyn & Meakings, 2016).

Although young people involved in the criminal justice system most likely represent a population also at higher risk of adolescent-to-parent abuse, prevalence studies have yet to be carried out among offender populations, despite the majority of parent abuse studies writing from a criminological perspective. Although the current study cannot address that particular knowledge gap, the intention is to gain more contextualised insight into parent abuse within the young offender population.

Lastly, there is also evidence that adolescent-to-mother violence may be more prevalent in populations with high levels of domestic abuse, with Livingston (1986) finding that 29% of single mothers reported physical violence from their child at some point in their lifetime, and that those with histories of partner domestic violence were particularly at risk. Two studies carried out in Australian communities with high levels of domestic violence (Edenborough et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2006) found that 50.9% of mothers reported having experienced 'child-to-mother violence' in their lifetime (Edenborough et al., 2008), with 21% of mothers reporting feeling fearful of a child using violent and threatening behaviour (Stewart et al., 2006). Although the study by Stewart and colleagues was unique in that it captured whether mothers were fearful of their children – a key characteristic of abusive relationships (Pain, 2012; Stark, 2007) – postal studies such as these typically suffer from significant self-selection bias, achieving particularly low response rates, as well as (at least in the case of Livingston, 1986) including cases that may have been single incidences rather than patterns of abuse. They should therefore be treated with caution.

## Parent and adolescent characteristics

### *Gender*

Most studies involving population, community, criminal justice and clinical/service samples report that mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to experience physical, verbal, emotional and psychological aggression from their adolescent children (for a review, see Simmons et al., 2018). In fact, within population studies, Ulman and Straus (2003) found that mothers had a 42% higher rate of being hit by their child than fathers over the previous 12-month period, with Agnew and Huguley (1989) finding mothers twice as likely. In clinical studies, the rate has been reported as four times higher for mothers than fathers (Fawzi et al., 2013), although this could potentially be due to mothers being the primary help-seeking parent in these cases. Evidence on severe forms of aggression is mixed, with Cornell and Gelles (1982) finding that rates of severe physical aggression were five times higher for mothers than fathers. Browne and Hamilton (1998) however, found that fathers experienced more severe physical aggression, while some community studies found that frequent physical and psychological aggression was directed equally towards both parents (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2013). As commented by Gallagher (2008), when severe physical aggression is measured, it tends to begin to resemble the clinical, police and service gender ratio of about 80% mothers to 20% fathers.

As regards sons and daughters, findings are mixed, with a number of studies finding no relationship between adolescent gender and physical, verbal, psychological or emotional aggression towards parents (e.g. Calvete, Orue, & Gamez-Guadix, 2015; Pagani et al., 2004, 2009; Paulson et al., 1990). In some studies, sons have been identified as the more likely physical aggressors (e.g. Calvete, Orue, Gamez-Guadix, & Bushman, 2015; Cornell & Gelles, 1982), while in others, it is daughters (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2013) – although not when physical aggression becomes frequent. In the majority of community studies, daughters appear to be more likely to use psychological and verbal forms of aggression than sons (e.g. Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013; Calvete, Orue, & Gamez-Guadix, 2015; Calvete et al., 2011), with only one study finding no difference (Ibabe, Jaureguizar, & Bentler, 2013). However, when comparing against parent reports, a number of studies have identified a pattern of daughters over-reporting and sons under-reporting their aggressive behaviour (Boxer, Gullan, &

Mahoney, 2009; Calvete, Orue, Gamez-Guadix, & Bushman, 2015; Pagani, Larocque, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2003) – a common limitation of survey studies of interpersonal violence which results in a gender ‘neutral’ picture (Gallagher, 2008). Other studies have argued that such a gendered pattern of parent/child reporter disagreement could be due to parents more readily recognising sons’ aggressive behaviour and minimising that of daughters (Charles, 1986; Pagani et al., 2003).

Clinical and criminal justice studies paint a more gendered picture, with physically aggressive adolescents typically being male (Charles, 1986; Laurent & Derry, 1999; Routt & Anderson, 2011) – although in some cases only when violence is directed towards mothers (Fawzi et al., 2013), or in some cases fathers (Boxer et al., 2009). Studies have also identified similar levels of physical aggression for sons and daughters (Biehal, 2012; Nock & Kazdin, 2002), while a more recent US study (Strom, Warner, Tichavsky, & Zahn, 2014) has identified a trend in increasing parent assault among female adolescents. However, the most typical presentation for clinical and criminal cases is adolescent sons abusing mothers (Condry & Miles, 2014; Gallagher, 2008; Moulds et al., 2019; Walsh & Krienert, 2007). Although, similar to community studies, clinical and criminal justice studies have identified daughters as more likely to use emotional and verbal aggression, and sons, physical aggression (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Nock & Kazdin, 2002), which could explain why sons are more likely to be represented in police and clinical statistics (Ibabe et al., 2013). What is clear is that the methodology and samples used by these studies determine, to a large extent, the victim/victimiser characteristics identified (Gallagher, 2008; Holt, 2012b).

## *Age*

Although parent victims of adolescent-to-parent abuse have articulated the early onset of aggressive behaviour from as young as five years old (Cottrell, 2001), with analyses of criminal justice data in the US highlighting its extension into adulthood (Walsh & Krienert, 2007), parent abuse typically begins in early to mid-adolescence, peaking between 14 and 16 years and declining after 18 (Calvete, Orue, Fernandez-Gonzalez, Chang, & Little, 2019; Holt, 2013; Simmons et al., 2018). Unfortunately, insights from older population studies are limited by their sampling. Some studies (e.g. Charles, 1986; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Moulds et al., 2019) have found an interaction between adolescent gender and age, with daughters’ violence typically peaking then declining at

a younger age and sons' violence beginning and ending later. This reflects the gender/age pattern identified within wider youth offending and within the generalised aggression literature (Holt, 2013; Simmons et al., 2018). It is also particularly the case with more 'serious' physical violence, identified as decreasing over time for daughters but increasing for sons (Cornell & Gelles, 1982).

### *Ethnicity and family demographics*

A recent systematic review of parent abuse studies (Simmons et al., 2018) has identified that 'the ethnic profile of CPA perpetrators internationally is largely unknown' (p. 39), although studies examining race and ethnicity have tended to find that 'White or northern European ethnicities are more likely to be the perpetrators and targets of CPA than people from other ethnic backgrounds in community, offender, and clinical samples' (p. 39). However, some criminal justice studies in the US and UK have identified an over-representation of Black and 'Afro-Caribbean' perpetrators relative to the population demographics (Condry & Miles, 2014; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Routt & Anderson, 2011), something Condry and Miles (2014) have argued could be due to their over-representation in crime statistics and criminal justice more broadly.

With respect to families' social class or *socioeconomic status* (SES), study findings are 'at best, weak and often inconclusive' (Simmons et al., 2018, p. 40). Variations in the definition and measurement of SES (e.g. parent education, income or occupational 'prestige'), combined with its strong association with known risk factors for parent abuse (e.g. family violence, substance misuse), make it difficult to identify its unique contribution to the dynamic.

Finally, as regards family structure, although several population studies (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Peek et al., 1985) found no relationship between family structure and physical aggression towards parents, a number of young offender and clinical/service studies identified that young people using violence towards parents were less likely to live with both biological parents and more likely to come from a home where parents had divorced or separated and where mothers were parenting alone (Kennedy, Edmonds, Dann, & Burnett, 2010; Pagani et al., 2003; Routt & Anderson, 2011). It may be that, as single parents, mothers may not have 'the familial, emotional or physical

support necessary to cope with their children's behavior, making them more inclined to seek external support' (Simmons et al., 2018, p. 40). However, findings from the *Crime Survey of England and Wales* (CSEW) (ONS, 2019a) have also highlighted that separated, divorced or single women are more likely to have experienced domestic violence – a known risk factor for parent abuse.

## **Summary**

The UK and international evidence on the prevalence and incidence of parent abuse is sparse and inconsistent, with the definitions, methodologies and samples used determining the rates obtained and the victim/victimiser characteristics identified. However, in the general population, an estimate of between 3 and 5% for 'more serious CPV' seems realistic (Gallagher, 2008, p. 89), with Gallagher (2008) rightly pointing out that although such a figure is indicative of a 'significant social problem' (p. 89), it is not more common than other forms of family violence such as child abuse or domestic violence. Despite this, evidence from police, clinical and service data suggest that this is a harmful problem currently being experienced by a large number of families in the UK, Europe and elsewhere and, as such, requires further attention. Although families experiencing this issue come from a variety of backgrounds, victim/victimiser profiles suggest it is predominately experienced by mothers from their adolescent children. Particularly in the UK context, there is a lack of data on patterned and non-physical forms of aggression. This study aims to complement the literature by gathering survey data that considers both the frequency and form of abuse, as well as in depth qualitative data to provide contextual insight.

## **Theoretical and conceptual framework**

### **Introduction**

No one theoretical perspective is adequate to explain adolescent-to-parent abuse in its entirety, so this research employs a diverse framework for analysis that draws upon feminist, childhood, family violence, trauma, stress, communication, power and developmental theories. These theories are structured within an ecological model to highlight the interactions between the various systems within which children and adolescents develop, exist and construct meaning. This integrated approach to understanding parent abuse draws on critical realist and post-positivist philosophy, recognising that although there is an external 'reality' to the phenomenon of parent abuse, our understandings of that reality are shaped through the methods we use to access it, as well as the constructions and meaning-making of those involved (Bhaskar, 1975; Clark, Lissel, & Davis, 2008). In this research, this refers to the meaning-making of those young people taking part in the study, in addition to my meaning-making, as the researcher. This section of the literature review will provide an overview of the theoretical framework for the study and identify the gaps in current explanations for adolescent-to-parent abuse.

As outlined below, the roots of parent abuse research lie within the fields of family violence, clinical psychology, and deviancy, and focus on the psychopathology, peer and family factors characteristic of adolescents instigating abuse (e.g. Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Charles, 1986; Kratcoski, 1985). Currently, the dominant research paradigm focuses on the investigation of individual and family-level risk factors which can 'predict' such abuse, as well as a range of psychological theories on cognition and attachment (e.g. Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2015; Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013; Calvete, Orue, Gamez-Guadix, & Bushman, 2015). Although such research is useful in highlighting those factors that may make parent abuse more likely, they often do so at the neglect of more contextualised explanations involving relational processes. Further, even where contextualised explanations do exist (e.g. Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Harbin & Madden, 1979), they are rarely centred around young people's experiences and constructions of using violence and abuse at home, omitting a large piece of the puzzle regarding their motivations, thoughts, feelings and perceptions. This research

addresses that gap by exploring young people's in-depth interview accounts of violence and abuse towards parents.

### **Family violence, family therapy and trauma**

Parent abuse literature coming out of the family therapy and domestic or family violence fields places greater emphasis on trauma, the relationships between power, control and gender, the role of witnessing domestic violence and abuse, and the victim/victimiser duality. Indeed, domestic abuse and child maltreatment have been identified as the most significant risks for adolescent-to-parent abuse (Simmons et al., 2018); unsurprising given that both have been implicated in a range of poor developmental outcomes for children (Dye, 2018; Hester, Pearson, Harwin, & Abrahams, 2007; Kar, 2019). Conceptualisations of the issue have not been static however, with parent abuse originally framed as a form of family violence explained through the absence of parental authority (Harbin & Madden, 1979), rather than as a response to child or domestic abuse. Later family violence theorists used multi-theory ecological models to explain how parent abuse resulted from *combinations* of factors at the level of the child, family, and wider social and cultural environments, with child victimisation and gender socialisation being central themes (Cottrell & Monk, 2004). The framing of parent abuse or 'son-to-mother abuse' as an extension of domestic abuse – a 'cycle of violence' – has also been prominent, with adolescent sons theorised as filling the 'power vacuum' left by abusive fathers (for a discussion, see Baker, 2012). More recently however, parent abuse has been conceptualised as a possible trauma response to victimisation experiences in childhood and adolescence (Bonnick, 2019; Papamichail & Bates, 2020; Thorley & Coates, 2020), focusing less on same sex theories of social learning.

Similar to Cottrell and Monk (2004) this study draws on a range of theories to conceptualise and explain adolescent-to-parent abuse, including those relating to young people's victimisation experiences. This includes explanations drawing on *developmental traumatology*, where children's experiences of victimisation are understood as shaping their neurological development – which, in turn, can have serious deleterious consequences on their emotional, behavioural, cognitive and social development (Berthelot et al., 2014; De Bellis & Zisk, 2014; Maughan & Cicchetti, 2002; Shonkoff et al., 2012). Social learning theory and coping theories are also applied,

exploring violence as an adaptive response to parental aggression (Brezina, 1999). However, in particular, this study seeks to respond to the critique by Simmons and colleagues (2018) that although much research has been done into the relationship between current and historical family abuse and adolescent-to-parent abuse, few studies have explored the *mechanisms* that may be involved. This study achieves this through an analysis of processes.

A number of family violence studies also conceptualise violence as a non-linear phenomenon, drawing upon family systems (Downey, 1997; Eckstein, 2004) and communications theories (Eckstein, 2004), whilst attempting to avoid the problematisation of parents and their children. This research draws upon such theories, conceptualising the family as a system in which a complex and dynamic interplay of interactions and power differentials exists, all occurring within the context of adolescent development.

This research moves away from a discourse of 'delinquency' and instead places parent abuse within a family violence framework, emphasising it as a social issue requiring support rather than a 'deviancy' to be punished. Unfortunately, although the use of a child welfare framework would centre children's rights and well-being, it may serve to further victimise parents and remove young people's agency in taking responsibility for the abuse. Placing it within a family violence framework, however, enables the reciprocity of the parent-child relationship and the victim/victimiser duality of both parents and children to be recognised. This duality cannot be accommodated so readily within a youth justice framework where there is a dominant binary discourse of victims and perpetrators (Hunter, Nixon, & Parr, 2010). Lastly, although placing parent abuse within the frame of domestic violence would recognise its gendered power relations, it would not fit well in terms of the responses available to address it (i.e. separation, labelling young people as abuse 'perpetrators'), nor could it accommodate the different power dynamics involved (i.e. of a parent having greater financial resources, legal rights, than their child). Therefore, it is positioned in terms of family violence rather than domestic violence, although parallels with domestic violence and abuse are explored.

## **Feminist theory**

This research positions parent abuse within a feminist framework as a gendered form of violence, helping to address the concern of researchers that 'Within the UK...there has been a failure by both policy makers and academics to recognise the gendered dimensions of this form of family violence' (Hunter & Nixon, 2012, p. 213). That is not to say that only sons perpetrate abuse against mothers, but that in framing parent abuse as gendered, we analyse from a position of understanding that male and female experiences and meanings of victimisation and perpetration are different, power within the family is gendered, and thus, relationships between children and their parents are shaped by gender (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Oakley, 1994; Walters, 2011). As this study focuses on young people's accounts, this could mean that sons who, as they enter late adolescence have greater physical power than their mothers, may fail to see aggressive actions as being threatening or violent, whereas a mother might experience them as such. On the other hand, as research has found that parents often have a greater tolerance of aggressive behaviour from their daughters than their sons (Charles, 1986; Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2010), female participants may reflect this by failing to recognise their actions as 'real' violence. Including gender in any analysis of violence is important, as men and women use violence in different ways and have different motivations for doing so (Hester, 2009). All of these factors impact on how the question 'How do adolescents understand, explain, and experience adolescent-to-parent abuse?' is answered.

The feminist exploration of gender 'roles' within the home, in terms of the gendering of parents (Holt, 2013) and of children (Baker, 2012), is an important concept for understanding parent abuse and the intersection of power, gender and violence within families (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Hearn, 1998). Feminist paradigms have emphasised the unequal division of domestic responsibilities involving household chores and child-rearing (Renzetti & Curran, 1999), with mothers primarily responsible for limit-setting and behavioural control (Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2010). It has been argued that this role of 'primary parenting agent' makes mothers the prime target of abusive behaviours from their children, whose increasing desire for independence clashes with the parental controls imposed on them (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cottrell, 2001; Ulman & Straus, 2003). In several studies, such 'mother-abuse' has been attributed in part to absent fathers (Edenborough et al., 2008), with absence argued as not only making mothers the only available targets for abuse, but also making them

targets for blame regarding paternal absence (Haw, 2010). Further, mothers who have separated from violent partners can often struggle to re-establish their power in the home, making them vulnerable to abuse from their children (Holt, 2013). The domestic violence literature is particularly helpful here, highlighting the damage domestic violence can do to the mother-child bond and mother-child communication (Humphreys, Mullender, Thiara, & Skamballis, 2006; Radford & Hester, 2006).

Although social learning theories around 'cycles of violence' may also be useful in understanding how some women experiencing domestic violence from their partners may also go on to suffer violence and abuse from their sons (Boxer et al., 2009; Ibabe et al., 2013), researchers such as Baker (2012) have argued that such theories are overly deterministic and risk aligning being a boy with being a potential mother-abuser, whilst neglecting more challenging explanations of power relations between men, women and children (Hearn, 1996; Kelly, 1994).

Feminist explanations of violence, such as Stark's (2007) exploration of coercive control (as opposed to just the 'physical incident model') and Hester and Westmarland's (2005) focus on patterns of abuse, have laid the foundations for the development of a multidimensional definition of parent abuse which recognises the use of physical, emotional, psychological, financial and (in rare cases) sexual violence to exert power and control over a parent. The conceptualisation of patterns of abuse is particularly useful, helping to draw a distinction between an ongoing abusive relationship involving power, control and fear, and single incidences of aggression that may reflect the normal course of adolescent development. As already highlighted, this is one of the common limitations of survey studies attempting to capture prevalence and profile data on such abuse. Furthermore, feminist discourse around domestic violence and abuse has been helpful in conceptualising violence in the home as shaping all family interactions (Holt, 2016a; Katz, 2015) and in furthering our understanding of its potential impact (Barter & McCarry, 2013; Hester, 2009; Johnson, 1995; Lombard & McMillan, 2013; Stark, 2007).

Finally, positioning this research within a feminist framework is also important due to the structural victimisation of mothers through the use of Parenting Orders in the UK – a legal 'remedy' that punishes (typically mothers) for the abuse suffered at the hands of their children (Holt, 2009, 2016a). Put plainly, this is a legal intervention that reflects

society's understanding of mothers as being complicit in their own victimisation. A trend that can also be seen in the 'mother blaming' that occurs within the context of mothering through domestic violence (Radford & Hester, 2006).

### *Reconciling feminism and the politics of childhood*

Historically, the relationship between feminism and childhood studies has not been straightforward, with some childhood theorists commenting that 'feminism is an "adultist" enterprise, rendering children largely absent from the social world and sociological consideration except as objects of socialisation' (Rosen & Twamley, 2018a, p. 4), and some feminist researchers arguing that the prioritisation of children and child welfare can often come at the expense of women (Rosen & Twamley, 2018a). Indeed, adolescent-to-parent abuse and its legal and social 'remedies' are good examples of this, often involving the 'double victimisation' of women as 'responsible' mothers (Holt, 2009, 2016a). However, in recent years, there has been a growing trend of combining women's and children's studies and their associated politics in research examining the various intersections of gender and generation (e.g. Rosen & Twamley, 2018b). Like these, this study is concerned with the 'overriding importance of achieving social justice for women and children' (Rosen & Twamley, 2018b, p. x) and, although this research is *primarily* concerned with voicing and understanding the experiences and perspectives of young people, its analyses of accounts will also be sensitive to the plight of mothers, who represent the most likely victims of this form of family violence (Simmons et al., 2018). Indeed, feminist epistemologies and methodologies – through their recognition of the situatedness of knowledge and the power imbalances between adults and children (Spyrou, 2018) – have been recognised as having 'provided childhood studies with its *raison d'être* by making its very object of enquiry, the child, central to its knowledge production' (Spyrou, 2018, p. 23). This is reflected in the current study through the use of in-depth interviews with young people. As stated by Nolas and colleagues (2018): 'Taking children's and young people's perspectives into account can help develop a more nuanced analysis of emotional experiences of family violence that takes us beyond dichotomies of perpetrators and victims, guilt and blame' (pp. 229-230).

## *Intersectionality*

The concept of intersectionality is used in this research to address an important issue concerning the experience of violence and abuse towards parents – that individuals experiencing it (both as victims and victimisers) may do so differently according to their age, gender, social class, ethnicity, dis/ability, and various other social identities (Holt & Shon, 2018). As a 'lens to investigate complexity' (Tang, 2020, p. 3), intersectionality can help us to tease out how the interactions between these identities may result in unique experiences and understandings for those involved. For example, the way in which a single mother parenting through domestic abuse may experience adolescent-to-parent abuse is likely to differ significantly to a father who has a physical or neurocognitive disability. Further, these identities may impact not only parents' and young people's experiences of abuse but also societies' responses to it, important when considering developments in policy and practice.

## **Childhood theory**

Parent abuse, with its challenge to typical parent-child constructions involving 'a passive and powerless "vulnerable child" and an active and powerful "god-like parent"' (Holt, 2013, p. 81), necessitates an exploration of the social constructions of childhood and adolescence, children's duality as victims and victimisers, as dependent yet independent, individual yet linked, and as active, meaning-producing social agents. Such an approach is in keeping with the philosophy of childhood and youth studies (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998; James & Prout, 1990) which argues that 'children are seen and must be seen as active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes' (James & Prout, 1990, p. 8). These are vital concepts in the exploration of parent abuse as they recognise young people's capacity not only to exert influence over their own lives but also to shape the physical and relational environments and experiences of those around them.

Currently, our understanding of adolescent-to-parent abuse is adult-centred, constructed through a discourse among researchers, parents and practitioners (Holt, 2011; Hunter et al., 2010), with only one small UK-based study (Papamichail & Bates, 2020) centred on the voices of young people. This research will add to this literature

through a comprehensive examination of young people's perspectives and experiences, prioritising the voices of 14- to 18-year-olds in the UK. This is not to say that notions of parenthood (and particularly motherhood) are not explored, but instead they are investigated through the meaning-making of adolescents, rather than the meaning-making of parents. Defining children as 'meaning-producing' represents the tradition of interpretive social research (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2014) and is reflected in this study through the use of in-depth interviews with young people. However, as with research carried out with adult perpetrators of domestic abuse, young people responsible for parent abuse may minimise or deny their behaviour, making it difficult to access the true extent of the problem, and potentially contributing to a victim-blaming discourse. Hopefully, encouraging interviewees to explore alternative perspectives to their own during interviews will have encouraged them to reflect on their use of violence and its impacts, whilst minimising victim-blaming.

Children's agency has been explored previously within the context of domestic abuse research (e.g. Katz, 2015; Överlien & Hydén, 2009), where children and adolescents have been identified as 'active resisters' who oppose violence. However, such theories typically conceptualise children as victims and supporters of other victims (usually mothers), leaving a gap in understanding around those children whose 'active resistance' takes the form of violent or abusive behaviour – not only towards perpetrators of domestic abuse (usually fathers) but also towards mothers who are the victims of it. As regards the parent abuse literature, although there is some indication that children exposed to domestic violence – in particular, those who experience 'polyvictimisation' (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007) – are more likely to engage in abusive behaviour towards their parents (e.g. Boxer et al., 2009; Ibabe et al., 2013), an in-depth investigation into the underlying processes has yet to be carried out (Simmons et al., 2018). This research enables an exploration of young people's conceptualisation of their agency within the family and specifically in relation to being both victims and victimisers.

Finally, notions of children's independence and dependence is also highly relevant to this research, being a unique characteristic of the phenomenon of parent abuse, especially in relation to the role of power in abuse. Further, as adolescence is conceptualised (at least in Western countries) as a developmental period characterised by developing capacities, striving for greater personal autonomy, and resultant

changes in power (Coleman, 2011; Kuczynski, 2003), discussions around independence and the potential for conflict when it is curtailed, are particularly salient. In particular, the concept of young people's spatiality – their (physical and virtual) space, place and movement – is an important area of exploration and recognised as highly relevant to the study of children and children's geographies (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; James, Jencks, & Prout, 1998).

### **Conflict perspective**

Despite recognising the gendered nature of parent abuse, with its roots in feminist theory, the paradigm of 'family conflict' – typically seen as a conflicting paradigm to gender-based violence (Holt, 2016a) – is drawn upon when conceptualising the problem. Conflict theory is useful in that it explores the negotiation of power within the family – an important concept given the conceptualisation of parent abuse as an inversion of the typical hierarchy of power within the home and of adolescence as a period characterised by changes in social power. Family conflict also emphasises the importance of communication patterns in the family, an issue highlighted as significant in the onset and maintenance of abuse (Eckstein, 2004). Further, as numerous studies have identified the importance of parenting styles and behaviours – including aspects relating to control, warmth, communication, punishment, and monitoring (see Simmons et al., 2018 for a review) – as well as young people's expectations around their access to privileges and social freedoms (e.g. Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013; Kethineni, 2004), this study reflects on the interactions between these parent and adolescent behaviours and expectations and the roles they may play in the parent abuse dynamic.

In this research, the conflict perspective is reflected through the use of an adapted version of the CTS (Straus, 1990), a tool that provides insight into the forms and frequency of aggressive behaviour towards parents. However, the CTS has been widely criticised for its inability to contextualise aggressive behaviours (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; 2004), which often results in findings reflecting a gender 'neutral' picture of violence between (historically) intimate partners (Hamby, 2014). The use of in-depth interviews is a way to gather such vital contextual information, whilst also providing an opportunity to interrogate the CTS results.

## Theories of stress and coping

Stress theory has been applied across a diverse range of social research, including studies in the fields of criminology (e.g. Felson, Osgood, Horney, Wiernik, & Wiemik, 2012), clinical psychology (e.g. Schneiderman, Ironson, & Siegel, 2005), child maltreatment (e.g. Wu & Xu, 2020) and family violence (e.g. Farrington, 1986). Although family stresses and strains have been implicated in adolescent-to-parent abuse (Cottrell, 2001; Harbin & Madden, 1979), stress theories have not been particularly prominent in the parent abuse literature. Further, where they have been applied (e.g. Agnew & Huguley, 1989), they have not taken a transactional approach to understanding stress, whereby experiences of stress are not uniform but involve a 'transaction' between the demands or environmental 'stressors' and the personal 'resources' available to cope with them (Hammer & Marting, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984b). Such an understanding can more readily explain why young people experiencing the same types of stressor (e.g. family violence, parental drug use, school difficulties) may respond and 'cope' in different (and sometimes violent) ways.

A stress and coping framework is applied in this study in recognition of adolescence as a period characterised by increasing stresses and strains (Coleman, 2011), that family violence – the most common explanation for adolescent-to-parent abuse – can be conceptualised as a 'toxic' stressor with enduring developmental implications (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014; Franke, 2014), and that young people's violence can be conceptualised as a harmful coping mechanism in the absence of healthy, positive alternatives (Strasburg, 1978).

## Applying an ecological framework

Nested ecological systems theory or the 'ecology of human development' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) comes from the tradition of developmental psychology, whereby the child's individual characteristics (such as age, sex and psychology) are situated within (and interact with) nested ecological 'systems' at the level of the family (microsystem), community (exosystem), and culture (macrosystem). Thus, how the individual or 'ontogenic' factors interact with these systems (and how these systems interact with one another) determines the developmental path an individual takes. One of the strengths of applying an ecological model is in its consideration of reciprocal

interactions (Cottrell & Monk, 2004), which could shed light on how young people, parents, their community, and wider cultural factors all interact to shape the development of parent abuse. Further, it enables the psychological, sociological, and feminist perspectives to be combined in one explanatory framework (Cottrell & Monk, 2004).

The most influential applications of this theory were by Jay Belsky (1980), who used the framework to integrate a variety of 'divergent etiological viewpoints' (Belsky, 1980, p. 320) into a coherent social-psychological account of child maltreatment and by Lori Heise (1998), who applied it to the issue of gender-based violence. Similar to Belsky, Heise used the framework as a heuristic tool to organise existing predictive factors of gender-based violence and integrate research on all types of physical and sexual violence towards women. These applications are particularly relevant to adolescent-to-parent abuse given it also involves a multitude of theories at all levels of the social ecology. Indeed, within the parent abuse literature, ecological frameworks have been effectively utilised as an explanatory framework (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Murphy-Edwards, 2012) as well as a means of structuring systematic reviews (Hong, Kral, Espelage, & Allen-Meares, 2012; Simmons et al., 2018). In their qualitative exploration, Cottrell and Monk (2004) combined theories relating to gender inequality and media violence (macrosystem); poverty, family stress and peer influence (exosystem); parenting styles and conflict (microsystem); and attachment, mental health, victimisation and drug use (ontogeny), to create a nested ecological theory of parent abuse. Likewise, this study uses an ecological framework to integrate a variety of (sometimes divergent) theoretical perspectives, drawing on feminist, childhood, family systems, communication, stress, conflict, and family violence and trauma theories. However, unlike Cottrell and Monk's (2004) model, which seemed to draw more heavily on their parent and practitioner accounts, this study focuses solely on young people's perspectives and experiences.

The developmental perspective is also useful in conceptualising change over the life course, and how change (both towards or away from abusive behaviour) can occur in an individual over time, according to the social relationships, life events, individual capacities, and social histories they inhabit or experience. An example specific to parent abuse is the impact of direct victimisation (e.g. child abuse), indirect victimisation (witnessing domestic violence), and polyvictimisation on the

development of abusive behaviours towards parents, and how gender and dependency may shape the nature of such abuse – ideas prominent in developmental victimology (Finkelhor, 2007 in Davis, Lurigio, & Herman, 2007). Such perspectives allow for the inclusion of age and child development in any analysis of family power relations.

### *Reconciling developmental psychology and childhood studies*

However, another tension to be reconciled in this research is that between childhood studies and developmental psychology. Childhood studies was, after all, a reaction against and challenge to the biological and psychological determinism of developmental psychology and its lack of recognition that ‘competence was not solely an adult characteristic achieved with biological and cognitive maturity’ (Montgomery & Tatlow-Golden, 2018, p. 9), but instead, was fluid and context-dependent. Criticisms of developmental psychology from the childhood perspective included its ethnocentricity – being mainly based on positivist research involving middle-class children in Western countries (Montgomery & Tatlow-Golden, 2018) – and its universalism with regards to the idea of an ‘ideal’ and ‘normal’ childhood trajectory – an idea seen as denying diversity while emphasising ‘deficiencies’ or ‘deviances’ from the norm (Montgomery & Tatlow-Golden, 2018).

Montgomery and Tatlow-Golden (2018) have argued that the two perspectives can be reconciled, as both developmental psychology and childhood studies have ‘at their centre, a desire to understand children and young people’s internal and external worlds’ (p. 7). Furthermore, concepts within psychology, such as self-esteem, attachment, and social competence, have been usefully applied in the service of improving the welfare of children and young people. Montgomery and Tatlow-Golden (2018) also argue that even though childhood is in a sense socially constructed, it is also ‘a distinct stage in the human life cycle and the majority of children do undergo recognisable patterns of physical and psychological development and growth’ (p. 9). This is important to this study’s conceptualisation of adolescent-to-parent abuse, which understands the onset and maintenance of abuse as being influenced by developmental pathways of the physical, social and psychological.

With his nested ecological theory of human development, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) sought to reconcile the individual with the environmental and cultural, creating a theory that recognised the wide-ranging impact of culture, socialisation and cultural norms on young people's development. His theory also emphasised the *active* role the individual has in his/her own development – challenging the previous critique by childhood studies theorists of the passivity of children within developmental psychology. Thus, combining an ecological framework with a young-person-centred methodology provides a conceptual bridge between these two divergent perspectives.

## **The impact of parent abuse**

### **Introduction**

The impacts of adolescent-to-parent abuse are wide ranging, including the destruction of property and the home, fear from the threats of violence, and injuries from actual physical violence (Condry & Miles, 2014; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Holt, 2011; Selwyn & Meakings, 2016; Walsh & Krienert, 2007). For parents, the emotional impact can include prolonged feelings of distress, fear and resentment (e.g. Edenborough et al., 2008; Jackson, 2003) and for children, alienation and distress (Kennedy et al., 2010), with shame being a significant factor for both (Bobic, 2002; Jackson, 2003).

However, compared to studies investigating prevalence/incidence and individual/family risk factors, research investigating the consequences and impact of parent abuse is scant, with the few studies there are focusing mainly on the impacts on parents rather than children. This means there is little understanding of the short- and long-term effects on adolescents. This has much to do with the methodologies employed within parent abuse research which, as already highlighted, prioritise the views and experiences of parents and practitioners over children and young people. This study addresses that gap by exploring young people's perceptions of the impact of their violent and abusive behaviour towards parents. This section outlines what is currently known about the impact of parent abuse on families' physical, mental and material well-being, while also highlighting the gaps in knowledge.

## **Impact on parents**

The consequences of parent abuse for parents themselves are not just physical or emotional, but also financial, social and legal. Impacts can be immediate and short-lived, or gradual and long-lasting, with the consequences of abuse determined by the characteristics of parents, children, and the family environment – as well as the supports made available. Unlike studies on prevalence, detailed research into the consequences of abuse tend to be limited to clinical and service studies of parents (mainly mothers) who have sought help for the issue, generating little understanding on the impact of abuse on parents in the general population.

### *Physical impacts*

Parents can experience a wide range of short- and longer-term injuries as a result of physical violence from their adolescent children, from more minor (and more common) injuries such as cuts, grazes and bruises, to more severe (and less common) injuries, including broken bones, deep cuts, burns, and wounds from weapons or household objects. Insight into the nature of these injuries typically comes from mothers participating in parent abuse programmes (e.g. Haw, 2010) or in community studies (e.g. Cottrell & Monk, 2004). It is also provided by analyses of police reports (Condry & Miles, 2014; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Walsh & Krienert, 2007), clinical/service assessments and case files (Biehal, 2012; Charles, 1986; Nock & Kazdin, 2002), and mothers posting on online message boards (Holt, 2011). To date, no studies have used young people's accounts of their violence to explore the physical harm caused to parents, a gap this study addresses.

Although some community surveys of high-risk populations have suggested that violence towards parents frequently results in injury (Livingston, 1986), evidence from the majority of population (Agnew & Huguley, 1989), clinical (Nock & Kazdin, 2002) and police report studies (Condry & Miles, 2014), indicate that serious parental injuries as a result of adolescent violence are rare and that, in most cases, injuries involve minor cuts and bruises. However, although such injuries would only have short-term physical implications, the psychological, emotional and relationship impacts of such violence have been argued as being more damaging to parents (Holt, 2011), extending well beyond that of the physical injuries themselves (Agnew & Huguley, 1989).

## *Impacts on mental health and emotional well-being*

Evidence on the emotional and mental health consequences of parent abuse for parents has typically come from interviews and focus groups with mothers within small community studies and evaluations of parent abuse interventions, in particular from Australia, the US, and Canada (e.g. Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Eckstein, 2004; Edenborough et al., 2008; Haw, 2010; Jackson, 2003; Paterson et al., 2002). Insights from these studies have been important in highlighting the damaging emotional impacts parent abuse can have on (particularly) mothers experiencing abuse, including short- and long-term feelings of stress, anxiety, depression (Cottrell, 2001; Edenborough et al., 2008; Parentline Plus, 2010; Paterson et al., 2002) and, in some cases, suicidal thoughts (Holt, 2011), particularly with prolonged experiences of abuse (Haw, 2010; Holt, 2009). Further, these impacts have sometimes been reported as continuing long after the abuse itself has stopped (Cottrell, 2001; Eckstein, 2004; Paterson et al., 2002).

Such poor mental health outcomes appear to be the result of extended periods of feeling helpless, hopeless, desperate and ashamed (Eckstein, 2004; Holt, 2011; Parentline Plus, 2010; Tew & Nixon, 2010), as well as fearful of physical violence and intimidation towards themselves and younger children (Haw, 2010; Holt, 2009, 2011; Paterson et al., 2002). Fear of physical violence has been described by mothers as becoming part of their everyday mothering experience (Edenborough et al., 2008; Jackson, 2003), often contributing to a sense of unpredictability and 'walking on eggshells' (Haw, 2010, p. 82). The fear of violence is also typically highly gendered, often involving sons who are physically more powerful than their mothers (Edenborough et al., 2008; Holt, 2011; Jackson, 2003; Tew & Nixon, 2010).

Ongoing stress and anxiety has been found to result in fatigue and other physiological problems, or the worsening of pre-existing conditions (Cottrell, 2001; Paterson et al., 2002), with parents describing ongoing abuse as 'emotionally exhausting' (Haw, 2010, p. 82). Further, as stress has been found to have a detrimental impact on parental 'competence' (Garaigordobil & Machimbarrena, 2017; Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012), the stress and lack of confidence resulting from parent abuse can, in turn, make parents more vulnerable to it, in a cycle that compounds the abuse (Holt, 2009).

Researchers exploring the impact of adolescent-to-parent abuse highlight the closeness of the parent-child bond as being particularly relevant for its long-term emotional impact. As Gelles and Straus (1979) state: 'Love, paradoxically, gives the power to hurt. So, the degree of distress felt in conflicts with other family members is likely to be much greater than if the same issue were to arise in relation to someone outside the family' (p. 35). Such views are confirmed in interviews with mothers, where a reversal of the caring bonds seen as typifying the mother-child relationship gives rise to extreme levels of distress – even more so than the distress surrounding partner violence (Jackson, 2003). Also, feelings of anger, hurt and betrayal described by some mothers experiencing abuse (Holt, 2011; Williams et al., 2017) have been reported as producing inner conflict within the mothering role and expectations around feelings of unconditional love (Jackson, 2003; Stewart, Burns, & Leonard, 2007). Indeed, feelings of guilt associated with being a 'failed parent' – in cases where children are removed from the family home, where there are contexts of domestic violence, or where parents have responded with their own violence – are common in the accounts of mothers experiencing the issue (Cottrell, 2001; Holt, 2011; Selwyn & Meakings, 2016; Williams et al., 2017). This is something that again highlights the uniqueness of the parent abuse dynamic in relation to other forms of family abuse.

Although the qualitative evidence provides detailed insight into mothers' feelings around their experiences of abuse, what do we really know about young people's understanding of the emotional impact of the violence and abuse they are using? As yet, no studies have sought to answer this question, meaning there is no way of knowing whether such violent and abusive behaviour is being used in the knowledge of its harmful consequences, or in ignorance of it. This study fills this gap in knowledge through young people's in-depth interview accounts.

### *Impacts on space and freedom of movement*

Evidence from interviews with mothers reveals that abuse can often limit their personal space, agency, and their freedom of movement. To avoid conflict or safeguard themselves against violence and abuse, mothers have described how they lock themselves in rooms at night (Jackson, 2003; Paterson et al., 2002) or in hiding places such as wardrobes or bathrooms (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Haw, 2010; Stewart et al., 2007), how they avoid communal spaces in the home (Paterson et al., 2002) and

sometimes avoid the home entirely. Parents scared of abusive behaviour can even avoid being alone with their children, whilst also needing to stay in the home to prevent damage to belongings and risky behaviour with unwanted visitors (Jackson, 2003).

Mothers have also reported their movements being highly constrained, avoiding public spaces for fear of embarrassment, shame, and public scrutiny (Williams et al., 2017) and being prevented (through obstructive behaviour) from going out and socialising (Haw, 2010; Stewart et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2017). This can impact significantly on their ability to maintain supportive friendships. Abuse can also include forced movement and action, with mothers reporting being made to drive their children to places (Cottrell & Monk, 2004) and being manipulated (through threats to cut contact, for example) into undesirable actions or concessions (Stewart et al., 2007) – highlighting the limiting of parental agency that can take place as a result of the dynamic.

### *Financial, material and legal impacts*

Adolescent-to-parent abuse can also have significant financial, material and legal implications for parents, such as by having to repair damage to the home or belongings, giving into demands for money, and paying fines for damages, non-attendance at school, and for breaching court orders (Bonnick, 2019; Condry & Miles, 2012; Holt, 2009; Holt & Retford, 2013; Nixon, 2012).

An analysis of police reports of parent abuse in the UK found that around a quarter of reported cases involved criminal damage to the home (Condry & Miles, 2014). Mothers and practitioners in a number of community, youth justice, and service studies in Australia, Spain, the US, UK and Canada (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Eckstein, 2004; Edenborough et al., 2008; Holt, 2009; Jackson, 2003; Paterson et al., 2002; Stewart et al., 2007) gave specific examples of the theft or destruction of the family car, demanding or stealing money, destruction of property in the home – including punching holes in walls – destroying personal items, and the tearing or theft of clothes. Such behaviour was also reflected in an analysis of police reports in the US (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988), a study of psychiatric inpatient records in France (Laurent & Derry, 1999), and in the UK, through in-depth interviews with parents receiving social

work support, with descriptions of adolescents 'smashing up the house' and 'kicking in the door' (Biehal, 2012, p. 253). Besides the financial implications of such destructive and abusive behaviour, parents are hurt by the destruction of personal items and the knowledge that their child has deliberately destroyed something meaningful to them in order to hurt them (Haw, 2010).

As regards the legal implications of abuse, mothers have reported getting into trouble with the police and social care as a result of false accusations of child abuse (Eckstein, 2004) or by using force in self-defence (Selwyn & Meakings, 2016). They can be threatened with prosecution for child abandonment in cases where they refuse violent adolescents' entry back into the family home (Holt & Retford, 2013). They can also end up being evicted from their homes due to criminal damage (Hunter et al., 2010) and, through Parenting Orders, may have to take part in parenting programmes (Holt, 2009) – which demands time away from work (Cottrell, 2001), as well as having emotional impacts (Condry & Miles, 2012). Indeed, mothers have also reported their capacity to maintain work has been affected, with the emotional and physical toll of abuse impacting the energy and concentration required (Cottrell, 2001) and some mothers even leaving their jobs to increase their presence in their children's lives (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014). Although such impacts are primarily felt by mothers, they also have implications for young people and their siblings, with families having fewer resources and less stability in terms of housing and school moves.

### **Consequences for children and young people**

Parent abuse can also be highly detrimental to those young people using violence and abuse, having physical, emotional, educational, legal and relationship implications. However, insights into these impacts are limited, with the focus mainly on outcomes for parents. Most of the evidence that does exist is cross-sectional in nature, meaning that although a range of studies indicate that those young people using violence and abuse also demonstrate various other challenges, such as peer violence and offending, educational difficulties, mental health and substance misuse problems (e.g. Biehal, 2012; Charles, 1986; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Haw, 2010; Jackson, 2003), it is not clear whether these negative outcomes are the result of parent abuse or are risk factors for it. Since the evidence is so limited, there are few, if any, insights into how individual factors, such as age or gender, may affect the

consequences experienced. This study addresses these gaps in understanding by talking to young people about the contexts and consequences surrounding their violence and abuse at home.

### *Physical impacts*

Evidence on young people's injuries from parent abuse are limited to qualitative data from parents and practitioners involved in community and service studies, elicited through a combination of focus groups, interviews and therapeutic work. The lack of quantitative evidence limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to the populations from which they are drawn or can be used to confidently predict negative outcomes. However, it does provide more nuanced data in terms of the contexts within which physical harm to children and young people occurs.

Qualitative evidence highlights three main mechanisms through which young people's physical well-being can be affected by the parent abuse dynamic: as a result of injuries gained during aggressive episodes – either by hitting parents, walls or doors, or throwing objects (Condry & Miles, 2012; Edenborough et al., 2008; Holt & Retford, 2013; Micucci, 1995); by parents responding with violent behaviour in retaliation, punishment, self-defence, or for restraint (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014; Eckstein, 2004; Holt, 2011; Micucci, 1995); or by the increased use of risky or self-destructive behaviour by young people, such as unsafe sexual behaviour, self-harm, staying out late with anti-social or unsafe peers, running away, or substance misuse (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014; Haw, 2010). However, due to the absence of young people's voices in the literature, there is little evidence of the specific physical harms caused by such behaviour. Where young people's voices have been captured, they have highlighted contradictions between parent and adolescent accounts, with parents describing their use of physical punishment as a *response* to abuse from their adolescent children and those same children describing their own use of physical violence as a *response* to such physical forms of punishment from parents (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014), emphasising the importance of representing multiple perspectives in the research.

With regards to risky and self-destructive behaviour, practitioners have identified that, particularly for girls (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014), such behaviour can often be used as a

means of hurting or controlling parents (Haw, 2010), with self-destructive tactics such as refusing medication used to enforce parental compliance. This often took place within a wider context of substance misuse, self-harm and running away. Running away and the homelessness that can result has been highlighted in various studies involving parents and practitioners (Coogan, 2013; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Paterson et al., 2002; Sheehan, 1997b) and can clearly have negative implications for young people, in terms of poor sexual or wider general health and impacts on emotional well-being (Harker & Shelter, 2006; LGA, 2017). However, these outcomes have yet to be measured specifically in relation to adolescent-to-parent abuse.

### *Impacts on mental health and emotional well-being*

There is scant evidence on the emotional and mental health impacts of parent abuse on young people, with parents' accounts (Condry & Miles, 2012), service data (Parentline Plus, 2010), social work assessments (Biehal, 2012), and clinical case files (Charles, 1986) indicating that mental health difficulties, such as depression, hyperactivity, suicidal tendencies, and low self-esteem, are often *co-occurring* factors in the lives of the young people involved. Furthermore, through their use of structured interviews with young people in the US, Paulson and colleagues (1990, p. 129) concluded that those who 'hit' parents 'have lower self-esteem, are less happy, and feel that they are not living up to others' expectations'. However, without any longitudinal data or contextual insights from young people themselves, the extent to which such feelings are understood as a cause or consequence of violence and abuse towards parents is largely unknown.

Some insight can be found in Cottrell and Monk's (2004) qualitative examination of parent abuse, where young people described feeling guilty as a result of their violent and abusive behaviour, with guilt turning to anger or 'shame-based rage'. Through his therapeutic reflections, Micucci (1995) found that adolescents abusing their parents are 'likely to feel inadequate, helpless, and alone' (p. 159), although he does not explain how such conclusions were reached, whether they were *possible* outcomes of parent abuse or were outcomes specifically observed in the children he was treating. Such insights have, however, been confirmed by parents during interviews and focus groups (Cottrell, 2001), speaking about their children's cycles of violence, remorse and self-loathing.

Micucci (1995) also explored the impact of parent abuse on the development of young people's sense of self. He revealed that, through the abuse dynamic, families can develop an overly negative view of the young person instigating the abuse, narrowing their assessment solely in terms of their violent behaviour rather than any of their positive qualities. This can be to the detriment of their sense of self, as their only feedback from family members is negative. Micucci (1995) argued that by focusing on the abusive behaviour, parents are also 'less likely to attend to normal developmental tasks' and adolescents can find themselves 'profoundly delayed in their development' (p. 160). The adolescent responds to this with anxiety, depression and frustration as he/she realises 'they are poorly equipped to face the developmental challenges of adolescence' (p. 160). However, as previously mentioned, such insights have yet to be confirmed by young people themselves.

### *Impacts on education*

Although several studies have indicated that young people abusing parents are more likely to have co-occurring problems such as poor educational attainment (e.g. Paulson et al., 1990), there is no longitudinal evidence available to identify whether parent abuse results specifically in poor educational outcomes. However, a few qualitative studies have provided insights into the mechanisms by which parent abuse may impact on education. Practitioners speaking in focus groups in Spain identified that, particularly among girls, the self-destructive nature of parent abuse can manifest in poor behaviour at school, as a way to punish parents by damaging their own life chances (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014). This was also echoed in analyses of psychiatric records in Japan (Honjo & Wakabayashi, 1988) and France (Laurent & Derry, 1999) which identified a strong link between parent abuse and school refusal, with the latter being used as a tactic by children to gain further control over their environment.

### *Impacts on space, agency and freedom of movement*

Parent abuse can also impact on the freedoms, movement and personal agency of the young people involved, ranging from the loss of material privileges in the home, such as access to computers, phones and other personal items, to restrictions on movement in the form of grounding and curfews (Eckstein, 2004; Holt, 2011). In Micucci's (1995) reflections on therapeutic practice with families, he found that

adolescents perpetrating abuse would often start to experience much narrower lives, with a reduction in extracurricular activities and schooling due to wider behavioural and violence issues, as well as parents limiting the young person's freedom.

In extreme cases, young people can be removed from the family home, usually in response to violence placing parents and siblings at risk (Jackson, 2003). Evidence from police case file analyses (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988), interviews and surveys with parents in community studies, adoption studies, and programme evaluations (Cottrell, 2001; Edenborough et al., 2008; Paterson et al., 2002; Selwyn & Meakings, 2016), clinical accounts (Laurent & Derry, 1999), and online message boards (Holt, 2011) highlights the distress that often comes with such separation. Where parent abuse co-occurs with child mental health or psychiatric conditions, removal from the home can mean placement in secure psychiatric accommodation (Charles, 1986; Micucci, 1995), which although mostly short-term, can also be long-term (Laurent & Derry, 1999).

### *Legal impacts*

Young people (typically sons) can also be affected by parent abuse through the legal punishment and criminalisation that results from their (typically physical) violence at home. Evidence from practitioners, parents, and analyses of police case files suggests that such punishment can take various forms, including being arrested and experiencing ongoing involvement with youth offending services (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Haw, 2010; Holt, 2011; Holt & Retford, 2013; Parentline Plus, 2010) and, in extreme cases, the issuing of legal measures, such as non-contact orders, preventing children from returning to live with their parents (Cottrell & Monk, 2004). Criminological studies have captured – particularly through analyses of police reports – that parent abuse often takes place within a wider context of youth offending behaviour and that assaults against parents involving weapons are more likely to result in the arrest of children and adolescents (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988).

Evidence from parents posting on online message boards (Holt, 2011) and participating in community studies (Haw, 2010) indicate that police involvement occurs either in an attempt to 'scare' young people into compliance, to remove them from the

family home, or to attempt to control the violence via legal sanctions. Such legal measures have implications for adolescents not just in the short term but could also have longer-term implications in terms of the impact of criminalisation on their life chances (Hoskins, 2018; McAra & McVie, 2010). Further evidence is needed to fully understand the longer-term legal implications of parent abuse on young people and their experiences of such legal interventions.

### *Impacts of the parent abuse context*

Young people 'instigating' abuse towards parents can also be victims themselves, of domestic violence and abuse, child maltreatment, or both (for a review, see Simmons et al., 2018). It is well evidenced that children can be and are seriously affected by domestic violence and child abuse, with both short- and long-term implications for their emotional, psychological, and physical well-being (Hester et al., 2007; Mullender et al., 2002; Radford et al., 2011). Although such impacts will no doubt vary according to individual characteristics, such as age, gender and resilience (Hester et al., 2007), for some, the impact may be in the form of aggressive coping strategies to prevent such abuse from taking place (Hester et al., 2007; McGee, 2001). Indeed, the few parent abuse studies that have drawn on young people's accounts highlight the use of violence as a response to or prevention of parent-to-child abuse (Biehal, 2012; Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Papamichail & Bates, 2020) and/or domestic violence towards mothers (Papamichail & Bates, 2020). This highlights the importance of considering not only the impacts of the parent abuse dynamic itself but also the potential impact of the victimisation that may be shaping it (Cottrell & Monk, 2004). Such impacts could include substance misuse and mental health problems which, although identified as risk factors for parent abuse, can also be symptoms of the contexts within which parent abuse may be taking place (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013; Cottrell & Monk, 2004).

### *Impacts on siblings*

Parent abuse can also have detrimental effects on siblings. This can be directly, such as by experiencing violence and abuse themselves (Biehal, 2012; Coogan, 2013; Haw, 2010; Holt, 2011; Laurent & Derry, 1999), or indirectly, such as through a lack of parental attention (Micucci, 1995) or by witnessing abuse (Holt, 2009). Insights come

mainly from focus groups and interviews with parents, clinical case files, and practitioner accounts, with no insight into the perspectives of siblings themselves. Impacts can include younger children mirroring abusive behaviour (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014; Cottrell, 2001), getting caught up in violence by attempting to protect parents (Haw, 2010), experiencing fear and distress as a result of witnessing violence and abuse (Ingamells & Epston, 2014), and experiencing psychological conditions associated with trauma, such as depression and anxiety (Cottrell, 2001). Siblings can also experience trauma and loss by being separated from one another, either as a result of abusive siblings being removed from the family home, leaving home themselves to avoid abuse, or distancing themselves emotionally to avoid witnessing or experiencing abuse (Holt, 2009; Micucci, 1995). Such separation and distancing can tear families apart and serves to emphasise the fact that parent abuse affects not just individuals, but entire families (Jackson, 2003).

### **Impacts on relationships**

One of the most significant impacts adolescent-to-parent abuse can have is on family relationships, with parents, siblings, wider family, and those young people using violence and abuse all suffering from poorer familial bonds and fewer positive relational experiences. Indeed, parent abuse is argued as a hidden factor in family breakdown (Cottrell, 2004; Haw, 2010; Sheehan, 1997b) and particularly adoption breakdown (Selwyn & Meakings, 2016).

Relationships between parents and abusive children can be permanently damaged by such periods of abuse (Cottrell, 2004; Howard & Rottem, 2008), with mothers reporting a painful loss of the parent-child bond (Haw, 2010), particularly in cases involving removal of children from the family home (Stewart et al., 2007). However, quite often such relational damage is not equal across parents, with several clinical studies finding that abuse can often be directed towards one parent alone, particularly where abusive partners are using their child's violence as a tactic of abuse towards mothers (Charles, 1986; Laurent & Derry, 1999).

Damage to the parent-child relationship can result from a betrayal of trust through lying, stealing, and being 'disloyal', resulting in mothers feeling unloved (Stewart et al.,

2007) and resentful (Edenborough et al., 2008). Such factors, along with avoidance of discussing the abuse, limit the options for mending the relationship (Charles, 1986; Cottrell, 2001). Further, parents (usually fathers) can begin to avoid the abusive adolescent, resulting in emotional distancing (Micucci, 1995). However, until this study, there have been no qualitative insights from young people regarding the damage their abuse causes to their relationships with parents.

For parents experiencing abuse, relationships with their other children can also be affected, with the parent abuse dynamic becoming the sole focus of attention (Cottrell, 2001; Micucci, 1995). Relationships between parents can also be placed under significant strain – particularly in cases where only one parent is targeted (Charles, 1986), or where one parent begins to avoid the family home (Micucci, 1995). Parents can often blame one another for the abuse, may disagree on how to address it, and can end up neglecting to nurture their relationship with one another – in some cases resulting in separation or divorce (Cottrell, 2001; Haw, 2010; Micucci, 1995; Stewart et al., 2007).

Mothers have reported finding themselves out of favour with other family members due to taking the role of mediator, attempting to prevent escalation between the abusive child and others (Micucci, 1995), or defending their child's behaviour to other children or partners (Stewart et al., 2007). In the study by Stewart and colleagues (2007), mothers typically did this in cases where the abuse was thought to be due to the child's mental health problems – highlighting the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding the dynamic.

As previously mentioned, relationships outside of the family can also be impacted, with mothers reporting depleted social support networks as a result of avoiding social interaction (Selwyn & Meakings, 2016). This can lead to feelings of isolation which, in turn, result in parents feeling helpless at their situation and their perceived lack of control over it (Cottrell, 2001; Routt & Anderson, 2011). Some of the reasons given by parents for difficulties maintaining relationships include their child's destructive and aggressive behaviour towards people or property (Jackson, 2003; Micucci, 1995; Stewart et al., 2007), the telling of untruths about them (Cottrell, 2001), and the lack of time and energy to nurture positive relationships (Micucci, 1995).

Lastly, parent abuse has been identified as a precursor to adolescent isolation from friends and family and as a risk to developing healthy romantic relationships (Charles, 1986), with studies identifying a potential link between parent abuse and violence in later intimate relationships (Hastie, 1998; Laporte, Jiang, Pepler, & Chamberland, 2011). As Hastie (1998) argues, parent abuse could represent part of a continuum of violence in a young person's life – contextual factors this study explores.

## **Summary**

Insights from qualitative studies of parent abuse – drawing on clinician, therapist and practitioner assessments, and from the accounts of mothers experiencing abuse – highlight the highly damaging nature of the dynamic, not just for those parents who are victims of abusive behaviour, but for those young people using violence and abuse, and for siblings living in the same home. Indeed, the evidence presented highlights the importance of parent abuse as a topic of investigation. However, our understanding of its impacts on those young people involved, as well as their own understanding of its consequences, is lacking. Given the scarcity of research drawing on young people's voices, the current study is well placed to generate a 'more informed dialogue' (Williams et al., 2017, p. 9) between those using violence and abuse towards parents and those seeking to prevent or address it.

## **Policy and practice**

This final section explores how adolescent-to-parent abuse is currently framed by policy and practice responses in the UK, how parent abuse policy has developed within a domestic abuse framework, and how such policy (or lack thereof) has translated into practice on the ground. The section ends by looking at the specialist responses to parent abuse, their theoretical underpinnings, and evidence of some promising programmes in the UK.

### **On the policy agenda?**

#### *A policy silence*

Until relatively recently, adolescent-to-parent abuse has gone unrecognised within the realms of UK social policy, having remained 'a somewhat taboo topic' (Miles & Condry, 2016, p. 804). Although this is due in part to the 'ambiguity and secrecy' surrounding the issue (Holt, 2013, p. 99), it is also a reflection of the inability of policy frameworks within youth justice, child welfare, and domestic violence to construct parents and children as both victims and victimisers – which 'denies the complexity inherent to the problem and means that there is no space for the issue to emerge in the public domain' (Hunter et al., 2010, p. 282). This policy 'silence' in relation to the issue (Condry & Miles, 2012; Holt & Retford, 2013; Hunter et al., 2010) has meant that although practitioners across multiple agencies are experiencing a rise in cases, there is a lack of guidance around how the problem should be conceptualised and addressed, and who exactly should be addressing it (Holt, 2013; Holt & Retford, 2013). This is compounded by the fact that there is currently no legal definition of parent abuse in the UK and no official way of recording cases when they arise (Holt & Retford, 2013; Home Office, 2015). For families, this can mean inconsistent and inadequate responses from a range of services and agencies, each with their own conceptualisation of what parent abuse is and how it should be dealt with (Holt, 2013). Furthermore, this official lack of recognition of parent abuse as a social problem (at least until fairly recently), has meant there are few well-evaluated programmes available to tackle the problem, with services provided on a 'post-code lottery' basis (Thorley & Coates, 2020).

## *Development of the domestic abuse agenda*

Despite this policy silence, there have been gains over the past decade, entwined with a number of hard-fought developments in the domestic abuse policy arena, driven by campaigning and lobbying by domestic violence and women's organisations in the UK. For example, in 2013, as part of the government's (2009) strategy *'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls'*, the UK cross-governmental definition of domestic abuse changed to include young people aged 16 and 17 (previously covering only 18 and over). Although this change came in recognition of the fact that young people in this age group 'experience high levels of relationship abuse' (Home Office, 2013, p. 4), it also meant that any 'incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse' (Home Office, 2013, p. 2) towards *parents* by children aged 16 and over was now legally recognised as a form of domestic abuse. As such, it was subject to those statutory policies within the UK government's (2004) *Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act*<sup>6</sup> and the Welsh government's (2015) *Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015*, relating to criminal justice and support for victims of domestic abuse. This was subsequently made explicit by the inclusion of 'child to parent violence' in the Home Office document *'Information for Local Areas on the change to the Definition of Domestic Violence and Abuse'* (Home Office, 2013), and most recently, in the *Draft Domestic Abuse Bill 2020* (Home Office, 2020) – although organisations have argued that it does not adequately capture the complexities of the issue (Adoption UK, 2019). Lastly, through the inclusion of 'controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship', under section 76 of the *Serious Crime Act (2015)*, children as young as 10 could be criminalised for their abusive behaviour towards parents under the 'broader umbrella of domestic violence' (Miles & Condry, 2015, p. 1080), although the appropriateness of such an approach for young children is highly contested (Bettinson & Quinlan, 2020).

## *A problem of domestic abuse*

As stated by Carol Lee Bacchi (1999), 'policy "responses" need to be understood as part of a discursive construction of "problems"' (p. 66), and this framing of adolescent-to-parent abuse as a form of domestic abuse has signalled some welcome messages

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<sup>6</sup> Soon to be replaced by the Domestic Abuse Act 2020 (Home Office, 2020).

regarding its nature as a harmful social problem. This includes an understanding that it is a gendered form of violence, part a continuum of violence experienced throughout the life course; that power and control are defining features of abuse, and that secrecy, shame, minimisation and structural victimisation serve to maintain it; that it often involves a *constellation* of physical *and* non-physical abuses such as coercive control; and that such abuses are both physically and emotionally harmful to its victims, as well as affecting all family members.

However, although a number of parallels can clearly be drawn between domestic abuse involving intimate partners/ex-partners and adolescent-to-parent abuse, there are key differences that make the use of such a framework problematic. First, a domestic abuse framework cannot accommodate the abuse of fathers so readily, or the use of violence and abuse by daughters (Holt, 2016a), and second, criminalising adolescents in the same way as adult ‘perpetrators’ of domestic abuse may not be appropriate (Holt, 2016a; Miles & Condry, 2016). This is particularly true given that behaviours may not be so entrenched, that ‘successful’ outcomes involve keeping families intact rather than separating them, and that the ‘solutions’ for domestic abuse between intimate partners (such as separation) are not so appropriate given parents’ legal responsibilities of housing, protecting and providing for their children until age 18 (Holt, 2016a; Miles & Condry, 2016). These issues aside, working within a domestic abuse policy framework could potentially help to counter the phenomenon of ‘mother blaming’ which is so prevalent within child protection and criminal justice – a culture that frames mothers in terms of either their ‘failure to protect’ or ‘failure to control’ (Wilcox, 2012).

### *The arrival of policy ‘guidance’*

Aside from a few brief mentions in a handful of national and local government policy documents relating to VAWG and responses to domestic abuse (e.g. HMIC, 2014; LGA & ADASS, 2015), it was not until the Home Office published its *‘Information guide: adolescent to parent violence and abuse (APVA)’* in 2015, that the issue gained prominence in the UK policy arena. Developed by an expert panel convened by the Youth Justice Board and latterly, the Home Office, it came in response to a strong call for practitioner guidance made at the final conference for the Oxford APV Research Project and as a means of progressing Action points 63 and 193 in the 2014 document

'A Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls' (HM Government, 2014) (Bonnick, 2015). This non-statutory guidance represented (and still represents) the most comprehensive account at the national level of adolescent-to-parent abuse; a self-defined 'first stage' in a longer process of developing a (still forthcoming) 'clear and specific' UK policy on the issue (Home Office, 2015, p. 6).

Targeted at professionals in the areas of health, education, social care, housing, police, and youth justice, the guidance emphasised that parent abuse was a distinct form of domestic abuse requiring, where possible, the use of specialist interventions to address it. Further, as a form of domestic abuse, it advised that local domestic abuse policies should be followed – including the use of the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment (DASH) risk assessment and Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC)<sup>7</sup>. In fact, one of its key suggestions was the importance of having a combined DASH/MARAC and MASH/safeguarding approach to cases, which has more recently been stated in the *Draft Domestic Abuse Bill 2020*.

... it is important that a young person using abusive behaviour against a parent receives a safeguarding response, which may include referral to MARAC (Multi-agency Risk Assessment Conference), regardless of whether there is any police action taken. Responders should use their discretion and professional judgement when addressing cases of APVA....The parent victim should also receive appropriate domestic abuse response and support.

(Home Office, 2020, p. 10)

Furthermore, the guidance stressed the importance of therapeutic support and listening to victims, who may also be victims of domestic abuse from partners or ex-partners; an emphasis on adult and child safeguarding; and the use of family-based intervention and mediation. It also stressed that as a gendered form of abuse, local VAWG strategies should be developed to address it. Reflecting an ecological understanding of domestic abuse, it suggested that assessments should include both individual and contextual/environmental factors and that the contextual factors would be best addressed using a 'wrap-around' 'whole-family approach' involving a multi-

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<sup>7</sup> MARAC stands for 'Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference' and is a regular, victim-focused multi-agency meeting coordinated by the police where high-risk domestic violence cases are discussed.

agency 'team around the family'. However, some of the strongest messages in the guidance included the importance of rebuilding family relationships and keeping children at home, avoiding the blaming of parents and (counter to the 'pro-arrest' policies of domestic abuse policy) the criminalisation of young people. Importantly, it also recognised the dual position that both parents and children can occupy as both victims and victimisers, encouraging, particularly the police, to speak to both parties separately when responding to call-outs.

Encouragingly, subsequent policies at the local level – such as Manchester Safeguarding Children Board's (MSCB) *'Working Together To Safeguard Adults and Children From Domestic Abuse'* (MSCB, 2015) – seemed to reflect those suggestions in the guidance, translating into policies emphasising the importance of work on healthy relationships in schools, therapeutic support from domestic abuse children's workers, support from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) around emotional well-being and mental health, and support for parents and wider family through specialist parenting courses and family therapy.

Significantly, the guidance also explicitly countered one highly criticised criminal justice practice – the issuing of Parenting Orders – a court-ordered parental responsibility measure which punished parents (usually mothers) for the abusive behaviour to which they were subjected (Holt, 2009). Such responses were characteristic of the 'criminalisation of social policy' (Crawford, 1997) in the 1990s and evolved in response to the dominant discourse of the 'parenting deficit' (Condry & Miles, 2012) and 'problem families' (Holt, 2009), which held mothers (particularly single mothers) accountable for the actions of their 'deviant' and 'delinquent' children and thus responsible for constructive changes (Holt, 2009). Involving mandatory attendance at parenting programmes, Holt (2016a) described such punitive measures as a form of structural victimisation towards mothers, which served only to further harm those experiencing abuse. Since 2012, however, when the dominant response to parent abuse was one of criminal justice, and the dominant construction, one of 'delinquency', the issuing of Parenting Orders has more than halved (DfE, 2019b). As an alternative, the 2015 guidance suggests using Conditional Cautions in the case of minor assault/criminal damage, combined with work to address abuse; Referral Orders combined with family intervention; or Community Orders combined with formal family

programmes to address such abuse. But how have these policy recommendations been implemented in practice?

### **From policy to practice**

The translation of policy into practice is not always straightforward and, given the relative lack of national or local policy in relation to adolescent-to-parent abuse, the UK response to the issue is highly variable (Holt & Retford, 2013), dependent on how cases come to light, as well as those 'unofficial' policies at the local level. For example, in their analysis of police responses, Miles and Condry (2016) found that 'the way in which incidents are recorded and responded to is often left to police discretion' (p. 812). This meant that typically, if a parent abuse incident involved a young person aged 18 or over (and thus fell within the then definition of domestic abuse), a DASH would be completed and the case potentially passed to the domestic violence unit for specialist services. If a young person was under 18 (and therefore outside of the definition of domestic abuse), the case would progress no further – meaning cases could fall through the gaps and go unaddressed. However, in the Metropolitan Police force, an 'unwritten policy' was advocated that cases 'in the spirit' of domestic abuse (i.e. involving a history of violence or serious violence towards parents) – no matter what the young person's age – would be dealt with by specialist domestic violence officers who were the most appropriately trained.

Miles and Condry (2016) also found that although adolescents were arrested in 94.6% of cases – in line with the 'pro-arrest' policy of domestic abuse – in 41.8% of cases, adolescents were either not charged or the charges were later dropped, with many cases involving younger adolescents passed on to youth justice services. This highlights the difficulty in applying domestic abuse policies to parent abuse cases, as parents often do not want to see their children criminalised but call the police as a last resort in the hope of accessing some form of support (Miles & Condry, 2016).

However, as Miles and Condry's (2016) analysis of police responses to parent abuse was based on cases from 2011 (similar to many parent abuse policy papers), it is difficult to get a sense of how the 2013 changes to the definition of domestic abuse, in addition to publication of the 2015 guidance, may have begun to shape the practice

response to the issue. In a 2019 article in *The Guardian* (Clough, 2018), one parent was quoted as saying how helpful it had been to be assigned an independent domestic violence advisor (IDVA) who helped her to engage the support of specialist services. It remains to be seen how many IDVAs are assigned within 'the spirit' of domestic abuse when following a criminal justice route and how many fall through the cracks. Further, although in a small number of severe cases, parents can be referred to a MARAC, the responses available to parent victims via this route are often unsuitable (Holt & Retford, 2013).

Indeed, many agency responses to the issue follow generic guidelines, such as victim support, which typically carries out a needs assessment in a safe space, develops a victim support plan, which may include emotional support and links to other agencies, and may discuss potential legal remedies (Holt & Retford, 2013). However, such a response draws heavily on a domestic violence framework of support which, as already discussed, offers less-appropriate remedies in cases involving victimised parents. In the context of youth justice, youth offending services respond to the issue in much the same way as they do to offences taking place outside of home, working with both young people and parents to address the root causes of offending behaviour. This often involves the provision of parenting advice and offering young people alternative strategies (Holt & Retford, 2013).

Although there is no recent analysis of the child welfare response to parent abuse in the UK, its dominant policy framework – based on the *Children Act* of 1989 and 2004, the *Children and Social Work Act 2017*, and policies within *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (HM Government, 2018) – struggles to construct children as victimisers of parents, but rather frames them as individuals in need of protection (typically from parents) (Holt, 2009, 2013; Hunter et al., 2010). Analysis of practitioner constructions of the issue have confirmed this, stressing their difficulty in knowing how to respond to parent abuse within a system constructed around safeguarding children rather than adults, with parent abuse often depicted as a problem of 'poor parenting' (poor mothering), 'emotional issues', or 'challenging behaviour' (Nixon, 2012; Selwyn & Meakings, 2016).

Parent abuse cases coming to the attention of children's social care do so either because parents (most often mothers) self-refer (Biehal, 2012), partner agencies

identify that siblings are at risk (Miles & Condry, 2016), adoptions are at risk of placement breakdown (Selwyn & Meakings, 2016), or because they come to light due to an associated problem such as domestic abuse between parents or school non-attendance – a common characteristic of the parent abuse dynamic. Unfortunately, in the UK, the high thresholds for receiving social work support means that parents, most commonly mothers, are often unable to access practical support in a timely way, which means that by the time support is provided, problems are often very entrenched (Biehal, 2012). In severe cases of parent abuse – where children are deemed to be at risk of ‘significant harm’ due to being ‘beyond parental control’ – Supervision Orders can be issued to engage more intensive ‘edge of care’ support or Care Orders issued where this has been unsuccessful (and children taken into local authority care). However, my own discussions with professionals delivering specialist parent abuse interventions suggest an increasing trend towards specialist intervention via Early Help services and ‘Teams Around the Family’ (TAF) (e.g. Selwyn & Meakings, 2016). This could reflect either the service’s expanding remit, the construction of adolescent-to-parent abuse as an issue best addressed as early as possible, or recognition that adolescents form one of the largest and most expensive social care groups, with outcomes that are typically poorer than their non-care peers (DfE, 2019a; Oakley, Miscampbell, & Gregorian, 2018).

Most commonly, however, parents seek help from their GPs, schools and CAMHS (Parentline Plus, 2010). If the issue is taken seriously, this can trigger a multi-agency response via the Local Children’s Safeguarding Board (LSCB) and a subsequent common assessment using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) to establish the child’s needs (Holt, 2013). However, such responses often involve referrals either to children’s social care or criminal justice, rather than to any specialist services outside of statutory agencies. As mentioned above, these are not always the best places to address this form of family violence.

However, for some families, specialist parent abuse interventions are delivered – either within the context of youth justice, children’s social care, domestic abuse and parenting organisations, or through CAMHS – but what forms do these ‘specialist’ services take and what theories and conceptualisations of parent abuse do they draw upon?

## Specialist responses

Parent abuse 'intervention' occurs most commonly within the context of youth offending services, specialist domestic abuse services, edge of care services, and CAMHS. Unfortunately, these services are not always specific to the problem of adolescent-to-parent abuse but often attempt to tackle additional or broader factors, such as wider youth offending, family breakdown, or co-occurring mental health problems. Where specialist responses do exist, they typically draw on multi-theory explanations and employ a whole-family approach. Although well-evaluated interventions for addressing parent abuse are few and far between (Cottrell, 2001; Holt, 2013), with very little empirical support for treatment approaches (Kennair & Mellor, 2007), a number of programmes early in their evidential journey are supporting families in the UK. However, due to the 'retraction' of mental health and youth services that has taken place over the past decade, the availability of such specialist parent abuse services is severely limited to those with the greatest need (Rachel Condry in Clough, 2018).

Some of the main approaches used to address adolescent-to-parent abuse include those that are restorative, cognitive behavioural, non-violent (NVR), trauma-based, and systemic (Holt, 2016b). In addition, there are approaches based on empowering parents and those from the domestic violence field which focus on gender, power and control. Although it is beyond the remit of this section to provide a comprehensive account, what follows is an overview of the main approaches, their theoretical basis, with some specific examples of programmes in the UK and (where available) evidence supporting their efficacy.

### *Restorative practice*

Restorative approaches originate from restorative justice, a political approach intended to give agency back to victims and their communities (Holt, 2013). The approach uses victim-offender mediation, recognising the harms caused by abuse and attempting to make young people aware of their parents' experiences and perspectives. In this way, the young person is made aware of the repercussions of his/her behaviour, can take responsibility for it, and attempt to mend some of the harm caused by using an agreed resolution. Criticisms of this approach include its lack of recognition of the power

imbalance within abuse dynamics, which can, in some cases, serve to further victimise victims. In their analysis of police responses, Miles and Condry (2016) found that police officers spoke favourably about the use of *Youth Restorative Disposals* (YRDs) which enabled less serious cases of parent abuse by 10- to 17-year-olds (without previous Reprimands, Cautions or Final Warnings) to be diverted towards restorative, non-criminalising interventions.

### *Cognitive behavioural*

Programmes based on cognitive behavioural principles often focus on the moderation of beliefs, thoughts, feelings and behaviours, using activities to help young people to understand the connections between each and to take ownership of them (Routt & Anderson, 2016). Cognitive behavioural approaches operate at the individual level of intervention and are among the more common ways of addressing the issue.

### *Trauma-based*

Trauma-informed approaches focus on the role of past trauma – particularly in relation to witnessing or experiencing family violence and abuse – and its impact on violent and abusive behaviour in young people. Interventions focusing on trauma explore its impact on parent-child attachment and child development, using a variety of techniques with both parents and children to help develop their understanding of how trauma may have impacted them, how they can better regulate their emotional responses to stressors, and how they can develop a more caring and empathetic relationship built on mutual respect (Evans, 2016).

### *Non-violent resistance (NVR)*

Non-violent resistance is based on the principles of parental commitment to non-violence and involves parent training to recognise the dynamic interactions involved in abuse and how escalation occurs (Holt, 2013). NVR works at the family level, focusing on intrafamilial explanations of abuse, such as interactions and communication. Important NVR concepts include parental presence (as opposed to avoidance), resistance, and ‘reconciliation gestures’ – focusing on how parents can control their

own behaviour to affect change rather than attempting to 'control' that of the child. Non-violent resistance involves the support of friends and family as well as face-to-face support from a counsellor. Currently being used within youth and family therapeutic services in the UK, evidence for its effectiveness is promising, with results from a randomised controlled trial (Weinblatt & Omer, 2008) indicating positive outcomes in relation to parenting, parents' sense of helplessness, and mother-reported child aggression. Holt (2013) also identifies a number of positive elements of NVR including its placing of parent abuse within a socio-political context and the avoidance of parent blaming.

### *Systemic/family systems*

Like NVR, systemic approaches also work at the family level, focusing on intrafamilial factors linked to parent abuse, including interactions, communication and family history. Typically taking place within the context of family therapy and social work, it involves therapeutic strategies such as 'supporting parental authority', 'repairing dislocated relationships', 'containing conflicts', and 'discovering and supporting competence' (Micucci, 1995, pp. 157-160). Such approaches have been used mainly in Australia as well as in Spain and the UK, and emphasise developing a shared responsibility for change within families by using a strengths-based approach to empower, rather than focusing on the violence and abuse itself (Holt, 2013; Sheehan, 1997b). Although NVR's evidence of violence cessation has been positive, it is based only on pre- and post-test evaluation methods (Sheehan, 1997b) and simple phone-based follow-ups (Pereira, 2016), thereby requiring more rigorous forms of assessment.

### *Solution-focused*

Solution-focused approaches to addressing abuse are often brief, assessing the goals of parents and children and providing practical solutions, rather than focusing on the problems themselves (Holt, 2013). Such approaches aim to give parents and their children the awareness they need to understand their own and others' emotions and the practical tools to communicate and interact more effectively, whilst reducing the feeling of guilt and shame associated with abuse.

## *Domestic violence-informed*

Finally, a number of interventions draw on the domestic violence field, focusing on the role of gender, power and control, parents' and children's past experiences of victimisation, parental empowerment, and maintaining family safety.

### **Drawing upon multiple theories and approaches**

As Holt (2013) observes, the majority of parent abuse interventions are theoretically pluralistic, sensible given that explanations involve factors at the individual, family, and societal levels (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014). For example, individual theories can relate to substance misuse and psychopathology, family-level theories to conflict or social learning, and societal-level theories to feminist theories of gender role socialisation, violence, and parenting, which can be all be operating concurrently. Programmes are also often multi-modal in structure, involving combinations of 1-2-1 sessions, group work with parents and their children (separately or together), as well as whole-family sessions, recognising the impact that abuse can have on the family system.

The Step-Up programme – originally developed in King County, Washington in the US and now used by youth offending services in the UK – takes such an approach, utilising joint parent-child groups to deliver restorative practice, cognitive-behavioural learning and skills-based approaches, motivational interviewing techniques, strengths-based and solution-focused practices, anger management, relaxation and self-calming techniques, positive behaviour modelling, and the Duluth Model (Routt & Anderson, 2016). The programme has a range of supporting evidence, with one US comparison group study identifying positive outcomes in relation to reported violence in the home and recidivism rates (Organizational Research Services, 2005) and another identifying positive outcomes via parent interviews (Correll, 2014). UK evidence is less well-developed, coming from two small (n=10, n=7) internal evaluation studies in Kirklees, West Yorkshire, reporting positive outcomes around violence and family relationships from pre-, interim, post-, and follow-up tests (Kirklees Council, 2014, 2016).

Although other programmes in the UK do have some supporting evidence, for example, Break4Change, a solution-based group work programme for parents and their children

which has both positive internal (Munday, 2009) and external evaluations (Wilcox et al., 2015), and the Respect Young People's Programme (RYPP), the majority of programme evidence comes from small-scale studies (<25), with no comparison groups, or robust measures to assess change.

Aspects of support identified as most useful to parents include: 'naming the abuse'; 'being listened to and listening to others' experiences'; 'developing strategies to establish boundaries with young people'; 'developing self-care strategies'; and 'education and awareness-raising on the dynamics of abuse' (Holt, 2013, p. 138). This also reflects Laurent and Derry's (1999) experiences of clinical cases, where families receiving treatment felt relief on hearing they were not the only parents being abused by their children.

However, having well-evidenced programmes to address parent abuse is only part of the puzzle. Several studies have revealed that even when some parents do manage to get their child to attend a programme, they may not actually engage with the content (Howard & Rottem, 2008; Hunter et al., 2010). More informal support for families can provide alternatives, such as telephone helplines and social supports such as friends, extended family, and neighbours.

## **Summary**

The support available to families suffering from adolescent-to-parent abuse is minimal and inconsistent, with a lack of practitioner guidance and specialist services (Holt & Retford, 2013). Current systems are targeted more towards protecting children, the public, or families from violent partners, which are inappropriate for parents experiencing abuse from their children. A greater understanding of the underlying contexts and processes involved in adolescent-to-parent abuse, as well as the specific needs of young people using violence and abuse at home, is vital if coherent and effective interventions and services are to be designed and made readily available in the UK. This study contributes to policy and practice by shedding light on those affected by adolescent-to-parent abuse in the UK, the nature of the problem and its contextual factors, young people's understanding of their motivations for using violence and the impact they think it has on them and their families, as well as what

they think would help them to stop using violence at home. In addition, it will bring young people's voices to bear on the problem of adolescent-to-parent abuse within UK policy and practice discussions – voices that are currently going unheard.

## **Summary of the literature and rationale for the study**

This study is an exploration of young people's experiences and perceptions of violence and abuse towards parents, something which sheds light on the nature of abusive behaviour, the causes and contexts within which it occurs, and the impacts it has on young people and their families. It also illustrates the ways in which it might be prevented or addressed. This is important, as currently the literature prioritises the voices of parents and practitioners over those of young people, who are the subject of 'protection' from research, or are merely side-lined (Biehal, 2012).

By examining the literature it is clear that parent abuse is a harmful social problem affecting families of all shapes, sizes and backgrounds in the UK, with practitioners suggesting cases are appearing with greater regularity. However, due to a lack of young people's voices in the literature, we have little knowledge of how this form of family abuse impacts young people themselves, or how they understand their violence as impacting others. This study addresses that gap by examining young people's in-depth interview accounts of their violence and abuse at home. Furthermore, the lack of prevalence studies measuring patterned forms of aggression towards parents limits our understanding of just how common this form of family violence is. This study progresses this by capturing survey data on patterned forms of physical and non-physical aggression towards parents.

Most of the literature on adolescent-to-parent abuse focuses on prevalence and incidence, as well as the individual and family factors that may make physical violence towards parents more likely. However, the mechanisms underpinning those individual, family, and wider societal factors are less well explored, leaving gaps in understanding as to how exactly these factors may be shaping the development of the dynamic. This study analyses the contexts and processes through which violence and abuse towards parents arises, as well as exploring how gender and age may contribute. Furthermore, it attempts to avoid the biases of criminal justice and service samples through the

inclusion of a non-service, further education sample, potentially tapping into those cases that may have 'slipped through the net'. Finally, although in recent years young people's voices have appeared more regularly in policy and practice discussions, to date, this has not been the case in discussions on parent abuse. The goal of this study is to develop a more informed dialogue between those young people using violence and abuse at home and those interested in helping to address it.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This chapter details and provides rationale for the study design and research process used to explore young people's perspectives and experiences of adolescent-to-parent abuse. Initially, it details the research questions guiding the study, before outlining and providing justification for the study design and its underpinning methodological philosophies and concepts. The process of data collection and the research tools used are then detailed, before moving on to discuss the analytical approaches for both the quantitative and qualitative components of study, in addition to an account of the data integration and management of conflicting findings. The chapter concludes with a full account of the management of ethical issues, particularly in relation to child participation in violence research.

### **Research questions**

The research aims to address the current gap in understanding of how adolescents experience and perceive the issue of adolescent-to-parent abuse. By so doing, it will provide research insights that can contribute to the development of effective policy and practice solutions for families experiencing the issue. As outlined in the previous two chapters, to date, research in this field has focused almost exclusively on the experiences of parents and practitioners, giving little insight into how young people experience and make sense of this form of family violence, what they understand its impacts to be, and how they think it could be addressed. To this end, the study set out to address the following primary and secondary research questions:

1. What is the nature of adolescent-to-parent abuse?
  - a) How common is it?
  - b) What forms and patterns of behaviour does abuse take?
  - c) What are the characteristics of the parents and young people involved?

2. How do young people understand, explain, and experience adolescent-to-parent abuse?
  - a) What are the causes, contexts and motivations involved?
  - b) What are the impacts on young people and their families?
  - c) How might it be prevented or addressed?

## **Study design and rationale**

### **Guiding philosophies and concepts**

#### *Critical realism and critical methodological pluralism*

As a study seeking to understand the profile and prevalence of abuse, as well as young people's experiences and perceptions of it, a philosophical underpinning able to support both positivist and relativist frameworks was needed. Critical realism – a form of philosophical realism – is a post-positivist philosophy that draws upon both positivist and relativist frameworks in an attempt to 'harness the strengths and address the weaknesses' of both (Clark et al., 2008, p. E68). As Clark and colleagues (2008) state, in 'taking the middle ground, it does not reduce the world to unknowable chaos or a positivistic universal order, nor does it place objective truth value on the perspectives of human beings or remove the influence and importance of human perspectives' (p. E68). Having such a philosophical underpinning is important when justifying the use of a mixed methods design, which to some (e.g. Smith, 1983; Smith & Heshusius, 1986) involves combining methods that represent conflicting paradigms, and thus a philosophical tension that cannot be resolved. However, by taking a critical realist stance, data and analyses from both quantitative and qualitative paradigms can be used within one study to generate greater depth of understanding in relation to social phenomena. Furthermore, by utilising the perspective of critical methodological pluralism, the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the various methods will be made explicit, ensuring that conclusions are only made where there is the ontological basis to do so (Danermark, Ekström, & Karlsson, 2019).

Developed originally by philosopher Roy Bhaskar in 1975 in response to varying critiques of both positivist and relativist frameworks of understanding, critical realism views both physical and social entities, such as culture, class, childhood and discrimination, as having 'an independent existence irrespective of human knowledge or understanding' (Clark et al., 2008, p. E68). This means that in the case of this particular study, adolescent-to-parent abuse, although acknowledged as a social construction, is also seen as existing with or without its perception or recognition by human beings. However, it is also acknowledged that any perception of the phenomenon will be determined by the social lens through which it is viewed, meaning that research to understand it will always be limited by the lens used to investigate it. In this sense, critical realism combines a realist ontology with a constructivist or relativist epistemology (Maxwell & Mitternig, 2015) – there is a reality, but we are unable to fully and accurately uncover it. Thus, it is considered beneficial to have multiple perspectives and multiple sources of data from which to draw conclusions, to enable the researcher to generate the fullest account possible. The incorporation of multiple and sometimes competing paradigms also allows for a wider range of research questions to be addressed in one study – and in the case of this study, enables insights from categorical data and the hermeneutic tradition to be combined.

Critical realism proposes that reality is stratified into three overlapping domains: the actual, the real, and the empirical (Bhaskar, 1975, 2008). The actual domain includes those most closely associated with the observable world, such as actions or events; the real includes the underlying structures, powers or mechanisms that cause events within the actual domain; and the empirical domain represents our perceptions and experiences, through which all domains are viewed and understood (Clark et al., 2008). This is a useful framework for conceptualising social phenomena as it acknowledges the sometimes invisible but altogether 'real' determinants of human behaviour and events, placing an emphasis on uncovering them. For example, although social structures such as gender-, age-, or race-based discrimination may go unrecognised by society, they still exercise real power and influence irrespective of our perception that they actually exist – which is why it is so vital to uncover them (Clark et al., 2008). The focus of critical realism on uncovering these real forces – these causal explanations – chimes with the aims of this study, which seeks to reveal the mechanisms behind parent abuse – the real forces driving the phenomenon. Uncovering such causal explanations is key to disrupting its development and maintenance in families.

Finally, within critical realism, the ontological concept of emergence also proves useful, with the understanding that humans and social phenomena can be understood at various micro and macro levels concurrently (e.g. at biological, psychological and social levels). Furthermore, although social phenomena such as parent abuse emerge from those levels and their interactions, they are more than just the sum of the levels and interactions combined (Clark et al., 2008). This is a concept compatible with ecological systems theory – the theoretical scaffold for the study.

### *Foregrounding the voices of young people*

Although this study is principally about a social phenomenon – adolescent-to-parent abuse – it is also an exploration of childhood and adolescence, seeking to platform the experiences and understandings of young people whose accounts are currently under-represented in parent abuse research. As missing pieces of the puzzle in understanding and addressing this complex social problem, young people’s thoughts, feelings, understandings, motivations and experiences must be sought. For this reason, young people are the sole sources of data for the study. This is also in keeping with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which gives ‘children the right to have their views given due weight in all matters affecting them’ (Lundy, 2007, p. 927). This is a perspective very much aligned with childhood theory (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998; James & Prout, 1990) which emphasises children as ‘active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live’ (James & Prout, 1990, p. 8).

### **A mixed methods approach**

Positioned within the field of childhood and youth studies, the aims of this study were to gain an understanding of young people’s experiences and perspectives of adolescent-to-parent abuse. Specifically, the study sought to explore the nature of the phenomenon, its impacts, the characteristics of victims and victimisers, the causes and contexts involved and understandings about how it might be prevented or addressed. To achieve this, it used a mixed methods design.

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods, mixed methods research is increasing in popularity within the social sciences (Bryman, 2016), perceived as combining the strengths of quantitative and qualitative approaches to research, whilst avoiding some of the weaknesses inherent in mono-methods approaches (Bamberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2012). However, combining approaches which some see as belonging to opposing epistemological and ontological philosophies, is still contested by a number of social science academics (Bryman, 2016).

Bryman (2016) outlines what he considers to be the two main arguments against mixed methods research in social science: 'the idea that research methods carry epistemological commitments', and 'the idea that quantitative and qualitative research are separate paradigms' (p. 636). As regards the first, researchers such as Smith (1983) and Hughes (1990) argue that methods cannot be separated from their underpinning philosophies regarding the nature of reality and knowledge, and to do so undermines the claims researchers make, which should be made from a strong and clear philosophical position (Smith & Heshusius, 1986). As concerns the second, Bryman (2016) argues that there are those that view the combining of paradigms to be at best, surface-level and at worst, an exercise in combining totally incompatible world views. However, in his counter argument, Bryman (2016) emphasises that methods can be 'put to a variety of tasks' (p. 636) across multiple epistemological perspectives and that quantitative and qualitative approaches do not necessarily represent distinct paradigms; that across the social sciences there is considerable overlap and a blurring of lines. In this respect, the present study takes the perspective of Gayle Letherby (2004) who, like Bryman, argues that the methods used should instead reflect the questions being asked and that, rather than limiting ourselves to one method or another, we should be reflecting critically on the application of research, i.e. 'how what we do affects what we get' and 'the relationship between process and product/doing and knowing' (Letherby, 2004, p. 183).

### *Planned and unplanned functions of the design*

Bryman (2016) identifies 16 distinct functions of mixed methods research. A number of these can be used to articulate its unique contribution to this research study and are explored below, organised according to whether the function was intentional (i.e.

identified *a priori*) or unplanned (i.e. identified *posteriori*), emerging as a result of adapting the design in response to real-world research conditions and constraints.

The planned functions of this strategy were:

- To address a variety of research questions
- To gain insight into the context of parent abuse
- To gain processual insights
- To inform the sampling strategy
- To gain valuable insights that have policy and practice utility

The unplanned functions that arose in response to survey limitations were:

- Triangulation and instrument development
- Explanation of early insights

The main reason for using a mixed methods approach in this study was to answer a variety of questions. As addressing Research Question 1 on the 'nature' of parent abuse would involve collecting prevalence and profile data – the 'who' and the 'what' of parent abuse – a quantitative survey instrument would be the most appropriate research method. Research Question 2 on young people's perspectives and experiences of parent abuse, however, would require a qualitative method suitable for the discussion and exploration of personal and sensitive subjects. For this, in-depth interviews would be suitable.

One of the main benefits of using a qualitative method such as in-depth interviews was the ability to generate rich data around parent abuse and the lives of the young people involved. A good grasp of the contexts within which parent abuse takes place can provide insight into the various mechanisms and dynamics operating, and thus, those key areas of focus for policy and practice. Alongside their ability to capture contextual information, in-depth interviews also enable the collection of processual data. Although the design of the survey instrument allowed participants to reflect upon events over the previous year, such insights only represent a snapshot of behaviour. To gain a more

nanced understanding of how parent abuse may develop and change over time, qualitative data was needed for an in-depth analysis of process and personal history.

However, to identify students who had been violent and abusive towards parents required an agile method that could be used with sufficient numbers of young people. As a non-service population, the number of young people with experience of violence and abuse towards parents who were also willing to take part in follow-up interviews was likely to be low (and difficult to identify through other means such as teacher recommendation). A survey instrument could provide the means of identifying such a sample efficiently and ethically. Further, a survey would provide insight into those who had used violence and abuse towards parents but were unwilling to discuss their experiences in an interview.

Lastly, the use of mixed methods in this study was considered necessary to provide insights with the greatest utility for policy and practice. Currently, practice and interventions to address parent abuse are informed through insights generated from practitioner and parent reflections rather than those of young people. Shedding light on young people's lived experiences of parent abuse through the rich data generated via in-depth interviews can help to develop better-informed policy and practice solutions to the problem. The inclusion of a quantitative survey instrument as well, can further our understanding of the efficacy of such instruments as a way to accurately identify cases of parent abuse, both at individual and population levels, whilst also providing insight into how common this form of family abuse is within a non-service population and the characteristics of those involved.

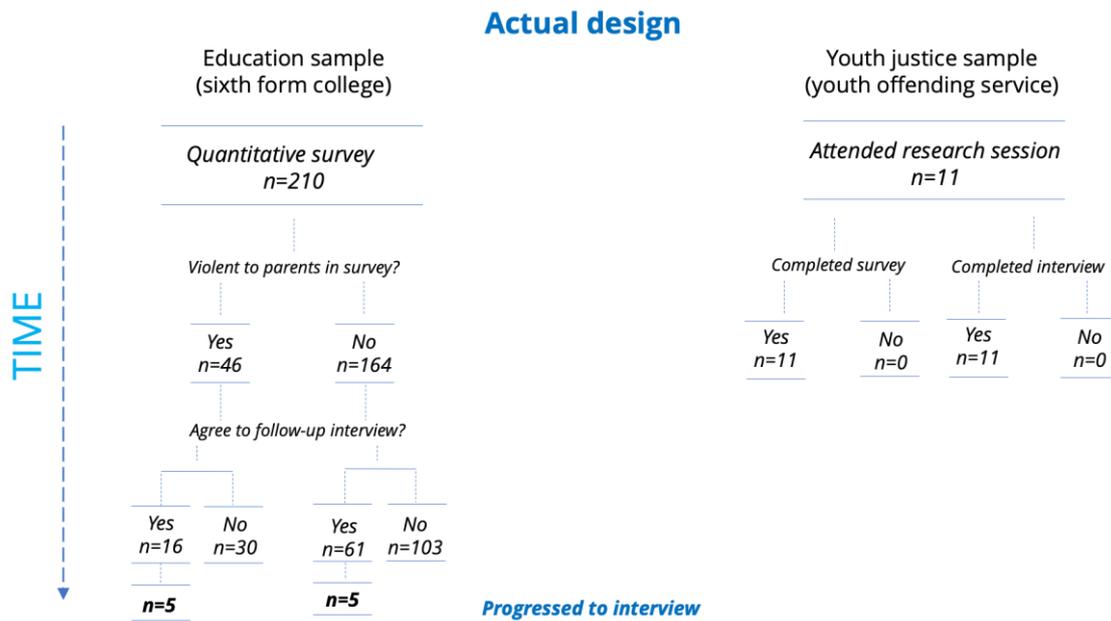
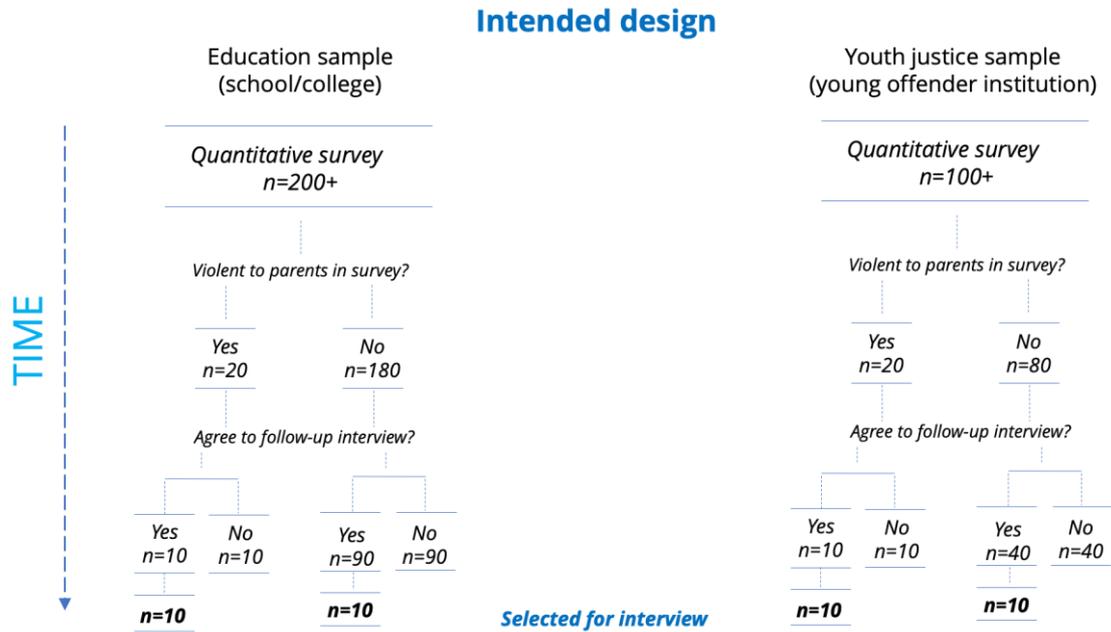
### *The sequencing of methods*

Originally, the intention was to use a sequential mixed methods design, with the quantitative survey to be completed initially with around 300 young people, to enable follow-up interviews with around 20 who had been violent towards parents (given that the prevalence of adolescent-to-parent physical violence is around 10% in the general population and not all young people would consent to a follow-up) and 20 who had not. However, in the end, this sequencing only took place at the college, as the youth offending service (YOS) (for reasons explored later) was much smaller in terms of the

numbers of young people it served and much more limited in its capacity to carry out a service-wide survey. Instead, a purposive sampling strategy was used to identify specifically (via key workers) those young people who either had come to the service due to their violence and abuse towards parents or who were considered at risk of such behaviour, and who would participate in both the survey and interview during a single one-to-one session. Despite the design differing across study sites – i.e. a concurrent mixed methods design at the YOS and a sequential mixed methods design in the college – the survey was still always completed first, with the interview following.

Thus, the final strategy was a sequential mixed methods design followed by a concurrent mixed methods design, with the qualitative component being the dominant strand across both. Although altering the research design across sites has the potential to introduce variance in the bias and research artifacts of the study, the practicalities of working within the YOS meant that this was the only option available. This limited the quantitative analysis to the further education sample, as the small size of the youth offending sample, combined with the fact that participants were purposively selected, meant that the dataset would have limited utility to answer the research questions. Furthermore, surveys and follow-up interviews at the college were separated by months, whereas in the YOS, participants completed the survey and interview within the same session – which could have meant differences in method concordance across the sites. See Figure 3.1 for a comparison of the intended and actual research designs.

Figure 3.1 Actual vs. intended study design and sequencing



## **Sampling**

### *Sample site recruitment and sampling methods*

Young people (221) were recruited via a combination of opportunity/convenience sampling at a sixth form college (210) and purposive sampling at a youth offending service (YOS) (11). Convenience and purposive sampling are forms of non-probability sampling, with the former selected because of the availability of participants and the latter to include participants with characteristics relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2016). Of the 210 participants who completed the initial cross-sectional survey at the college, 10 were recruited to take part in follow-up interviews via a combination of purposive and volunteer sampling (i.e. the surveys of those who volunteered for follow-up were analysed for the presence or absence of violence towards parents and recruited on that basis). All 11 young people selected by the YOS took part in both the survey and interview components.

In both sites the study managed to recruit only half the number of intended interviewees. In the college, despite the high numbers agreeing to follow-up in the survey, only 10 responded to follow-up emails. In the YOS, a number of young people using violence in their relationships did not wish to take part in the research and in some cases, staff felt that it would be too dangerous for me to carry out one-to-one interviews. It is important to remember that a number of these young people were in crisis and further, none of them were attending the YOS on a voluntary basis (this will be discussed further in the ethics section).

### *Education sample*

Initially, it was intended that a large sample of 15- to 18-year-olds would be drawn from schools within the London Borough of Barnet (my home borough), to provide a cross-sectional sample to investigate the prevalence and profile of parent abuse within a non-service population of adolescents (i.e. mainstream education). This age range was selected to match the age profile of young people residing in young offender institutions (the intended youth justice sample). Forty-nine schools in the London Borough of Barnet were contacted by letter, email and telephone between September

2015 and January 2016 (see Appendix 1). Schools were contacted if they had both male and female students, were non-religious, and had a sixth form. Unfortunately, none of the schools were able to take part in the research, potentially due to the high risk of identifying safeguarding issues in the home and the need to obtain parent consent for pupils under 16. Schools within the council area of Renfrewshire in Scotland (participating in a separate project with my employer) were also approached, but declined on the basis that the questions were too sensitive to be embedded into their wider well-being survey. Due to the difficulties in recruiting an education site and the time limitations, I used my own networks to identify a study site. Consequently, a sixth form college in south-east England agreed to participate in return for presenting a lecture on entering a career in social research and on the PhD experience. Students were studying A-level sociology and the departmental head was a personal contact.

Although necessary, using a convenience sample did limit the generalisability of the survey results to A-level sociology students within a further education setting. It also limited the age range of the education sample to young people between 16 and 18 years, meaning that prevalence and profile data could not be captured on younger adolescents. It also meant that the ability to compare themes across interviews by site and age was limited, as those in the youth justice sample were 14 to 17 years of age. Lastly, as the further education interview sample was determined, in part, by those young people who volunteered, this limited the sample to those willing or able to discuss their use of violence and abuse towards parents. They may not have been representative of all those students using violence and abuse at home.

Recruiting schools to participate in research projects is notoriously difficult, especially when researchers are unknown to them (Powers, 2007). Taking part in research can represent a risk to schools due to the legal responsibility they have for children within their care. There is also the possibility of both legal and reputational damage in the event that child well-being is impacted by the research, or that any safeguarding issues which arise are not properly dealt with. Such issues can act as barriers to school involvement – particularly in sensitive research – where there may be no obvious benefit to them or the students who take part. This was explored by Powers (2007) who stated that schools' main research priorities are those which further educational outcomes, with research into unrelated areas rarely being approved. It is therefore

important for researchers to prioritise how the research can benefit those participating in it, rather than being a one-way transaction solely of benefit to the researcher.

### *Youth justice sample*

The youth justice sample originally intended for the study was to come from a young offender institution (YOI) in England, where a potentially larger number of violent young offenders could be accessed in one location. Approval for the research was granted by NOMS (National Offender Management Service) and recruitment letters, emails and calls made to one YOI and three secure training centres between July and October 2016 (see Appendix 2). This process resulted in the successful recruitment of one YOI in the south of England. Unfortunately, the research relationship broke down, being unable to contact the worker assigned to support the study. As a result, a second recruitment campaign was directed at youth offending services in the north-west of England (near my new home), with eight emailed a research proposal in October 2017 (see Appendix 3). Although two responded positively, only one was taken up due to the lengthy research approval required by the other.

The YOS provided access to 11 young people aged 14 to 17 years, a number of whom had used violence towards parents. Recruitment took place in the context of the service wanting to further their understanding of young people involved in parent abuse, as this was an issue they were experiencing with increasing frequency – being dealt with via their ‘YP-DAM’ (Young Person’s Domestic Abuse Meeting)<sup>8</sup>. The hope was that the interviews with young people attending their service would provide insight into how they could improve their support for this cohort. Due to the smaller size of this service and the lack of capacity to carry out a service-wide survey, cases were selected using purposive sampling, among those who had either come into the service via the YP-DAM or had been identified as suitable by key workers. Purposive sampling was the most appropriate method, as it offered the greatest chance of gaining insight into the problem of adolescent-to-parent abuse. Although originally, ‘suitability’ meant that young people were using violence or abuse towards parents and were willing (and

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<sup>8</sup> The ‘YP-DAM’ was a multi-agency referral panel specifically designed for young people engaging in domestic abuse towards family members or intimate partners, that provided/brokered holistic support to try to address the issue to prevent domestic abuse offences and improve family relationships. It was hoped that the research could support a better understanding of those young people referred through this board. However, as recruiting proved difficult, not all participants came via the YP-DAM.

safe) to take part, due to poor participant uptake, the eligibility criteria was extended to include those young people with high parent conflict, those with histories of family violence or abuse, and those 'at risk' of using violence and abuse in their close relationships. The expanding of the eligibility criteria meant that not all participants from the YOS had used violence or abuse towards parents.

### *Parent abuse service sample*

To increase the number of participants with direct experience of adolescent-to-parent abuse, nine parent abuse services were emailed research proposals between July 2017 and June 2018 (see Appendix 4). Three services responded positively, with one attempting to organise recruitment. However, practitioners refused to recruit participants due to nervousness around engaging them during crisis. The remaining two organisations ceased contact before the research could commence. It is unclear why this happened, although may have been linked to the difficult economic context charitable organisations were (and still are) working within and the fact that the research would not have contributed to evidence of programme 'impact' (the study being descriptive-exploratory as opposed to evaluative).

### *An adolescent sample*

Originally, the research was to generate insight on adolescents within YOI and mainstream secondary school populations. The age range of students was to be matched to young offenders within YOIs (15 to 18 years), so that the populations would be more closely aligned and comparable. However, following conversations with the YOS recruited to the study, as well as other parent abuse services across England, it became apparent that the issue was more prevalent (at least within these services) in young people aged between 13 to 15 years. In response, the age range was extended to young people aged between 13 to 18 years.

Adolescents, rather than children, were chosen as the focus of the research because of the higher prevalence of parent abuse within this age range (see Chapter Two) and thus the greater likelihood that cases would be identified in the sample. In addition, adolescents have a greater ability to effectively verbalise complex feelings, thoughts,

and experiences, along with a greater capacity for self-reflection (Coleman, 2011; Nippold, 2007). The latter being vital for capturing insights into the nature of parent abuse, its contexts, causes and consequences via in-depth interviews.

It is important to recognise, however, that 'adolescents' are not a uniform group. Young people participating in the study were accessed via two very different systems – further education and youth justice – and, as such, likely represent distinct groups with distinct characteristics and backgrounds. These recruitment contexts were originally chosen in order to capture data from a diverse sample of young people, to understand whether there was an unmet need in the mainstream education population, and, via youth justice, to identify some of the more severe cases of parent abuse. Indeed, young people accessed within the context of the youth justice system are likely to sit at the most severe end of the parent abuse spectrum and their family relationships are more likely to be problematic. Young offenders are also much less likely than their non-offending peers to achieve five or more GCSEs (or equivalent) grade A\* - C , with only 5% of young people in receipt of a Youth Rehabilitation Order achieving such qualifications compared to 59% of young people within the general population (MoJ & DfE, 2016). Therefore, it is much less likely that the participants within the YOS would progress to post-16 education, meaning as a group, they likely differed to those A-level students recruited from the sixth form college. Further, there were also key socio-demographic differences between the two research sites: the college was situated in a local authority in south-east England with child poverty levels similar to the UK average (16%), whereas the YOS was based in a local authority in north-west England with double the levels of child poverty (32%) (End Child Poverty, 2018). That aside, although it is important to acknowledge these differences when analysing the data and drawing conclusions about parent abuse, the diversity of participants should be seen as a strength of the study. Including young people with a range of backgrounds and life experiences is essential in order to better understand the issue and how best to support young people with a variety of family histories and contexts.

## Data collection

### The survey component

#### *The use of a self-report survey*

Self-report surveys or questionnaires enable the collection of data from a large number of respondents using relatively low researcher resources, particularly relevant in the context of PhD research such as this, where one researcher is responsible for all data collection. Self-report surveys using a closed question format are easier to answer, quick, and generate data that can be used to support conclusions which, if done well, can be generalised to the wider populations from which the samples are drawn (Bryman, 2016). Closed format questions were of particular use in this study as they offered the opportunity to understand parent abuse prevalence, form, and victim/victimiser characteristics. Importantly for the further education sample, a self-report survey enabled data to be collected from a sufficient number of students to identify those suitable for follow-up interviews. Lastly, unlike other forms of survey research (such as surveys completed through structured interview), the use of self-reporting – particularly in research on interpersonal violence and abuse – can increase the amount of control felt by young people within the data collection process, whilst also reducing the impact of social desirability, making disclosure more likely (Bryman, 2016; Burton, Ward, Artz, & Leoshut, 2015; Radford, Lombard, Meinck, Katz, & Mahati, 2017).

#### *Straus' Conflict Tactics Scale*

An adapted version of Straus' Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2) (Straus, 1990) – originally a 39-item self-report survey designed to capture a range of conflict and conflict resolution behaviours between intimate partners – was used to collect data on parent abuse prevalence, the form behaviours took, their frequency, and the targets of such behaviour. In addition, the tool captured data on young people's conflict resolution behaviours and demographic information such as age and gender. For the further education sample, the survey also acted to inform the sampling for the follow-

up interviews and included a check box indicator where participants could indicate their preference for inclusion or exclusion at the interview stage.

The CTS2 includes 39 items across five scales of 'physical assault', 'psychological aggression' (including verbal aggression), 'injury', 'sexual coercion', and 'negotiation'. All 39 items are asked in relation to the respondent's behaviour, then their partner's (i.e. 'have they ever done this to you?'). The intention is to build up a picture of partner interaction and bidirectional conflict. Participants are asked to select a response to each behaviour statement along a Likert scale of 0 to 7, with each number corresponding to a frequency over the past year – e.g. '0 = This has never happened', '1 = Once in the past year', ... '4 = 6-10 times in the past year', ... '7 = Not in the past year, but it did happen before'. One of the tool's main strengths is that it focuses on concrete behaviours and events that have actually taken place (Straus et al., 1996) as well as providing an understanding of whether these relate to patterns of behaviour or one-off incidents. Asking about concrete 'acts' rather than broader (and more emotive) terms such as 'abuse' has been reported as more appropriate for surveys on interpersonal violence, as they encourage disclosure of a wider range of behaviours, thus providing more accurate estimates of prevalence (Mathews et al., 2020). In this study, a focus on specific acts (at least within the survey) was particularly important, given that young people may not have been familiar with the term 'parent abuse' and further, may not have framed their behaviour as abusive.

The CTS2 was considered appropriate due to its wide use within the family violence field and in research relating to child-to-parent violence specifically (e.g. Boxer et al., 2009; Browne & Hamilton, 1998). It is also well-regarded in terms of its statistical robustness (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Further, it covers a wide range of *potentially* abusive behaviours (both physical and non-physical), enabling a multidimensional definition of parent abuse to be explored. Other tools were considered, such as the Intra-Family Violence Scale (Ibabe et al., 2013) and the Adolescent Child-to-Parent Aggression Questionnaire (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2013). However, both captured only a limited range of (solely negative) conflict behaviours. This was also the case for the child-to-parent version of the CTS, which comprised just 9 of the original 39 items. In accordance with Smith's (1994) recommendations, it was felt that including a greater number of aggressive acts within

the survey would offer young people more opportunities for disclosure whilst also providing greater insight into the various dimensions of parent abuse.

### *Adaptations to the scale*

A number of adaptations were made to make the CTS2 suitable for capturing data on adolescent-to-parent abuse and its physical and non-physical forms. First, the focus of the questions was changed from partner to caregiver. In most cases, this involved substituting the word 'partner' with 'caregiver', although in one instance it meant rewording an item. In response to pilot-test feedback from two young people (external to the study participants) aged 13 and 16 years, some American English words were replaced with their British English counterparts (e.g. 'garden' rather than 'yard') while some were replaced with more age-appropriate terminology (e.g. 'upset on purpose' rather than 'to spite'). Further, although the original tool was bidirectional, the adapted version focused solely on those behaviours enacted *by* the young person. This was to reduce completion time, response burden and minimise the possibility of parent-to-child aggression questions acting as barriers to recruitment (for more risk-averse sites). Further, following up on all reports of parent-to-child aggression would have been beyond the study's resources. However, in order to identify behaviours that were in response to violence and aggression *from* parents, a question was added to the end of the survey: '*Did you do any of the above because your caregiver was violent or aggressive to you first?*' and then, '*If you have circled "YES", would you like to speak to anyone about this?*' (see 'Ethical issues' for details on confidentiality limits and safeguarding). A further text box allowed respondents to add any relevant additional information. It was felt that by giving respondents the opportunity to add further details or speak to someone about potential parent-to-child aggression, the research achieved the balance between ethics and pragmatism.

Several items were also removed, and some added (see Appendix 5). This included the sexual coercion items, since it was felt that the prevalence of adolescent-to-parent sexual abuse would most likely be extremely low (see Holt, 2013 for a discussion) and that retaining them could potentially hamper site recruitment and participant engagement. Items added included those relating to financial and psychological abuse specific to the child-parent dynamic. For the most part, item ordering reflected the

original CTS2. However, as participants could read them all before completing any, order effects were less of an issue.

The alteration of some items had the potential to negatively affect the construct validity of the scales. This was particularly relevant for the psychological aggression scale, where the severe psychological aggression item '*I accused my partner of being a lousy lover*' was replaced with '*I told my caregiver they were a bad parent to hurt their feelings*', to make it relevant to the context of parent abuse but in keeping with the intention of the original item. An item representing a psychological 'tactic' characteristic of parent abuse was also added: '*I threatened to hurt myself if my caregiver didn't do something I told them to do*'. Lastly, the two financial abuse items created specifically for the study have yet to be validated through statistical analysis. Although adding and amending items can compromise the construct validity of survey scales (Juniper, 2009; Mathews et al., 2020), it was considered important to capture behaviours specific to the parent-child dynamic. Unfortunately, the data was too limited to carry out any tests of internal consistency (reliability) or validity.

Response options were also changed as it was felt that it would be difficult for respondents to know exactly how many times over a 12-month period they had carried out certain behaviours. Instead of eight response options ranging from 0 to 7, the survey had five: 'Never', 'Once', 'Sometimes', 'Frequently' and '\*' – which indicated that the behaviour had taken place but not in the previous year. Although fewer response options facilitated the completion of the survey, the use of such descriptive frequency terms made the tool less precise.

In response to observations on the tool made as part of the research application with the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), the survey was adapted to allow respondents to answer in relation to any individuals they viewed as caregivers. Participants were asked to list all of their caregivers, assign them an initial, then respond to each question using those initials. As respondents could choose their epithets – e.g. 'stepdad', 'Mum', 'Nan', etc. – this avoided alienating respondents who may not have been willing to refer to step-parents as 'Mum' or 'Dad', or who may not have had a mother or father at home. The tool's flexibility allowed for the expression of a diverse range of family structures and also a more nuanced analysis of parent gender and parent role (see Appendix 6 for the full survey).

## *Limitations of the tool*

One of the major critiques of the CTS made by feminist domestic violence researchers is its focus on 'acts' at the expense of the *contexts* within which those acts take place (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; 2004). This results in a hierarchy of acts that do not take into account the motivations for using violence (which, for example, may include self-defence) or the physical disparities that may exist between those using violence and those who are the targets of it. For example, according to the survey, a slap is considered 'minor' physical violence, whereas a kick is considered 'severe'. However, due to a lack of contextual information, this means that a kick delivered by a small woman or child in self-defence is categorised as more severe than a slap delivered by, for instance, a large man, despite the latter having a greater capacity for harm. Although this was partially addressed within the CTS2 by including items relating to physical injury<sup>9</sup>, it still reflects only a 'physical incident model' of abuse (Katz, 2015; Stark, 2007), with no recognition of the emotional harm caused by such violence or the impact of ongoing violence and abuse.

The lack of contextual information in the CTS has led to a number of studies playing down the gendered nature of intimate partner violence, despite evidence to the contrary highlighting that women are by far the most likely victims and men the most likely perpetrators (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Hamby, 2014). Studies investigating this gender 'symmetry' have found that although it may seem that a similar proportion of women use physical violence within intimate relationships, their motivation is often defensive, the violence less frequent, and its impacts less harmful (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). Further, men are more likely to use controlling behaviour (Dobash & Dobash, 2004), an aspect of intimate partner abuse not captured by the survey. Recognising the importance of coercive control in partner abuse, items were added relating to the use of threats to coerce partners into actions they may not otherwise have done. Finally, by comparing partners' accounts, studies have also highlighted that men are more likely to under-report and women over-report their use of violence (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). This is not necessarily surprising given that male perpetrators of partner abuse often justify, minimise and blame their use of violence and abuse on victims (Cavanagh, Dobash, Dobash, & Lewis, 2001). These tendencies must be taken into consideration

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<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, as one of the injury questions (item 6) was reversed in error, the parent injury scale was not included in the analysis. However, low reporting across the other injury items (and physical aggression items) suggests prevalence would likely have been low.

when interpreting the survey (and interview) data, particularly in relation to how boys and girls may differentially report and construct their use of violence. This is particularly relevant given that an initial analysis of the survey data identified higher proportions of physically and non-physically aggressive behaviour in the female population of college students.

Other survey limitations became apparent through the course of data collection. Questions asked by student participants made it clear that the survey could not account for the intention behind actions (i.e. play fighting or calling names in jest). However, triangulating survey responses with interview accounts would allow for an examination of context and intention – at least, for a limited number of participants. This would help interrogate the instrument for its utility in identifying cases of adolescent-to-parent abuse. Lastly, an initial analysis of the survey data suggested that participants often behaved more aggressively towards mothers than fathers. Although the survey data itself could not provide greater insight into this, the follow-up interviews could, enabling an examination of the various family relationships and the role played by gender in determining the shape of abuse.

### *Survey administration and participation*

The survey was completed initially by 210 students in a sixth form college and by 11 young people fulfilling various legal orders at a youth offending service, giving a total of 221 completed surveys. At the college, non-probability convenience sampling was used, with the data collection taking place in one session with those students attending their sociology class during that period on that day. This represented 264 AS and A2 (A-level) sociology students in total, of whom 210 (79.5%) decided to participate. Thus, the final sample represented 37.5% of the 560 sociology students attending the college at that time. Although a response rate of around 80% is considered a good standard for self-report surveys given that the likelihood of non-response bias is low (Bryman, 2016; Draugalis, Coons, Plaza, & Draugalis, 2008), the lack of demographic information for non-attendees (i.e. the remaining 296 sociology students at the college) makes it difficult to say whether the sample was representative of all sociology students attending the college at the time. Completer and non-completer characteristics are explored in the following chapter.

Data was collected at the beginning of the academic year (see Figure 3.3), to ensure there was enough time to carry out follow-up interviews and to reduce study drop-out. A short period of time between completion of the initial survey (where adolescent-to-parent violence may have been identified) and follow-up interviews, was likely to give more accurate recollections of past events.

Students completed the survey during one, 90-minute session at the college in October 2016, supervised by myself and a number of the teachers whose classes were attending. Students sat next to each other in a lecture theatre. Data collection was embedded in a session I delivered on pursuing a career in social research and studying for a PhD – useful input which meant both the college and students were getting something out of the research experience. Once the lecture was finished, the research was introduced and students invited to participate. A full account of participant rights was provided to ensure consent was fully informed. Those students wishing to complete the survey ( $n = 210, 79.5\%$ ) then did so (after completing the consent form) while those who did not ( $n = 54, 20.5\%$ ) were invited to answer a social research quiz in the data-collection pack provided. This was provided so that students would not be able to distinguish between those who had and those who had not decided to take part and between those who had more or less to say in their surveys (Barter, McCarry, Berridge, & Evans, 2009). It also meant those who finished early would be occupied while others were finishing. Students were asked to complete the surveys in silence and to raise their hands if they had any questions, which some did. These questions mainly concerned the motivations behind the actions, i.e. whether hitting in jest should be included. However, the in-person design of the data-collection session helped to ameliorate this issue.

One major limitation of the data collection environment was students' close proximity to one another, which resulted in some discussing their answers with others or being able to see the answers of those nearby. This may have resulted in responses biased by social desirability or in students deciding not to participate for fear of peers seeing their answers.

Unfortunately, as ethnicity questions were not embedded in the survey, ethnicity data was collected retrospectively from those students attending the survey session, with registers sent to classrooms with the names of those students in attendance

(completers and non-completers). Students were asked to choose from a list of 18 ethnicity categories, as recommended for use by the UK government (HM Government, n.d.) and record it in a box next to their name. These were then matched to the surveys via the participant consent forms. Unfortunately, there was no option to follow-up with those young people attending the YOS, as many were only there for a limited time.

Survey sampling in the YOS was purposive, with potential participants identified by their key worker based on whether they felt the young person had either direct experience of parent abuse, or of family conflict more broadly. Unfortunately, recruitment to the study was more challenging than the YOS had anticipated, with many young people with direct experience of parent abuse either not wanting to take part in the interviews or being too violent to be interviewed alone safely. For those who did take part, survey administration took place at the beginning of a one-to-one session with myself, sat alone in a quiet and pleasant therapy room at the YOS offices. These one-to-one sessions varied in length between 30 and 90 minutes, with the survey taking around 10 minutes. The sessions took place between March and June 2018.

Participant rights were explained fully at the beginning of each session to ensure consent was fully informed. This was particularly important within the context of the YOS sessions, due to the power dynamic of participants attending a service compulsorily as part of their legal order. Most completed the survey alone, although in some cases assistance was given in reading particular words or explaining certain questions. Although this can be explained, in part, by the inclusion of younger participants, it is also reflective of the evidence on the lower reading ability and higher special educational needs (SEN) in young offender populations (Gregory & Bryan, 2011; MoJ & DfE, 2016). Once the surveys were completed, they were put to one side, rather than read during the session. At the end of the session, participants were given a £20 voucher to thank them for their time.

### **The interview component**

Reflecting the aims of the study, a method was required that would centre the voices of young people and shed light on their inner worlds, perceptions and lived experiences. A qualitative, in-depth method was considered the best way to give participants the space to explore their often highly sensitive personal and family histories (Elam & Fenton, 2003), as well as their thoughts and feelings about violence and abuse towards

parents. Such an approach reflects 'the epistemological and ontological stance that knowledge and reality can only be sought from those who experience it' (Elmir, Schmied, Jackson, & Wilkes, 2011, p. 13) and is reflected in this study, in the use of in-depth interviews.

### *Semi-structured in-depth interviews*

In-depth interviews can be unstructured or semi-structured, allowing for the collection of data that is rich in context, process and personal narrative (Bryman, 2016). Unlike structured interviews originating from the quantitative tradition of research, which reflect the framing and emphasis of the researcher, in-depth interviews are qualitative in nature, focusing on eliciting the perspectives of interviewees themselves (Bryman, 2016). This makes them 'a powerful method for generating description and interpretation of people's social worlds' (Yeo et al., 2014, p. 178). Semi-structured interviews have an inbuilt degree of flexibility, allowing participants (to varying degrees) to control the direction the interview takes. As a result, insights and themes unanticipated by the researcher can emerge – a characteristic reflective of a feminist approach to research, whereby interviewees' voices and experiences are prioritised (Stanley & Wise, 1990). Through the use of open-ended questions, and their participant-led nature, in-depth interviews can last from 10 minutes to several hours. They can take place just once or repeatedly, and can be in-person, by telephone or online. In this study, participants were interviewed just once and in person, with in-person interviewing allowing for the reading of non-verbal cues and helping rapport develop between researcher and participant.

Yeo and colleagues (2014, pp. 183-184) note several key functions of the qualitative in-depth interview which are relevant here:

- they *combine structure with flexibility* – although interviews are typically participant-led and thus able to take new directions, they are still structured around certain topics the researcher wants to cover;
- they are *interactive* – the coverage and depth of information captured and its meaning is determined by the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee;

- they involve *getting below the surface* – through the use of prompts and probes, interviewers guide participants to explore their social worlds deeply and analytically;
- they can be *generative* – encouraging the generation of new insights and ways of thinking, both for the interviewer and interviewee;
- they place an emphasis on the *importance of language* – encouraging a focus not only on *what* is said, but also on *how* it is said.

Such characteristics make in-depth interviews particularly suitable for navigating and gaining depth of knowledge in relation to areas of investigation such as parent abuse, which are still relatively early in their conceptualisation and require sensitive navigation through potentially distressing areas of discussion.

### *The influence of feminist methodological concepts*

Qualitative interviews are seen (particularly by feminist researchers) as providing an alternative method to those associated with the positivist research tradition, which are considered inadequate for capturing the complexity of women's lives (Doucet & Mauthner, 2012). With their capacity to reveal participants' inner worlds and lived experiences, qualitative interviews are particularly well-placed to investigate sensitive subjects such as domestic abuse and family violence (see 'Ethical issues' later in this chapter), making visible the previously invisible, and giving participants greater power within the research process (Stanley & Wise, 1990). Feminist methodological concepts are reflected in this study's interview design and process, being concerned with issues of power differentials and hierarchical relations, the co-construction of meaning and identities, and the importance of empathy and rapport in the interview process (Doucet & Mauthner, 2012). Although in-depth interviews are not a feminist *method* per se, as Gayle Letherby (2007, p. 81) states, 'it is not the use of a particular method or methods which characterizes a researcher or a project as feminist, but the way in which the method(s) are used.'

Characteristics reflecting a feminist methodology included the consideration of rapport, empathy, reciprocity and self-disclosure to help address (although not totally) the inevitable power differential within the interviews. Establishing good rapport within

the context of qualitative interviewing is vital, both in terms of its ability to aid deeper engagement (Booth & Booth, 1994), and in generating a positive research experience for the participant that does not traumatise, oppress or exploit (Doucet & Mauthner, 2012). Issues of power differentials and hierarchy were particularly relevant in this project given I was an adult, a woman, a professional, and some of the young people participating did so within the context of legal orders (i.e. they did not have to take part in the interviews, but they did have to complete their compulsory time at the YOS). All of these factors will have intersected to determine how the interview played out, the identities brought to the interview (by participants and myself) and the information disclosed by the young people participating.

To attempt to address some of these power differentials, a number of 'activities' were performed before and during the interview:

- time spent before the interview explaining that the session was about understanding *their* experiences, they could disclose as much or as little as they wanted, and could stop at any time they wished;
- at the beginning of the interview, time was spent discussing activities participants liked, to build rapport and to give them a chance to get used to the interview dynamic;
- humour was used within the interview where possible (and where appropriate), to try to relax participants;
- understanding and empathy were demonstrated by using phrases such as 'that must have been difficult for you', 'that doesn't sound very nice', etc.;
- similarities between interviewees' lives and my own were highlighted – including topics such as subjects studied at college and shared enjoyment of specific leisure activities;
- finally, the use of self-disclosure to make the interview dynamic more reciprocal in nature.

Feminist conceptualisations of the process of qualitative interviewing also include the construction of researcher and participant identities within the interview space (Doucet & Mauthner, 2012). For interviewees, this can mean the creation of identities which aid the process of healing, particularly with regard to sensitive interviews on surviving

violence, abuse or other trauma (Taylor, 2002). In this respect, interviews can be cathartic, not only in terms of voicing experiences which may previously have gone unspoken, but in the creation of positive identities which participants can take beyond the interview context. This was demonstrated in this study when participants constructed their interview participation as being helpful to others – a narrative which increased their positive self-regard.

### *Interview structure*

In-depth interviews were used to explore young people's experiences and perceptions of adolescent-to-parent abuse – some having had direct experience of it and some not. This was done to avoid stigmatising those invited to take part in a follow-up interview as well as to capture insights into healthy, non-violent relationships with parents and how they may differ to parent-child relationships involving abuse. Interviews were intended to generate insights into the nature of parent abuse and its contexts, young people's motivations and perceptions, the impact it had on young people and their families, and their thoughts on how to help those experiencing it. In-depth interviews allowed participants to explore what they felt was relevant to discuss in relation to the issue, without being overly constraining. However, to ensure that the data generated would provide adequate insight to answer the research questions, an interview topic guide was developed to help guide the interview (see Appendix 7).

By speaking with practitioners working with young people using violence and abuse at home, it was decided that a structure which would guide interviewees through their most recent episodes of violence and abuse towards parents, their first-ever episode, and then their worst-ever episode, would be useful in stimulating recollection of past events. It would also help to provide greater understanding of the antecedents of violence within these contexts. This structure reflects the 'context specific approach' to interviews developed and used by feminist domestic violence researchers Dobash and Dobash (1983) in their critique of the CTS. As interviews were carried out with both abusive and non-abusive adolescents, it was decided that for the latter the questions would be framed with regard to conflict with parents more broadly, to get a sense of the presentation of non-abusive conflict and to identify points where negotiation/conflict resolution skills were used.

Interviews began by building rapport, asking interviewees about college or leisure activities. This gave them a chance to relax into the interview and familiarise themselves with the interviewer-interviewee dynamic. They then progressed to discussing relationships at home and the dynamics between family members. Next, the interviews discussed conflict (and where applicable, violence and abuse), using the practitioner-recommended structure previously described. Interviewees were asked initially to describe episodes, before being asked why they felt they had been violent or abusive; factors, contexts or dynamics that they felt had contributed; and how it had impacted upon themselves and others. Those not violent or aggressive were asked similar questions in relation to non-violent conflict, before being encouraged to talk about why they thought young people might be violent to their parents; why they felt they were not; and how common an issue they thought it was. All interviewees were then asked how they resolved conflict at home and the techniques they used to calm themselves when feeling angry or frustrated. Those who had been violent or abusive to parents but were no longer violent or abusive were asked to reflect on what had changed and why. The final section of the interview discussed what could help families experiencing the issue. The interview finished by moving on to lighter subjects to help ease participants out of discussions on sensitive topics. Throughout the interviews, prompts and probes were used to gain depth – techniques characteristic of the in-depth interview method (Yeo et al., 2014).

Although the topic guide was created before interviewing began, aspects were added as the interviews progressed. For example, some of the student interviewees discussed the importance of having their own space at home, as well as outlining and critiquing some of the services they had received. These issues were then added to subsequent interviews in an iterative process of refinement, which can be helpful in covering areas not previously identified during the initial stages of interview design.

For interviews with YOS participants, additional topics of discussion were added as to how the service had or had not helped with respect to their violence towards parents, and how they might change the service to provide more effective support. This component was added to give the YOS insight into how effective their current provision was and areas for improvement. However, interviewees found it difficult to pinpoint any specific interventions or inputs they had received as regards addressing their violence and abuse towards parents, and this was fed back to the service. In retrospect, it may

have been better to discuss the inputs received by participants in advance of the interviews to enable more effective prompting.

### *Terminology used within interviews*

The term 'parent abuse' was not used within the interviews as it was felt that applying such a label to behaviour could be distressing if participants had not previously conceptualised it in that way. It also had the potential to act as a barrier to establishing a non-judgmental, safe space where they could openly discuss sensitive and personal subjects. Instead, the terms 'family conflict', 'violence' and 'aggression' were considered to be more appropriate.

### *Pilot testing*

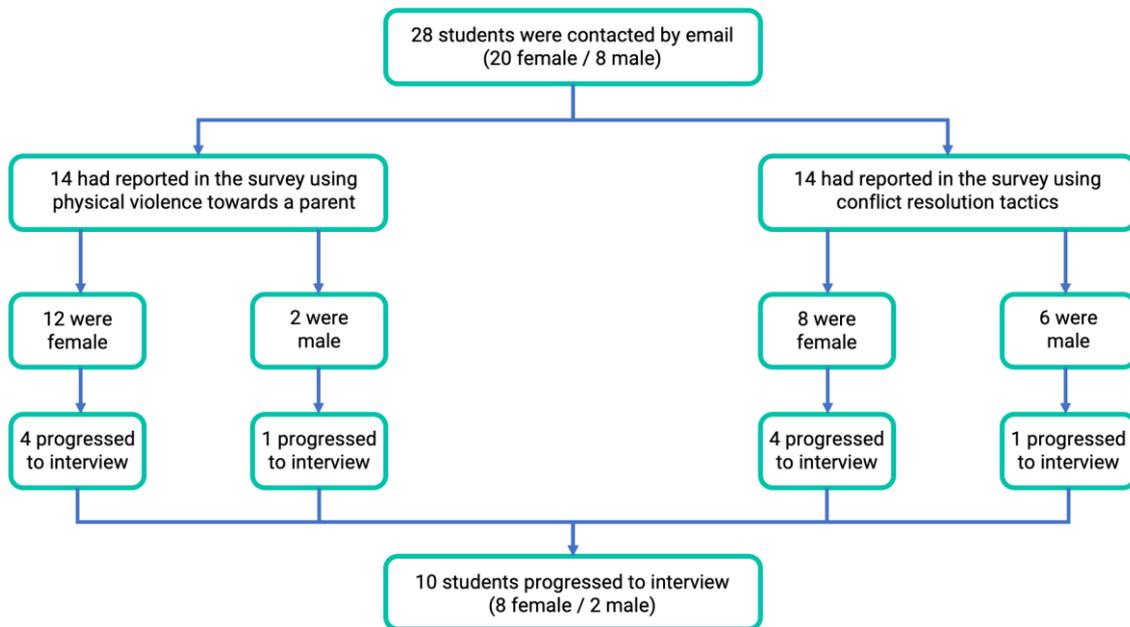
The interview was pilot tested and discussed with one 16-year-old male who was not part of the final sample. As a result, it was decided that all participants would be asked about conflict with parents and how they attempted to resolve conflict or regulate their emotions during conflict. Originally, it was intended that only those young people who reported using violence and abuse would be asked to discuss violence at home and conflict with parents, with those not reporting violence (and only those) asked questions around conflict resolution. Discussions with the pilot test participant revealed the value in keeping the topic guide more open to a range of varying experiences – particularly given that relational dynamics can vary significantly between family members. Furthermore, the discussion of varying experiences allowed for comparisons between contexts – i.e. times when violence did or did not occur and what may have been different.

### *Interview administration and participation*

The interviews were completed by 10 students at the college and by all 11 participants at the YOS, giving a total interview sample of 21. For the further education sample, sampling was purposive, selected by the researcher initially if there was any adolescent-to-parent physical violence reported in the survey, then latterly, if conflict resolution 'tactics' were reported. Only those participants who had agreed to follow-up

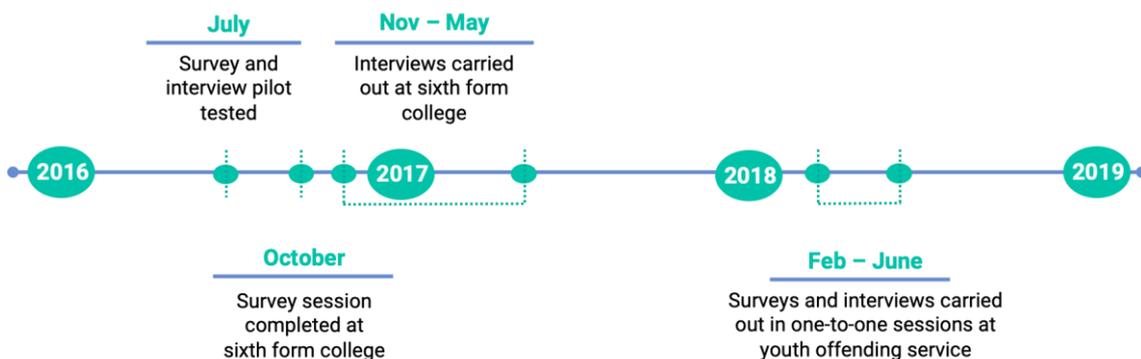
interviews were contacted by email (see Appendix 8). Figure 3.2 below illustrates the purposive sampling process used in the college.

Figure 3.2: Purposive sampling of 10 student interviewees



For the further education sample, interviews were carried out during the day in students' free periods, in a quiet and private room at the college. They lasted between 22 and 97 minutes and were digitally audio recorded. For the youth justice sample, interviews took place within the same one-to-one session as the survey, after the surveys had been completed. Consent for the interviews was re-established once the surveys had been completed and, once again, the interviews were digitally recorded.

Figure 3.3: Data collection timeline



## Data analysis

### Quantitative survey data

Data was input manually from the data-collection sheets into an SPSS Statistics database, where all data cleaning and analyses took place. Raw data corresponded directly to the categories of the Likert scale used in the survey. Due to the small number of young people reporting violent and aggressive behaviour to parents, only descriptive statistics were performed and reported. This meant that no statistical analyses of the potential contributions of parent/adolescent gender, adolescent age, study site, or ethnicity could be carried out. Further, no analyses could be done to examine the relationships *between* different forms of aggression. Although this was disappointing, it was felt that reporting any inferential statistics could potentially be misleading.

Frequency tables were generated on each item to establish the prevalence of all types of conflict behaviours. Cross-tabulation was used to break this down by gender of parent and adolescent for comparison. Items were then aggregated to form composite variables representing the subscales in the survey. All items were then recoded into new dichotomous variables to establish the proportions of young people who had:

- ever used a behaviour (including prior to the 12 months preceding the survey);
- had used a behaviour *at least once* (within the last 12 months);
- had used a behaviour *more than once* (within the last 12 months);
- had used a behaviour *frequently* (within the last 12 months).

Frequencies, proportions and cross-tabulation by parent and adolescent gender were then performed on all recoded items and subscales. Finally, to identify cases most likely representing cases of parent 'abuse', thresholds combining the various scales were developed and applied to the dataset, again coded dichotomously (see Chapter Five for details).

## Qualitative interview data

### *Thematic analysis*

The qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews was analysed using thematic analysis, a foundational 'process' of analysing qualitative data that involves 'identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning (or "themes")' (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 84). An approach that underpins many of the major qualitative analytic traditions (Braun & Clarke, 2006), it has greater flexibility and accessibility than approaches such as interpretive phenomenological analysis or conversation analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) but still provides a rich and detailed account of the data (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Being mainly inductive, it has a 'descriptive and exploratory orientation' (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, p. 6), although unlike approaches such as grounded theory, it can also be used deductively. This means that analyses can interrogate the data for its applicability to other concepts and theories pre-existing in the research literature. This was useful within the context of this study, as the field of adolescent-to-parent abuse is relatively theory-rich, requiring a critical analysis of what already exists. Further, thematic analysis also fits comfortably within the context of a mixed methods project, its application suited to essentialist, realist, relativist and social constructionist frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2012). Importantly, it was a suitable method for answering this study's research questions concerned with experiences, feelings, understandings, perceptions, behaviour and influencing factors (Clarke & Braun, 2016; Guest et al., 2012). As such, thematic analysis shares the characteristics of phenomenology, 'which seeks to understand the meanings that people give to their lived experiences and social reality' (Guest et al., 2012, p. 12).

Clarke and Braun (2016) outline a six-phase process for using thematic analysis systematically and robustly: data familiarisation; data coding; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and writing up. This process was used in this study's analysis although, given the fluid and iterative nature of thematic analysis, it was not always linear.

### *A supplemental discursive analysis*

As a flexible process that can be used across a range of analytic approaches, thematic analysis was also useful in that it allowed for a supplemental analysis of *how* young people *spoke* about violence and abuse towards parents. Drawing on discursive psychology (a form of discourse analysis) (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wiggins, 2017), young people's words, phrases, use of metaphors, 'rhetorical devices' and forms of talking were examined and compared to those of adult male domestic violence perpetrators (as explored in Adams, Towns, & Gavey, 1995; Cavanagh et al., 2001; Dobash & Dobash, 1998; LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011; Stamp & Sabourin, 1995). Discursive psychology was an appropriate analytical method given that it examines *accountability* within talk (LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011), suitable for exploring perpetrator accounts of violence and abuse as they often do the work of justifying, minimising and denying violence. This is in line with a social constructionist understanding of the social world, where language is framed as reality-constructing and performative of social actions (Coyle, 2016). This is the first parent abuse study to analyse young people's 'talk' in this way. However, being a supplemental analysis – carried out in response to noticing young people's use of minimising words and phrases – the analysis was only partial, structured (similar to Cavanagh et al., 2001) according to Goffman's (1971) four 'tactics of accounting'. The findings suggest that future studies could apply and develop this analytical method to provide a more detailed examination of young people's parent abuse 'talk'.

### *Analysis process*

Interviews were digitally audio recorded, transcribed verbatim (including all colloquial terms, pauses, and partially-formed words as spoken), anonymised using pseudonyms (in some cases using names picked by interviewees), and uploaded to the analysis software NVivo, where the majority of interview analyses occurred. Interviews were transcribed verbatim to capture the authentic voices of young people. This is very much in line with the humanistic and anthropological tradition which seeks to give voice to "the other" (Guest et al., 2012) and their lived experiences. After completing each transcription, a summary sheet was written detailing key characteristics of the participant and interview, such as age, gender, study sample, household and family structure, history, relationships and a brief overview of the nature of violent and

abusive behaviour towards parents (if any). These summaries not only served to provide a good understanding of the interview coverage, but also helped to provide a narrative of each case, ensuring that the uniqueness and wholeness of each interview were not lost through the analysis process. In addition, reflective notes were made on how I felt during the interview, my perception of the interviewee, and the rapport developed. This drew mainly on my recollections of the interviews (prompted by listening to the recordings) but also on field notes taken at the time. Interviewees were informed I would be taking field notes before interviews commenced.

Data quality was assessed via reading of the transcripts and making reflective notes. The data quality was variable, with some participants able to answer in depth regarding their thoughts, feelings, and motivations, with others unable or choosing not to engage with questions. This tended to vary with age, with those around 16 and over having greater insight into their behaviour. This could also have been due to interviewees finding it easier to discuss behaviour that had ceased but finding it hard when they were still engaging in them. Typically, those aged around 14 were less emotionally mature and less articulate, and were often involved in current abuse towards parents, making their responses more defensive in nature. I attempted to mitigate this within the interviews by empathising with their experiences as much as possible and by taking an open and non-judgmental (although non-collusive) approach.

Once all interviews had been transcribed, an initial coding framework was developed in Excel for use in NVivo, based on five interviews deemed the richest in terms of their breadth and depth of coverage (including male and female, further education and youth justice, violent and non-violent). These interviews were coded by hand on paper copies, with codes developed and noted in the margins to describe key concepts. Initially, to ensure the reliability of coding, blind coding was carried out on two interviews with the supervision team (one male, YOS, non-violent, and one female, college, violent) and then discussed. I then coded the remaining three interviews myself and collated all five into a comprehensive coding framework. This included main codes (parent codes) which were broken down into three levels of sub-codes (child codes). Codes also reflected the study's research questions and its theoretical framework, reflecting an ecological and gendered understanding of violence, and a sociological framing of childhood. Refinement of the framework included some collapsing and reframing of codes. The coding framework was then added to NVivo in the form of 'nodes' which

were then used as the basis for coding all 21 interviews. Codes were applied to 'segments' of text – an approach which allows for embedded codes and provides greater flexibility and nuance (Guest et al., 2012). Where the need for new codes arose, these were added as new nodes in NVivo and added to the codebook in Excel (see Appendix 9 for the final codebook).

An Excel database summarising key variables across all 21 interviews was also developed (see Appendix 10 for the list of variables), making it easier to identify the key patterns across the sample and the characteristics of individual interviews. It also allowed for a comparison between the interview and survey to assess concordance. Information captured included interviewee demographics, composition of the home, whether the young person had experiences of family violence or abuse, or insight into parent abuse, the main interview themes, and reflections on the interviewee. Entries into the database were made immediately after coding to ensure themes were fresh in my mind.

Once all interviews had been coded and the summary database completed, an analytic plan was developed to focus and structure the analysis in NVivo. This is a recommended approach in applied thematic analysis as it focuses on the purpose of the analysis and the most systematic method for achieving that goal (Guest et al., 2012). The plan was structured according to the study's research questions, with analysis objectives that included describing, exploring and (where possible) explaining the phenomenon of adolescent-to-parent abuse. The analysis also sought to interrogate some of the key pre-existing theories, as well as serving a comparative function; with a dataset comprising two samples – further education and youth justice – the analysis would need to assess for similarities and differences between them. Other groups also required comparison, such as violent and non-violent adolescents. Lastly, as the research aimed to provide policy and practice recommendations, the analysis needed to be focused accordingly. The following description reflects the final analysis performed.

Initially, all material within each node in NVivo (main codes and sub-codes) was reviewed to obtain an overview of the emergent themes. Subsequently, those codes corresponding directly to the study's research questions, e.g. 'APVA Causes', 'APVA Impact' were explored, with codes and sub-codes compared for their usage, i.e. how

much material and from how many interviewees was assigned to each code. The query function in NVivo was used to identify material that fell into multiple categories – e.g. ‘APVA Impact’ **and** ‘Parent’, or ‘APVA Causes’ **and** ‘Child’ **and** ‘Mental health problems’. This enabled the analysis to be focused around specific emerging themes. Analyses of the relationships *between* codes were also carried out using numeric matrices, identifying, for example, those codes which often appeared together, such as ‘Parenting’ **and** ‘Child agency’, or ‘Fathers’ **and** ‘Past trauma’. This approach revealed the interconnectedness of codes, building up a deeper understanding of the themes in the data, the phenomenon itself, and the experiences of the young people interviewed. Beyond those codes directly representing the study’s research questions, others were systematically reviewed and assessed for their relevance. Patterns of codes with clear *central organising concepts* underpinning them then formed the basis of themes (Clarke & Braun, 2016). The process of identifying the central organising concepts of themes is an important aspect of thematic analysis as it ‘ensures that each theme is internally coherent and distinctive’ (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 93). The key themes identified in the analysis were then reviewed, defined, named and written up, with excerpts from interviews used to illustrate and ‘bring alive’ the findings. This also ensured that the findings were grounded in the data and reflected the voices of the young people interviewed.

Analyses were initially performed on the dataset as a whole, before continuing *across* the dataset, looking for differences and similarities between the various groups – i.e. those based on gender, sample, abuse/no abuse. This resulted in greater nuance in terms of understanding adolescents as a heterogenous rather than homogenous group.

## **Data integration**

Data integration – a vital aspect of the mixed methods approach – can involve integration at the point of design, data collection, analyses, and interpretation (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). In this study, integration took place at all four stages, with the interview sampling at the college informed by the survey data. It also took place during analysis, with the creation of a data summary sheet to enable comparison of qualitative and quantitative data, as well as during the final stage of interpretation, where conclusions were drawn using findings from both the

quantitative and qualitative analyses. Lastly, data integration also took place through the presentation and communication of the research. Data from the qualitative component was used to interrogate and expand on the quantitative results, in addition to answering its own separate set of research questions. Where findings from the surveys and interviews contradicted or challenged one another, this was reflected upon and suggestions for divergence made.

## **Ethical issues**

### **Child participation in research on violence**

The main ethical issues considered were the balancing of young people's rights to participate and be heard, with their right to protection from exploitation and harm – principles laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) (Daley, 2015). Further, there was also a balance to be struck between protecting children at the individual level (as participants) and in protecting the wider group of children and adolescents, who may benefit from research that produces knowledge to prevent violence and importantly, research that more accurately reflects their experiences and perspectives (Daley, 2015; Smith & IPSCAN, 2016). This is important as historically, definitions and responses to crime and violence have been shaped by adult understandings (Radford et al., 2017).

Reflecting the perspectives of childhood studies, this research positions young people as active social agents who have the right to be heard in matters affecting them (James & Prout, 1990). Over the last 20 years, this framing of children has resulted in an increase in family violence research which 'engages directly with children as expert informants on their own lives and lived experiences' (Øverlien & Holt, 2019, p. 2), generating greater insight into 'what it means to be a child and live with violence in their experiences' (Øverlien & Holt, 2019, p. 4). Such a perspective is essential if we are to understand young people's experiences of adolescent-to-parent abuse and how best to support them – an aspect of the issue currently informed by the views of parents and practitioners. This is also particularly important given the high overlap between the various forms of family violence (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Holt, 2009) – something confirmed through the findings of this study.

The increase in child participation in family violence research reflects a broader consensus that involving children meaningfully in social research is important as they may hold perspectives that differ from those of parents, practitioners or policymakers (Powell et al., 2018). However, that is not to say that it is *always* appropriate to include children and young people in social research. There must be a robust rationale for doing so, as well as appropriate methods and safeguards through which to include children in a meaningful and non-exploitative way, incurring no harm to their well-being (Smith & IPSCAN, 2016). This can be especially difficult when investigating socially 'sensitive' topics such as adolescent-to-parent abuse, as young people – as victims and/or victimisers of abuse – are more likely to be vulnerable to distress and harm as a result of participation (Campbell et al., 2016; Carter, 2009; Smith & IPSCAN, 2016).

### *Harm and benefits*

Sensitive research is defined in this study as research that has the potential to cause harm to participants, the social groups they represent and the researchers investigating it (Sieber & Stanley, 1988). Harm can be emotional, as a result of exploring people's private worlds (Cowles, 1988); legal, as a result of incrimination (Finch, 2001); physical, as a result of retribution for disclosing violence, abuse or crime (Radford et al., 2017; Smith & IPSCAN, 2016); or social, as a result of insights and recommendations having negative impacts, via policy for example (Lee & Renzetti, 1990). Particularly for research on interpersonal violence and harm, ensuring participant safety and support is vital, as children disclosing violence and abuse may be at particular risk of uncovering traumatic memories or feelings of shame and also of experiencing physical harm as a consequence of disclosure (Smith & IPSCAN, 2016). Within this study, this was more relevant for those taking part in interviews, as those participating only in the survey could remain anonymous, could skip questions without the researcher knowing, were reporting only on their own behaviours (unless providing additional qualitative information) and were exploring issues of violence and abuse in much less depth. They also had greater control over the research process and distance from the researcher, facets of the design that can encourage greater disclosure (Burton et al., 2015; Radford et al., 2017). Indeed, a number of the male interviewees reported physical violence towards mothers within the survey but denied such violence in the interview.

Studies exploring the emotional impact of taking part in violence research have found that only very few children and adolescents actually report distress as a result of participation and even those who do, still feel that taking part is worthwhile (Finkelhor, Vanderminden, Turner, Hamby, & Shattuck, 2014; Radford, Corral, Bradley, & Fisher, 2013). Further, Powell and colleagues (2018) argue that preventing children from participating in research can do more harm than good, as the social harms they may be enduring are only partially understood, and therefore addressed using practice that is uninformed by their perspectives. In fact, young people have indicated the importance of having their voices heard in research on violence and abuse, particularly when in service to helping other young people (Smith & IPSCAN, 2016) – something confirmed through the feedback of participants within this study.

Understanding the potential harms and benefits of socially sensitive research is vital for deciding whether it is appropriate to include children and young people in its design (Carter, 2009). In terms of the harm children and young people may encounter, Powell and colleagues (2018) identified that young people – particularly those from marginalised, disadvantaged or stigmatised groups – have the potential to feel blamed by researchers discussing sensitive subjects. Such a potential was particularly acute in this study, being concerned with young people’s use of violence and abuse towards parents. This was revealed when a small number of participants completing the survey at the college were upset by its unidirectional nature – its focus being solely on those aggressive behaviours enacted on parents by adolescents, rather than including those by parents themselves. This issue was addressed later in the YOS sample, where participants were reassured – before completing the survey – that all aspects of their experience would be sought in the follow-up interview. Further, interviews were carried out in a non-judgmental way to avoid feelings of blame among participants. However, a tension did exist, given that some interviewees were being actively violent and abusive towards their parents. It was hoped that for these individuals, the interview process could be helpful in reframing their understanding of their behaviour and its impact. However, achieving this without causing undue distress to interviewees, or alienating them and damaging the rapport during the interview was difficult, and meant that reframing techniques<sup>10</sup> were used sparingly. Encouragingly, one YOS participant

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Reframing’, also referred to as ‘cognitive reframing’, is a counselling approach that aims to provide an alternative perspective to that held by a client. In this case, hypothetical scenarios were used to encourage interviewees to reflect on what they might have done if they had been in their parents’ shoes. This helped to highlight contradictions in their accounts, encourage empathy and perspective-taking, as well as indicating those areas of greatest importance to them.

recommended the survey and interview session as an appropriate way to help young people using violence and abuse towards parents, highlighting the potential benefits of taking part in such research.

*A year ago if I would have done this [the survey/interview], it would have helped a lot. But...as you get older, you sort of like realise you gotta speak to people. But I bet there's people 'ere [at the YOS], that are these people, that'll come 'ere, that are a bit younger, an' that have problems wiv' their parents, that this [survey/interview session] would help...or goin' through them [survey] questions an' that...it would make you think if...if they've been doin' them stuff an' like...ya know what I mean? You're gonna be like, "Yo I shouldn't be doin' that", and yer gonna think about it when you read the questions. So that'd probably help 'em.*

(Kirby, male, 16, YOS)

Potential for participant harm also included the possibility of interviewees realising the abusive nature of their relationship with parents, reflecting on their identity and relationships in ways they had not done previously. To counter this, all participants were provided (via a debrief sheet – see Appendix 11) with the contact details of several relevant agencies and services offering support. Only two young people – both college participants – became upset during the course of their interviews. They were asked if they wanted to take a break or stop the interview but both declined. They were also offered the contact details of the college counsellor and in one case, this offer was taken up.

The potential for participants to be stigmatised through the research was another consideration in the study design. To mitigate this, young people both with and without experience of adolescent-to-parent abuse were invited to take part in interviews, and all participants were informed of this fact. Lastly, there was a risk that interviewees may incriminate themselves – particularly relevant for those young people within the YOS who discussed a wide variety of criminal activity. It was made clear at the beginning of the interview that only activities constituting a major crime involving serious harm to another (for example, rape or attempted murder) would need to be discussed with professionals outside of the interview. No disclosures of this kind were made.

To minimise the potential harm of participating in the research, the study underwent two major ethics processes – via the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) – the latter of which has jurisdiction over research carried out in the context of criminal justice institutions such as young offender institutions (YOIs). Changes to the study, such as lowering the age range of participants, was also approved by the University’s ethics committee.

Any assessment of potential research harm should be balanced against the potential benefits of participating. Davis (2009, p. 4) argues that the benefits from child participation in research can be usefully categorised into those representing:

- *Epistemological benefits – children contributing to an improved understanding of a particular research issue.* In this study, children contributed to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of adolescent-to-parent abuse.
- *Pedagogical benefits – the contribution of the research to children’s learning.* Although not a key focus of this study, young people at the college were given a lecture on social research and becoming a social researcher.
- *Political benefits – the potential for children and young people to contribute to changes in social policy regarding issues that affect them.* Although difficult to achieve, this research aims to develop insights that can inform policy development in this area – particularly important given the lack of UK policy to guide service responses.
- *Consumer benefits – the potential for children to contribute to programme and practice development.* An important aspect of this research concerns turning the insights from data analysis into tangible practice recommendations on how to address the issue of adolescent-to-parent abuse.
- *Protectionist model benefits – that children having meaningful and respectful dialogue with other children and also adults can result in improved child protection – both immediately for those involved and in the longer-term, for other children.* The former became evident in this study when interviewees disclosed their experiences of harm from adults, which were then reported to appropriate safeguarding professionals.

Another benefit includes emotional benefit – the potential for research to function cathartically (for example, for those children disclosing previously hidden trauma), or to foster a sense of positive self-worth in participants. This was evident in several interviews in both the YOS and college where participants described feeling like a weight had been lifted off their shoulders, feeling positive about contributing to research that could help others and feeling proud because they had been unsure as to whether they had enough to say or the speaking skills to contribute meaningfully. Further, one young person said that the interview helped her to understand the impact of her violence on her mother, something she felt was important. Clearly, for some interviewees, this was the first time they had spoken in-depth to someone about the abuse taking place, highlighting the potential benefits for young people participating in sensitive research.

*I'd rather talk about it than not talk about it at the end of the day, 'cos...I guess now...actually...that might make me understand...hmm, I dunno. I've still got questions I should probably ask myself about why I did half the stuff I did!*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

### *Access and consent*

Adolescent-to-parent abuse not only represents a 'sensitive topic' by discussing subjects such as parents, abuse and 'secrets' – areas identified by children themselves as inherently sensitive (Powell et al., 2018) – but it also represents an atypical version of the family hierarchy, making it particularly 'taboo'. Perceptions of topics as socially sensitive, combined with a framing of children and young people as vulnerable, innocent, passive, and incompetent (Carter, 2009), can contribute to the reticence of those adults tasked with protecting children's emotional and physical well-being – from parents and practitioners to ethics boards and institutions – to allow children to participate. This can be even more acute where adults perceive young people as particularly vulnerable, for example, due to mental or physical health problems, or belonging to a particular social group, such as in the social care or criminal justice systems (Powell et al., 2018). Such reticence can result in prioritising protection over participation, even when the risk of harm is outweighed by the benefits of participation (McCosker, Barnard, & Gerber, 2001). Sparrman (2014) refers to this as the complex negotiation of 'fears, responsibilities, and assignment of vulnerability' (p. 305), and in

this study, may have been the reason behind the reluctance of institutions (particularly schools) to participate. Unfortunately, as Alexander and colleagues (2018) observe: 'Although well-meaning, the actions of gatekeepers are not only paternalistic, they could be further marginalising vulnerable populations by denying them the benefits to be gained from research designed to identify and begin addressing their needs' (p. 85). This is one of the main aspects that differentiates between research with children and research with adults; although children may be considered sufficiently competent to contribute to research, they are dependent upon adults to consent to their participation (Powell et al., 2018).

Since the majority of participants in this study were 16 years plus, parental consent was not required. For YOS participants under 16, participation letters were delivered to parents by key workers, along with study information sheets and consent forms (see Appendices 12, 13 and 14). For these young people, consent from parents, and their own consent, were required. Consent was granted by all parents approached. To fully inform young people at both sites, study information was provided ahead of data collection (see Appendices 14 and 15). This included a description of the study and each of its components, how the information would be used and who would see it, confidentiality and its limits, and their rights as participants. These aspects have all been identified by young people as being important to know before participating in sensitive research (Powell et al., 2018). Before each study component, consent was requested in written and verbal form (see Appendices 16 and 17) and participants were made aware that they could stop and withdraw at any time. Consent was also checked periodically throughout the interviews, particularly when participants appeared upset or unkeen to engage in discussion.

Although student participants were required to attend the lesson in which the survey session was embedded, they were given a quiz to complete as an alternative to taking part if they so wished. Students participating in follow-up interviews were only contacted if they had indicated they wanted to be considered for the interviews, which were held during their free periods. In this way, only those who really wanted to take part did so. However, ensuring that participation was fully voluntary within the context of the YOS was difficult. The interviews and survey sessions often took part in young people's compulsory 25 hours of attendance – a legally enforced period young people had to spend at the YOS each week. Consequently, some were unaware that

participation was optional. In these cases, young people were given the option to sit and relax if they preferred not to take part. None took up this offer. The young people in the YOS were also given a £20 shopping voucher in recognition of the time spent on the interviews. In the context of a youth justice environment, it was felt that this may reduce the stigma of participation by giving young people an alternative reason for taking part. Furthermore, some of the young people interviewed were either care leavers, in care, or from areas of high deprivation, so it seemed appropriate that they should be compensated for their time. Since most of the college students were interested in taking part and learning about social research, compensation was less of an issue.

### *Privacy and confidentiality*

Trust is an important aspect of sensitive research with children, determining how comfortable they are with disclosing the 'hidden' and 'secret' aspects of their lives (Powell et al., 2018). Essential to establishing trust is the knowledge that 'secrets' will be guarded and not revealed (i.e. that they are confidential). However, in research involving children, there is a tension between providing a confidential space for participants – with a research process that upholds their anonymity – and the duty of care a researcher has to report any potential harm to which a child might be at risk. As limitations of confidentiality are not always clear cut, the study participants were given concrete examples. For example, it was made clear that discussions around petty crime, violence and abuse towards parents (unless constituting a major crime), and drug use, would not be reported to professionals outside of the interview. However, it was also explained that any abuse inflicted on them *by* adults (and in more serious cases, peers), would have to be discussed with a safeguarding professional. For students, this was the appointed safeguarding lead and for YOS participants, their key worker. Any disclosures were discussed with the young person in advance.

Potential safeguarding issues were discussed with the college safeguarding lead in three cases – all relating to physical or verbal aggression from a parent or mother's partner. However, conversations kept the participants anonymous and, after subsequent discussion with the young people, it was decided that no further action was required. This was due to the older age of the young people involved, the isolated nature of the incidents combined with the relatively minor nature of the physical

aggression, the fact that one participant no longer had contact with the adult in question, and lastly, that two of the young people did not want me to pass on their details. In the YOS, the details of disclosures from three young people were discussed with key workers. These related, in one case, to regular visitation to a 'crack house', in two cases to physical harm from parents, and in one of those cases, also harm from police officers. All three participants were willing for this information to be shared with their key worker and in nearly all cases, it already had been shared and acted upon.

## **Summary of methodology**

The study used a mixed methods approach underpinned by critical realist philosophy, feminist and childhood theory to explore young people's experiences and perceptions of adolescent-to-parent abuse. A self-report behaviour survey was used to generate data on the prevalence and forms of aggressive behaviour and the characteristics of those involved, as well as functioning as a screener for follow-up interviews with students. In-depth interviews were used to capture young people's authentic voices and generate context-rich information regarding their perceptions, feelings, motivations and lived experiences.

Surveys and a smaller number of interviews were carried out between October 2016 and June 2018 with 210 A-level sociology students at a sixth form college in south-east England and 11 young people attending a YOS in north-west England. Interview sampling was purposive and involved 21 young people (11 YOS, 10 college), a number of whom had been violent and/or abusive to parents. The interview accounts were the main focus of the subsequent analysis, interpretation and reporting.

Analysis was carried out using SPSS for quantitative data and NVivo for qualitative data. Due to the small number of students reporting aggressive behaviour in the survey, the analysis was limited to descriptive statistics. Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic and discursive analyses, with direct quotes used to capture the authentic voices of young people. Data integration took place throughout.

A pragmatic approach balanced young people's rights to participate and be heard, with their right to protection from harm. For some participants, the research represented a positive experience involving catharsis, positive affirmation and identity development.

## CHAPTER FOUR: INTRODUCING THE FINDINGS

This chapter details the characteristics of both the survey and interview samples. The four subsequent chapters detail the research findings from across all samples and methods and are organised according to the themes and subthemes under the four research questions relating to: the nature of parent abuse, its causes and contexts, its impacts, and the way it might be prevented or addressed. Chapter Five draws upon insights from both the survey and in-depth interviews, while Chapters Six, Seven and Eight use insights solely from the interviews. Throughout each chapter, findings are discussed in relation to current theories and thinking around parent abuse, with Chapter Nine providing an overarching and more detailed discussion of findings and theory and their interconnections. Quotations from interviews are used to illustrate and evidence the themes and insights discussed; where quoted, young people have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity.

### Survey sample characteristics

In total, 221 further education and youth justice participants aged between 14 and 18 years completed the survey. See Table 4.1 for a full breakdown of demographic frequencies and proportions.

#### *Further education (college) sample demographics*

The further education sample represents those students who completed the survey. This comprised 210 AS and A2 (A-level) sociology students aged between 16 and 18 years ( $M = 16.59$ ,  $SD = .05$ ), with the most common age being 16 ( $n = 82$ , 39%). Just over three-quarters ( $n = 161$ , 77%) of the sample identified as female and just over one-fifth ( $n = 46$ , 22%) as male. The majority of participants within the further education sample ( $n = 137$ , 65%) identified either as White British or White English, with 10% ( $n = 22$ ) identifying as belonging to Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups<sup>11</sup>, and 21% ( $n = 44$ ) choosing not to respond. When removing those cases with missing data,

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<sup>11</sup> Frequencies are not provided by specific BAME group as it could compromise participant anonymity.

BAME students represented 13% of the sample, close to the 15% average for England in 2016 but higher than the 5% recorded for the local authority (ONS, 2019d).

In terms of participants' family structures, the majority ( $n = 153$ , 73%) lived in two-parent homes comprising parents identified as 'Mum' and 'Dad'. Nearly one-fifth ( $n = 40$ , 19%) lived in families that included step-parents (across both one and two households). Seventeen participants (8%) lived in single-caregiver households. In 14 cases, this was single mothers, in two cases, a single father, and in one case, a single sister. The majority of participants had mothers ( $n = 203$ , 97%) and fathers ( $n = 189$ , 90%) in their lives, with 29 (14%) having stepfathers and 19 (9%) stepmothers. One student had two stepmothers and another student lived with just a sister. As of 2017 (ONS, 2019c), 17% of families in south-east England were lone parent families – much higher than the 8% of participants within this college sample. Further, although not directly comparable, analysis of the 2011 census data for the local authority (ONS, 2014) indicated that only 4% of dependent children aged 0 to 18 lived across two parental homes, much lower than the 19% in this sample reporting living with step-parents. This indicates that the sample was not necessarily reflective of the wider population of young people in the local authority at the time of the study, being more ethnically diverse, less likely to live in a single-parent household but more likely to have parents with differing addresses.

Analyses of age, gender and ethnicity (aggregated to BAME) were performed to look for any demographic differences between those who chose to take part and those who chose not to. Pearson's chi-squared tests identified that students choosing to take part were more likely to have been female<sup>12</sup> (although the Phi Coefficient test reported a fairly weak strength of association) but just as likely to identify as being from a White or BAME group<sup>13</sup>. A Mann-Whitney U test indicated that those who did take part were also younger<sup>14</sup>, with the non-completer group comprising mainly 17- and 18-year-olds and the completer group 16- and 17-year-olds (see Figure 4.1 and Table 4.1 for the age distributions).

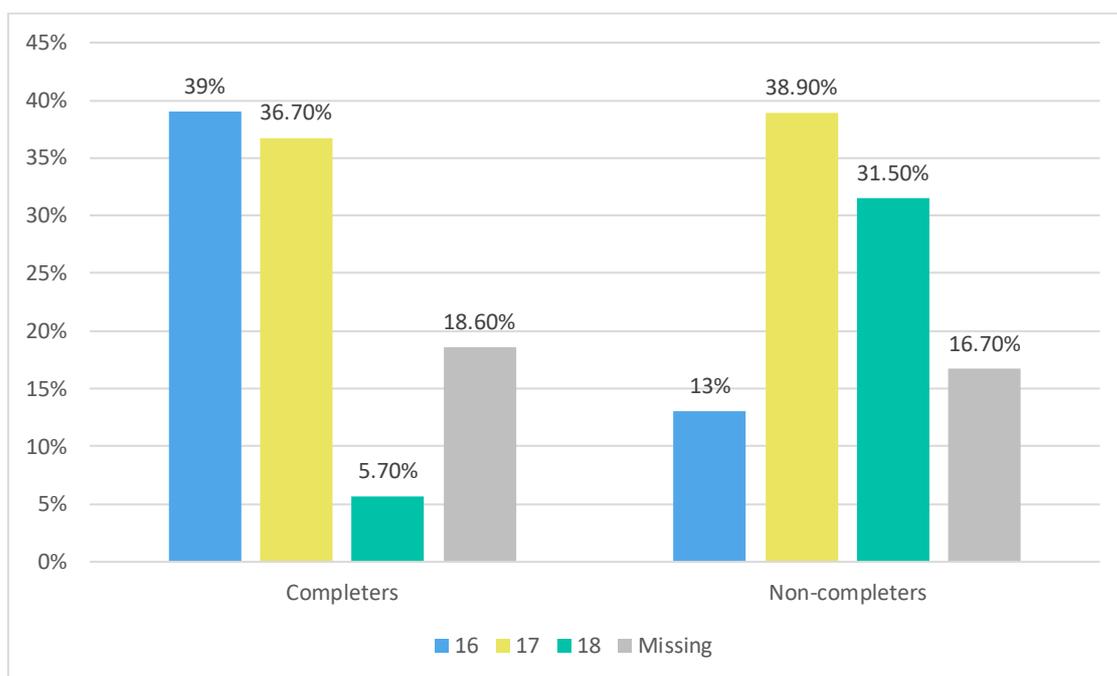
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<sup>12</sup>  $\chi^2(1, n = 261) = 6.24, p = .02, \phi = .16, p = .02$

<sup>13</sup>  $\chi^2(1, n = 210) = .004, p = ns$

<sup>14</sup>  $U = 2072.50, p < .001$

Figure 4.1: Age distribution of completers and non-completers (college sample)



#### Youth Offending Service (YOS) sample demographics

The YOS sample comprised 11 young people (7 male, 4 female) aged between 14 and 17 years ( $M = 15.36$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ), with a relatively even distribution across the ages (see Table 4.1). As previously mentioned, ethnicity data was not collected for this sample. In terms of participants' family structures, just over half lived in single-carer households. In three cases, single parents were single mothers, in two, grandmothers, and in one case, a father. The remaining young people were fairly evenly split between those who lived in two-parent homes comprising parents identified as 'Mum' and 'Dad' and those who lived in families that included step-parents (across both one and two homes). The majority of young people had mothers caring for them, although only around a third had fathers actively involved in their lives. Three had stepfathers and just one had a stepmother. In two cases, young people were looked after solely by their grandmothers. Due to the sampling and sample size differences, the two samples were not compared statistically for demographic difference. However, those in the YOS sample appeared more likely to be younger, male, and live in single-parent households than those in the further education sample.

Table 4.1: Survey sample demographics

	College completers (n = 210)	College non-completers (n = 54)	YOS sample (n = 11)	Total sample (N = 221)
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	161 (76.7%)	33 (61.1%)	4 (36.4%)	165 (74.7%)
Male	46 (21.9%)	21 (38.9%)	7 (63.6%)	53 (24.0%)
Missing	3 (1.4%)	-	-	3 (1.4%)
<b>Age</b>				
14	-	-	3 (27.3%)	3 (1.4%)
15	-	-	3 (27.3%)	3 (1.4%)
16	82 (39.0%)	7 (13.0%)	3 (27.3%)	85 (38.5%)
17	77 (36.7%)	21 (38.9%)	2 (18.2)	79 (35.7%)
18	12 (5.7%)	17 (31.5%)	-	12 (5.4)
Missing	39 (18.6%)	9 (16.7%)	-	39 (17.6%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>				
White ethnic group	144 (68.6%)	38 (70.4%)	-	-
BAME group	22 (10.5%)	6 (11.1%)	-	-
Missing	44 (21.0%)	10 (18.5%)	-	-
<b>Parents at home*</b>				
Mothers	203 (96.7%)	-	8 (72.7%)	211 (95.5%)
Fathers	189 (90.0%)	-	4 (36.4%)	193 (87.3%)
Stepmothers	19 (9.0%)**	-	1 (9.1%)	20 (9.0%)
Stepfathers	29 (13.8%)	-	3 (27.3%)	32 (14.5%)
Female 'non-parent' PCGs	1 (.5%)	-	2 (18.2%)	3 (1.4%)
<b>Structure of the family</b>				
Two-parent family – mothers and fathers	153 (72.9%)	-	2 (18.2%)	155 (70.1%)
Families with step-parents	40 (19.0%)	-	3 (27.3%)	43 (19.5%)
Single-parent family – mother	14 (6.7%)	-	3 (27.3%)	17 (7.7%)
Single-parent family – father	2 (1.0%)	-	1 (9.1%)	3 (1.4%)
Single-parent family – grandmother	-	-	2 (18.2%)	2 (.9%)
Single-parent family – sister	1 (.5%)	-	-	1 (.5%)

\* Proportions will be higher than 100% due to participants having parents and step-parents.

\*\* One student had two stepmothers, making the actual count 20. This was used as the denominator.

## Interview sample characteristics

The interview sample was purposive, determined by student survey data and the recommendations of YOS staff. The final interview sample comprised 21 participants aged between 14 and 18 years, 11 of whom were attending a YOS and 10 a sixth form college. By reviewing their surveys and interviews, 13 of the 21 young people (8 female, 5 male) had reported or discussed their use of violence or aggression towards parents, although in three of these cases (two male, one female), behaviours were only reported in the survey and not the interview. In two cases (one female, one male), although aggressive behaviours were discussed within the interviews, it was not clear whether these formed a pattern of abusive behaviour towards parents (see Table 4.2 for information on interviewee characteristics). This is a particularly unique sample given that the majority of interviewees using violence and abuse towards parents were female. This could be partly due to the lower participation rate of young men within the college. However, it does provide insight into a less-visible population of young people using violence at home.

Many of the young people interviewed – particularly those demonstrating abusive behaviour towards parents or caregivers – had experienced a range of adversities in their lives, such as domestic violence and abuse, child maltreatment, absent parents, living with parents who were struggling with substance misuse or mental health problems, or dealing with mental health and substance misuse themselves. It should be noted that although these young people may have been responsible for carrying out abusive behaviour towards their parents, they often did so within contexts of trauma, distress and victimisation, with a number of cases reflecting ‘mutual’ violence between interviewees and their parents. However, not all cases fell within this category, highlighting the complexity of the phenomenon and the heterogeneity of the young people and families experiencing it. This will be discussed fully in Chapter Six: *Causes and contexts of parent abuse*. Table 4.2 overleaf outlines the various adversities experienced and discussed by each interviewee, in addition to more basic demographic information. This can be referenced when reading quotations to remind readers of the contexts and histories of interviewees’ lives.

Table 4.2: Interviewee details

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Age	Sample	Parents/Caregivers	APVA discussed	Target of APVA	Adversities experienced
Jade	Female	14	YOS	'Mum' and 'Stepdad'	Yes	Mother and stepfather (according to survey)	Unknown
Penelope	Female	17	College	'Mum' and 'Stepdad'	Yes	Mother	Father in prison when younger, absent father, stepfather mental health difficulties, YP mental health difficulties.
Ruth	Female	18	College	'Mum' and 'Stepdad'	Yes	Mother	Sexually abused by mother's partner, emotionally abused by father, absent father, father mental health difficulties, father substance misuse, domestic abuse (father to mother), YP mental health difficulties, YP substance misuse.
Dan	Male	15	YOS	'Mum'	Yes	Mother	Physical and emotional abuse by mother, physical abuse by father, witnessed domestic violence and abuse from father to mother, absent father.
Ant	Male	16	College	'Mum' and 'Dad'	Only in survey	Mother and father (mostly father)	Bullying by peers at school, YP mental health difficulties, possible psychological abuse from father.
Jo	Female	14	YOS	'Mum'	Yes	Mother	ADHD (medicated).

Jodea	Female	17	YOS	In care. Sees 'Mum' and 'Dad' (separated)	Yes	Mother	Physical and emotional abuse from mother, father, and mother's partners, witnessed domestic abuse towards mother, rejected by family and taken into care, mother drug dependent, father severe mental health difficulties, YP mental health difficulties, YP arrested for stealing for mother, death of a sibling, separated from siblings.
Pete	Male	15	YOS	In care. Lived with 'Mum' and 'Stepdad' previously	Yes	Stepfather (and mother according to survey)	Physical and emotional abuse from stepfather, taken into care, traumatic arrest using force.
Jenn	Female	14	YOS	'Mum' and 'Stepdad'	Yes	Mother	Victim of severe peer violence, victim of sibling violence, YP mental health difficulties, absent father.
Jared	Male	17	YOS	'Mum' and 'Mum's boyfriend'	Potentially	Mother and possibly grandmother	Witnessed domestic violence between mother and father, financial abuse from father and uncle, absent father, father substance misuse, moving between family members, victim of knife attack.
Ronnie	Female	17	College	'Mum' and 'Dad'	Potentially	Mother	Physical and emotional abuse from father, potentially emotional abuse from siblings.
Anthony	Male	16	YOS	'Dad'	No	-	YP incarcerated, placed in care home but ran away, absent mother.
Kirby	Male	16	YOS	'Mum' and 'Dad'	No	-	Arrested for drug distribution.

Pippa	Female	17	College	'Mum' and 'Dad'	No	-	None mentioned
Bianca	Female	17	College	'Mum' and 'Stepmum', 'Dad' and 'Stepmum'	No	-	Complex family separation, living across two homes, YP mental health difficulties, slapped once by father.
Sarah	Female	17	College	'Mum' and 'Dad'	Only in survey	Mostly father	Emotional/psychological abuse by father.
Shreya	Female	18	College	'Mum' and 'Dad'	No	-	Emotional/psychological abuse by father, witnessed emotional and psychological abuse of mother by father.
Jamie	Male	15	YOS	'Nan'	Only in survey	Grandmother	In care when younger, frequent moves, mother drug dependent, drug withdrawal at birth, emotional and financial abuse by mother and grandmother, spends time in crack houses.
Jason	Male	16	YOS	In care. Lived with 'Nan' and 'Mum' and 'Dad' previously	No	-	Taken into care due to mother's alcohol dependence and lack of coping with YPs behaviour (possibly neglect), YP incarcerated, father incarcerated, separated from siblings.
Alan	Male	17	College	'Mum' and 'Stepdad'	No	-	Witnessed domestic abuse towards mother, possible emotional abuse from stepfather, YP mental health difficulties, stepfather alcohol dependency.
Marcus	Male	17	College	'Mum' and 'Mum's boyfriend'	No	-	Fighting with mother's boyfriend.

## CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS ON THE NATURE OF PARENT ABUSE

### Introduction

This chapter details the findings in relation to the study's first primary research question – 'What is the nature of adolescent-to-parent abuse?' – combining insights from the survey and the in-depth interviews. Areas of focus include the profile and prevalence of 'abusive' behaviour, young people's perception of its prevalence and acceptability, how 'abuse' can be operationalised (or not) within a survey, what abuse 'looks like', and how it is shaped by gender. Although all young people, irrespective of their involvement in adolescent-to-parent abuse, contributed to the insights relating to this question, the accounts of those with *direct* experience have been prioritised.

### Parent abuse – a common issue?

An adapted version of the CTS (see Chapter Three and Appendix 6) was used to try to assess the extent of adolescent-to-parent abuse in the sample of college students and to identify those students who could provide more detailed insights via follow-up interviews. However, it should be noted that although a range of *potentially* abusive behaviours (physical and 'psychological'<sup>15</sup>) were reported by students completing the tool (see Table 5.1 for subscale frequencies), without access to the context within which those behaviours took place, the intentions behind them, or the impact they had on parents, it is difficult to assess the extent to which behaviours were in fact 'abusive' and constituted a wider pattern of parent 'abuse'. To make the tool a more useful identifier of parent abuse cases, thresholds devised from combinations of physically and psychologically aggressive behaviours at varying frequencies were applied to the dataset and will be presented using individual cases as examples. First, the behaviour types will be reviewed in isolation to understand how typical psychological and physical aggression was within the sample of young people.

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<sup>15</sup> Although two financial 'abuse' items were also included in the survey, no participants reported having used threats to obtain money, and the theft item – when taken alone – was not necessarily seen as representing parent 'abuse' per se. Therefore, it is not reported in the findings.

## Prevalence of physical and psychological aggression

### *Physical aggression*

Overall, 18%<sup>16</sup> (37) of students reported having used minor physical aggression such as pushing (the most common behaviour), grabbing, slapping, throwing objects, and twisting the arms of parents *at least once* over the 12 months prior to survey completion. However, when removing one-off incidents, this figure fell significantly, with the presence of *patterned* minor physical aggression towards parents (i.e. behaviour used on *more than one occasion*) being relatively low at only 7% (15) of the sample. This reduced even further to just 1% (3) for minor physical aggression used *frequently*. This is important as it indicates the potential for inflating rates of parent abuse when reporting figures that include one-off incidents, a practice employed by the majority of parent abuse studies to date.

Unsurprisingly, reports of 'severe' physical aggression were lower, with 8% (16) of students reporting having kicked (the most common behaviour), punched, slammed into walls, or beaten up parents *at least once* over the 12 months prior to survey completion. Similarly, this fell to just 2% (4) of students for severe physical aggression used on more than one occasion, down to just one student reporting having used such physical aggression *frequently*. See Table 5.1 below for a breakdown of frequencies and proportions.

*Table 5.1: Prevalence of physical and psychological aggression*

Form of aggression	Frequency (%)		
	At least once	More than once	Frequently
Minor physical	37 (17.6)	15 (7.1)	3 (1.4)
Severe physical	16 (7.6)	4 (1.9)	1 (.5)
Minor psychological	199 (94.8)	172 (81.9)	52 (24.8)
Severe psychological	99 (47.1)	48 (22.9)	14 (6.7)

<sup>16</sup> Percentages reported are valid percent, i.e. taking into account missing data.

These figures are broadly in line with the few school-based survey studies of adolescent-to-parent 'aggression' reporting rates of *patterned* physical aggression (rather than rates which include one-off incidents). This includes the study of 13- to 18-year-olds by Calvete and colleagues (2013) which identified a rate of 3.2% for 'severe physical aggression' (meaning any physical aggression that had occurred at least three times over the previous year); the study of 13- to 17-year-olds by Calvete, Orue and Gamiz-Guadix (2013) that identified rates of between 0.1% and 0.3% for physical aggression which had happened 'often' over the previous 12 months; and lastly, the UK study of 11- to 18-year-olds by McCloud (2017) that identified rates of around 1% for slapping, hitting with an object, and kicking/punching parents 'often' in the previous six months. Surprisingly, to date, these are the only three survey studies to report on *patterned* aggression towards parents. This is an important focus in this study as it was felt that rates representing patterns of aggressive behaviour were more likely to represent the phenomenon of parent abuse and therefore would be a more valid statistic to report.

However, removing one-off incidences when attempting to measure parent abuse in a given population can prove problematic. In cases where severe violence, such as threats or use of a weapon or severe assault resulting in serious injury, have taken place, even just once, these can operate as a form of control without the use of any further violence, with victims altering their behaviour in an attempt to prevent any future attacks (Pain, 2012). This highlights one of the key limitations of behavioural surveys such as the CTS, whereby the lack of understanding of the *impact* and *context* of behaviours severely limits our ability to assess what does and does not constitute abuse.

When asked during interviews whether they thought physical aggression towards parents was common, the majority of interviewees felt that it would be a relatively rare occurrence "*I give it like a one or a two percent. Like... maximum four percent.*" (Alan, male, 17, College) and definitely less common than violence *to* children *from* parents. However, two interviewees felt that the problem was probably more common than people assumed, due to the hidden nature of the issue and the potential stigma parents might feel in relation to it, factors highlighted in previous studies (e.g. Haw, 2010; Holt & Retford, 2013; Jackson, 2003; Nixon, 2012; Tew & Nixon, 2010).

*I think it happens more often than people think it does. Because like...if it's...from the child's point of view and they've like hit their mum, their mum wouldn't wanna speak to people about it...an' stuff...so it's sort of like a dark...figure in society.*

(Pippa, female, 17, College)

### *Psychological aggression*

Although other interviewees agreed that physical aggression towards parents would be less common, they felt that verbal and psychological aggression would happen much more frequently, with one interviewee stating that verbal aggression towards parents happened “...*probably most of the time*” (Sarah, female, 17, College).

*I would say like, in terms of like, actual violence, I don't think it would be that common. But then...controlling behaviour would probably be more common than most people would think.*

(Marcus, male, 17, College)

The results from the survey support this view, with patterned non-physical aggression towards parents (termed ‘psychological aggression’ in the CTS) being reported much more frequently than physical aggression (see Table 5.1), a trend also reflected in studies by Calvete and colleagues (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2013; Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013) and McCloud (2017). In the present study, 92% (172) of students reported having used minor psychological aggression such as shouting (the most common behaviour), swearing, saying things to purposefully upset, and storming off, on *more than one* occasion over the 12 months prior to survey completion. For 25% (52) of students, these behaviours were a *frequent* occurrence. For more ‘severe’ psychological aggression, such as telling parents they were bad parents (the most common behaviour), calling them fat, ugly, destroying something belonging to them, or threats to harm (either themselves or their parents), 18% (41) of students reported carrying out such behaviours *more than once*, with 7% (14) of students stating they had done this *frequently*.

These figures are slightly higher than those reported in previous studies, with Calvete and colleagues (2013) identifying a rate of 14.2% for 'severe psychological aggression' (meaning any psychological aggression that had occurred more than six times over the past year) and Calvete, Orue and Gamiz-Guadix (2013) identifying rates of between 0.6% and 7.5% for psychological aggression that had happened 'often' over the previous 12 months. They are also slightly higher than those identified by McCloud (2017), who reported rates of 10.4% for shouting, 4.6% for insulting or swearing, and 1.7% for threats to hit parents 'often', over the previous six months. However, as the items and scale composition differ across the studies, it is difficult to compare with any confidence.

The figures reported in this study highlight that although physical aggression was a relatively rare occurrence in the parent-child relationships of the college student sample, psychological aggression was, in fact, fairly common.

*I know that arguin' wiv' your parent is normal. Every teenager will get moody (laughs). (Jenn, female, 14, YOS)*

Physical aggression was also seen as much less acceptable than psychological or verbal aggression, highlighting the differing norms of young people.

*It's classed as domestic abuse but it's just arguin' an' fightin' wiv' my mum, but not actual physical fisty cuffs.*

*(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)*

This also highlights that any tool designed to identify cases of parent abuse must take into account the normal range of 'aggressions' that typify the parent-adolescent relationship, particularly in relation to non-physical forms of aggression, which appear to be a regular feature.

## *Conflict resolution behaviours*

It is important to highlight that, similar to previous studies (e.g. Jaureguizar et al., 2013), positive conflict management behaviours (termed 'negotiation' in the CTS) had the highest prevalence figures of all the adolescent-to-parent behaviours. Emotional negotiation, including showing respect (the most common behaviour reported), care, and open-mindedness during arguments with parents, had been used *frequently* by 79% (166) of students surveyed. Similarly, cognitive negotiation, such as explaining one's perspective (the most commonly reported behaviour) and compromise, was used by 72% (151) of students. Although a range of physically and psychologically aggressive behaviours were reported, the most common behaviours demonstrated during conflict were positive rather than negative. This is important as it contrasts with the harmful rhetoric that has come to typify much of the UK government's policy on juvenile crime since the 1990s, with its focus on anti-social behaviour, parenting orders, and 'problem families' (e.g. Home Office, 1997).

## **Identifying parent abuse cases in the data**

### *Thresholds*

In an attempt to identify cases that may have represented a pattern of parent abuse, the minor and severe physical and psychological aggression scales were looked at in combination and thresholds devised. Thresholds could be met based solely on the use of physical aggression, solely on the use of psychological aggression, or when the two were combined. This reflects the multidimensional definition of parent abuse being explored and sits in contrast to the majority of parent abuse research to date, which focuses predominantly on young people's physically aggressive behaviour. As previous studies of domestic abuse survivors have shown, emotional and psychological abuse can be more harmful in the longer term than physical abuse (Hester, Jones, Williamson, Fahmy, & Feder, 2017), making its inclusion in any form of abuse measurement vitally important. For ease of calculation, the thresholds were based on scales rather than profiles of individual behaviours.

Thresholds are typically used to help practitioner judgements in relation to making clinical diagnoses or assessing eligibility for a particular intervention or service. They can be dichotomous in nature (e.g. yes/no) or graduated/tiered (e.g. low/moderate/high need) and allow for greater consistency and objectivity in clinical decision-making. In this study, a dichotomous threshold was applied in an attempt to provide a more accurate measurement of the prevalence of parent abuse among the students completing the survey. As the original purpose of the CTS was to measure 'the prevalence and chronicity of tactics employed by partners to resolve conflict in a dating, cohabiting or marital relationship' (Chapman & Gillespie, 2019, p. 28) rather than establishing the presence of a pattern of 'abuse', no such threshold has ever been devised or applied to the tool. Instead, behaviours within the scale are categorised as either 'minor' or 'severe', with severity equating to the form of aggression used, e.g. pushing (minor) and punching (severe), with the frequency of behaviours also (sometimes) reported. However, such behaviours are typically reported at the scale level rather than combined to create profiles of behaviour.

Indeed, without taking the pattern of behaviour into account when measuring adolescent-to-parent aggression there is a risk that prevalence rates of 'severe' behaviours – including, for example, one-off incidences of kicking a parent or threatening to throw something at them – could be misrepresented as prevalence of parent abuse, when really these may not represent patterns of harmful behaviour at all (Simmons, McEwan, Purcell, & Huynh, 2019). In other studies, such as the Spanish school study of adolescent-to-parent aggression by Calvete and colleagues (2013), severity reflected the patterned nature of aggression, with incidents that occurred at least three times within a 12-month period being classified as 'severe'. However, even in this study, this would have meant classifying as 'severe' shouting at parents more than three times in a year – behaviour which could be considered typical within the parent-adolescent relationship. Indeed, the only study to develop and apply a parent abuse threshold to date has been Simmons and colleagues (2019), who recently developed their 'Abusive Behaviour by Children Indices' (ABC-I), with abuse determined by parent norms around the frequency and form of aggressive behaviour by children. However, as the tool was tested on a convenience sample of mostly female young adult psychology students (18-24 years), it is not directly comparable to the age range of young people within this study.

Similar to Simmons and colleagues (2019) it was felt that a threshold taking both form and frequency into consideration would be a more comprehensive way of identifying potential parent abuse cases in this study's further education sample. However, even with these two pieces of information, without first understanding the intention behind aggressive acts or the impact that they have on parents, such a threshold can only ever be a partial indicator of parent abuse and thus – without supplemental contextual data – would not be an appropriate practice tool.

### *Physical abuse threshold*

These caveats aside, cases were considered as *potential* parent abuse cases if any of the following **physical aggression** thresholds were met:

- 1 (a). There had been frequent use of minor physical aggression
- 1 (b). There had been frequent use of severe physical aggression
- 1 (c). Severe physical aggression had been used sometimes
- 1 (d). Minor physical aggression had been used sometimes **and** severe physical aggression had been used at least once.

Nine cases (4%) fell into these four threshold categories. Three involved frequent minor physical aggression (1a), one frequent severe physical aggression (1b), three the use of severe physical aggression sometimes (1c), and three using a combination of minor physical aggression **and** severe physical aggression (1d). One case fell into more than one of these categories, involving the use of minor physical aggression frequently **and** severe physical aggression sometimes.

### *Example case 1: Heather*

Heather lived with her mother and reported **frequently** having pushed her and also having grabbed her once (both **minor physical** aggression). She also reported one incident of punching or hitting her mother with something that could have hurt her and **one incident** where she kicked her (both **severe physical** aggression). In terms of non-

physical aggression, she reported frequently shouting at her mother and storming out of the house during arguments (both minor psychological aggression), sometimes swearing at or insulting her and saying things to upset her (both minor psychological aggression), as well as sometimes calling her fat or ugly, telling her she was a bad parent to hurt her feelings, and threatening to hit or throw things at her (all severe psychological aggression). Heather did not indicate that any of these behaviours were carried out in response to aggression from her mother.

This example met threshold 1(a) due to the frequent use of pushing (a form of minor physical aggression). However, even if Heather had only pushed her mother sometimes, her use of severe physical aggression (kicking and punching) would still have resulted in threshold 1(d) being met.

### *Psychological abuse threshold*

Cases were also considered as *potential* parent abuse cases if the following **psychological aggression** threshold was met:

2. There had been *frequent* use of *severe* psychological aggression

Fourteen cases (7%) fell into this threshold category. However, four of these also fell into the previous threshold categories 1(a), 1(b), 1(c) and 1(d), with one of the four falling into multiple categories (1a **and** 1c). This highlights the constellation of abusive behaviours that can often characterise the dynamic.

### *Example case 2: Nick*

Nick lived with his mother and father and reported having **frequently** destroyed things belonging to them and sometimes having told them they were bad parents to hurt their feelings (both **severe psychological** aggression). He also reported frequently and purposefully saying things to hurt them and storming out of the house during arguments (both minor psychological aggression). In addition, he sometimes shouted

at them (also minor psychological aggression). Nick did not indicate that any of these behaviours were carried out in response to aggression from his mother or father.

This example met threshold 2 due to the frequent destruction of possessions belonging to Nick's parents.

### *Combined threshold*

Finally, cases were considered as *potential* parent abuse cases if the following psychological **and** physical aggression thresholds were met:

3. Minor physical aggression had been used sometimes **and** minor psychological aggression had been used frequently

Seven cases (3%) fell into this threshold category, and five of these also fell into the previous threshold categories of 1(b), 1(c), 1(d) and 2. Two of the five cases fell into more than one of these previous categories (1b **and** 2; 1d **and** 2).

### *Example case 3: Suzy*

Suzy reported living across two homes, with her mother and stepfather in one and her father in the other. She reported having **sometimes** slapped her stepfather (**minor physical** aggression), in addition to **frequently** shouting at him, sometimes saying things to purposefully upset both her mother and stepfather and storming out of the house during arguments (once with her mother and **frequently** with her stepfather). These constituted acts of **minor psychological** aggression. Suzy stated that although these behaviours were not in response to any physical aggression from her parents, her stepfather often insulted her and this would lead to arguments.

This example met threshold 3 because Suzy sometimes slapped her stepfather (a form of minor physical aggression), in addition to frequently shouting at him and frequently

storming out of the house during arguments (forms of minor psychological aggression).

### *Rationale*

The rationale for these thresholds was that any *frequent* use of either physical aggression (minor or severe) or severe psychological aggression would constitute an intentional pattern of behaviour towards a parent which could be harmful – either physically or psychologically. The higher likelihood of behaviour within the severe physical aggression scale causing harm to parents is why behaviours in this scale used ‘sometimes’ still met the threshold for parent abuse. However, the overall high prevalence of psychological aggression (both minor and severe) in the sample meant that only *severe* psychological aggression used *frequently* constituted abuse. For example, a young person who frequently walked out of the room during arguments or frequently swore (items constituting minor psychological aggression) would not necessarily represent a pattern of abusive behaviour (at least not in isolation). Where physical aggression was lower than the required threshold, combined with psychological aggression it could potentially represent a pattern of harmful and controlling behaviour, which is reflected in the thresholds. For example, minor physical aggression may have only been used ‘sometimes’ (and thus would not meet the parent abuse threshold) but when combined with frequent minor psychological aggression, it would.

### *Overall prevalence*

In total, 21 cases met at least one of the six devised thresholds, representing 10% of the total student sample completing the survey. However, seven of these cases (32%) identified parent aggression as having led to participants’ aggressive responses, highlighting the importance of capturing contextual data on motivation – particularly where it relates to self-defence. Excluding these cases, the rate drops to 7% (14) of the total student sample.

Although the sample of 21 was not large enough to carry out statistical tests concerning the characteristics of young people, their parents, or family structures,

there does appear to be some over-representation of those young people who identified as belonging to BAME groups, those living with step-parents, and those who had experienced aggression from parents. However, the small subgroup sizes prevent a more conclusive analysis. Table 5.2 below details the frequencies and proportions identified. Further details at the case-level are presented in Appendix 18.

*Table 5.2: Cases meeting the parent abuse thresholds*

Subgroup ( <i>n</i> )	Frequency	Proportion (of subgroup)
<b>Gender</b>		
Female (161)	16	10%
Male (46)	5	11%
<b>Age</b>		
16 (82)	10	12%
17 (77)	5	6%
18 (12)	2	17%
Missing (39)	4	10%
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
White ethnic group (144)	9	6%
BAME group (22)	6	27%
Missing (44)	6	14%
<b>Parent victims</b>		
Mothers (203)	14	7%
Fathers (189)	13	7%
Stepmothers (20)	1	5%
Stepfathers (29)	4	14%
<b>Structure of the family</b>		
Two-parent intact (153)	9	6%
Single parent (17)	2	12%
Families with step-parents (40)	10	25%
<b>Responding to parental aggression</b>		
Yes (24)	7	29%
No (173)	13	8%
Missing (13)	1	8%

### *Limitations of the thresholds*

It is important to emphasise that these thresholds have significant limitations. First, as they are based on scales (rather than individual behaviours), individuals meeting the same threshold could have significantly different behaviour profiles. For example, two young people could both meet the threshold for frequent use of severe psychological aggression, but for one this could equate to frequently saying their caregivers were bad parents, whereas for another this could mean frequently calling their parents fat or ugly, destroying their belongings, threatening to hit them **and** coercing them with threats. In these two very different cases, the latter seems to indicate a likely pattern of parent abuse, while the former potentially represents a normative adolescent response to conflict and, as such, a 'false positive' categorisation of parent abuse. Second, individuals not meeting any thresholds could have a wider range of aggressive behaviours than those who do. If we take the previous example of a young person frequently telling their caregivers they were bad parents, this *would* meet the threshold for parent abuse, whereas an individual calling parents fat or ugly, destroying their belongings, threatening to hit them **and** coercing them with threats – but only 'sometimes' – would *not* meet the threshold for parent abuse when, on aggregate, these behaviours probably indicate a pattern of parent abuse and, as such, could represent a 'false negative'. It is clear that without taking the full profile of individual behaviours into account, the thresholds are a fairly blunt indicator of parent abuse (even potentially misleading in some cases). One way of mitigating this could be (as in Simmons et al., 2019) to use a higher-order scoring system that accounts for the presence of multiple behaviours in a given category, as well as considering the frequency, form and severity of the behaviour. Unfortunately, devising such a scoring system was beyond the limits of this PhD research.

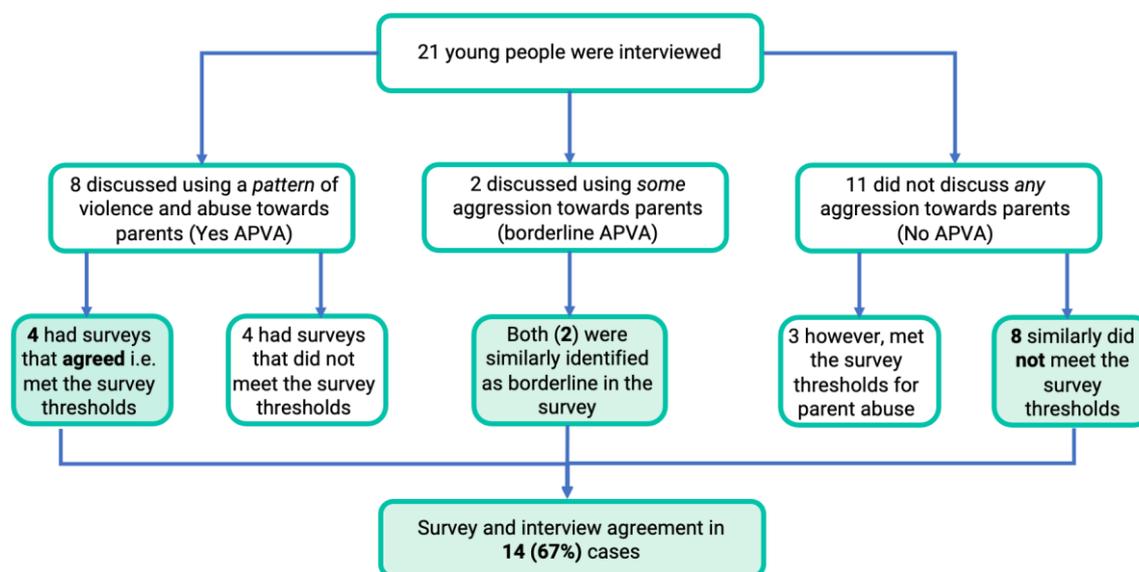
These critiques aside, the thresholds can still help to identify those parent-child relationships where there is a potentially harmful pattern of interactions involving aggression towards parents from adolescent children. They can also help to highlight those cases involving parent-to-child aggression – which previous surveys have failed to do.

## Comparing surveys to interviews

To understand whether or not cases identified through the interviews as involving parent abuse would be similarly identified by the survey (when applying the parent abuse thresholds previously detailed), the surveys of the 21 young people interviewed were compared to their interview accounts. Of the 21, eight had discussed the use of patterned physical and/or psychological aggression towards parents in their interviews, with two more mentioning instances of aggressive behaviour. The remaining 11 interviewees did not discuss ever having been physically or psychologically aggressive towards their parents.

Overall, 14 of the 21 interviewees (67%) had survey threshold judgements that matched the judgements made on the basis of the interviews, i.e. that parent abuse was/was not present (see Figure 5.1 below for the breakdown of cases).

Figure 5.1: Survey and interview agreement



Of the eight young people identified through the interviews as having used patterned physical and/or psychological aggression towards parents, only four met any of the survey thresholds for parent abuse. For the four cases that did not meet any of the thresholds, one was a case where abusive behaviours were identified, but outside of the 12-month period considered by the survey, with the three remaining cases involving

the identification of numerous abusive behaviours that occurred only once or sometimes (rather than frequently), meaning that none of the thresholds were reached. This confirms the limitation previously discussed, that multiple types of aggressive behaviours occurring at lower frequencies will not meet the thresholds for abuse.

Of the 11 cases where no aggression was reported in the interviews, eight had matching surveys, i.e. no aggression was reported. However, three of the 11 cases *did* meet the survey thresholds for abuse. In one of these, although the participant did not discuss any aggressive behaviours in the interview, in the survey he reported numerous physically and psychologically aggressive acts towards both his mother and father which, together, reached one of the thresholds for parent abuse. The remaining two cases met the thresholds for psychological abuse – one which, on further examination, held up as a potential case of parent abuse and one which was felt to fall more into the category of normative adolescent behaviour, including storming out of rooms during arguments and telling caregivers they were bad parents.

Lastly, the two interviewees whose behaviour was felt (via the interview) to be borderline parent abuse, were also identified as borderline in the survey, reporting the use of mostly psychologically aggressive behaviours (and one incident of minor physical aggression) that did not meet any of the survey thresholds. In these cases, it is difficult to assess whether the behaviours discussed in the interview and reported in the survey constituted a pattern of parent abuse or just high levels of parent-child conflict. As Gallagher (2008, p. 43) states, '*... there are no clear empirical definitions of abuse and no clear cut-off point where a growing child becomes "abusive" rather than merely aggressive.*'

This comparison between the two different study methods highlights the difficulties involved in identifying parent abuse cases using a survey threshold (particularly one that is designed as a research rather than a practice tool to support assessment) and indicates the need for a more nuanced scoring system (such as Simmons et al., 2019) which takes individual behaviours into account. It also highlights how even in interviews, aggressive behaviours can go undiscussed, reinforcing the benefits of a mixed methods approach where participant accounts can be triangulated across methods. Lastly, the survey was also useful in highlighting the aggressive behaviours

used on parents who were not the primary targets of abuse, who were often less of a focus during interviews.

## **What does parent abuse 'look like'?**

Young people with experience of parent abuse described a range of abusive behaviours towards parents, both physical and non-physical in nature and often combined. Although for some young people abusive behaviours were one-off occurrences not constituting a pattern of abuse, for eight interviewees, abusive behaviour towards parents was a regular occurrence, some of which was instigated and/or reciprocated by parents and some not. Young people reflecting on their behaviour typically described a time when abuse and conflict peaked around 14 to 16 years of age, with arguments and 'fights' becoming a daily occurrence.

*Some of them would just be arguments, some of them would be like me pushing her and give up an'...some of them would be like...over the phone. 'Cos I wouldn't come home, I'd be like, "I'm refusing to come home, I'm not telling you where I am". And then yeah...some of them would be like the really, really violent ones. But it just depended...but mostly every single day there'd be a problem...*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

This chimes with parent accounts of abuse that describe a range of verbal and physical aggressions carried out by adolescent children (Cottrell, 2001; Edenborough et al., 2008; Haw, 2010; Jackson, 2003) which, for some parents, form 'part of the daily tapestry of their lives' (Holt, 2011, p. 456).

## **Physical violence**

Seven interviewees described the physical violence they enacted on parents. This ranged from pulling hair and pushing – the most commonly cited form of physical violence in both surveys and interviews and also seen as the most acceptable form of violence, "I've pushed her, I've not hit her. I've pushed her" (Dan, male, 15, YOS) – to more harmful violence such as punching, kicking and throwing objects, "... if she was

*holding me [protectively] and I couldn't do anything, I'd try and kick the back of her legs out... 'cos then I could like, get away"* (Ruth, female, 18, College).

Physical violence resulting in injury was discussed fairly infrequently, with the majority of cases involving patterns of relatively minor violence, sometimes escalating over time to single incidences of more severe violence. However, as with the disparity in accounts of injury between male perpetrators of domestic violence and their female victims/survivors (Dobash & Dobash, 1998), it may not be that injuries were rare, but rather that not all interviewees were aware of or willing to acknowledge/report their existence.

*We started fightin' and then it ended up me throwin' things at her [Mum] and it smashin' near her and then she was gettin' hurt and... she got badly hurt... so that's why she phoned the police.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

Interviewer: *Could you tell me a little bit about what you mean by 'getting a bit out of hand'?... What sort of violence?*

Penelope: *... punching, kicking, I think. And the last straw, 'cos I ran out the house afterwards, I smashed her [Mum's] head against the wall.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

In several cases, more severe physical violence developed either in response to parents attempting to physically restrain interviewees or to them retaliating, highlighting how parental management of adolescent violence plays an important role in its presentation and development. Accounts of mothers in previous studies (e.g. Jackson, 2003) have identified similar themes whereby abuse often peaked and became physical when attempting to restrain or physically control their adolescent children. Describing one of the more serious episodes of violence between her and her mother, Ruth said:

*I think mum just went mental and I just grabbed her and just started like pushing her. Then she started pushing me back and... she pushed me really hard and I fell*

*over. And I got back up and... I just went crazy. It wasn't too crazy, I was just... like I punched her a few... like... not... on the face or anything, it was more like just punching her arms and stuff like that, just trying to get her away from me.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Not all physical aggression from parents was retaliatory in nature. At times, interviewees' use of violence was in *response* to parental violence. However, although in some cases interviewees' responses to such violence were defensive and proportionate, a few incidents involved an escalation in the severity of violence used by the young person that appeared disproportionate.

*And then she [her mother] just grabbed hold of me hair and ragged it around calling me 'stupid silly little bitch' and all this... So I've pushed her, punched her, yeah, to get her off me...pushed her, grabbed her hair, pulled...ragged her head around... and when she's got...when I've got her off me I booted her and she just went flying into the wardrobe and slid down, and it was proper traumatic.*

(Jodea, female, 17, YOS)

*Like, he'll push me and then I'll punch him [stepdad]*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

This last excerpt by Pete, however, highlights one of the difficulties in understanding the extent to which violence between adolescents and their parents can ever be considered truly 'mutual'. In his interview, Pete spoke about responding to a push from his stepfather with a punch which, although could be seen as an escalation in the level of violence, given the likely physical disparity between him and his stepfather, could also be viewed as entirely proportionate. In a similar way to gender, age intersects here to shape the perception and experience of violence and abuse: not only in terms of how the age of children will shape their experiences of violence from parents (and thus their responses to it), but also in how parents will experience violence from their children. This is highlighted in previous studies drawing on the accounts of mothers (Jackson, 2003), where the rising age of (typically) male children intersects with being a single female parent to create an environment characterised by fear around physical safety.

Intersectionality can be helpful in exploring this, highlighting how aspects of identity such as gender, age, single motherhood, and being a mother with a history of partner abuse, can intersect to shape the experience of parent abuse and the impact it can have.

### **Destroying property**

Similar to parents' accounts of adolescent-to-parent abuse (Cottrell, 2001; Edenborough et al., 2008; Howard & Rottem, 2008), young people commonly described aggressive behaviours aimed at property in the home: *"I picked a vase up from the side and I threw it on the floor"* (Dan, male, 15, YOS), or the home itself, such as doors, walls or curtains, *" ... because, I was feelin' violent, I was rippin' me curtains down"* (Jenn, female, 14, YOS). Typically younger interviewees described destroying their rooms or possessions as well as destroying other things in the home such as vases and plates. The most common behaviour described was smashing up rooms and punching or kicking walls or doors – behaviours not covered specifically in this study's adapted CTS, indicating a potential gap in the survey coverage for this type of family violence. However, the survey item *'I destroyed something belonging to my caregiver'* did provide some coverage and when analysed, indicated that 25% (5) of those students meeting the threshold for parent abuse reported destroying caregiver belongings on more than one occasion. In the YOS sample, this was even higher, at just under half (46%,  $n = 5$ ).

For a number of interviewees, enacting violence on objects within the home represented a cathartic activity and an alternative to enacting violence on parents themselves.

*'Cos I got dead angry. And I'd rather rip summin' up [schoolwork] than... end up either walkin' out the house or just not bein' very happy with myself and punchin' a wall again... rather do that than take it out on anybody else.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

This was also the case for those *not* involved in a pattern of parent abuse, indicating the range of aggressive responses to conflict that can fall outside of the boundaries of parent abuse and within 'typical adolescent behaviour'.

*So I was arguin' wiv' 'em [Mum and Nan] and then...after that I went into my room and just ended up smashin' my room up and just...punched the wall and things like that.*

(Jason, male, 16, YOS)

However, although viewed as a cathartic and non-harmful activity to interviewees, accounts from mothers experiencing abuse have shown that violence towards household objects can act as an ongoing reminder of the potential for violence towards them, putting them in a state of fear thinking "am I next?" (Cottrell, 2001; Edenborough et al., 2008), again highlighting the importance of victim experiences and perceptions to gaining a proper understanding of the dynamics of abuse. One mother in the study by Edenborough and colleagues (2008) described how she felt her son was communicating a threat that if he could hit a wall or a door, he could easily hit her – an intention behind behaviour that was particularly difficult to establish within this study. This could either have been due to interviewees' lack of malicious intent behind property abuses or the difficulty of acknowledging such intent within the context of an interview.

Although less common, items more personal to parents, such as mobile phones or cherished belongings, were also targeted, but typically within some of the more severe exchanges where parents either used or responded with physical force or violence. In these cases, the destruction of personal items can potentially be viewed as a means of punishing parents for feelings of hurt or injustice.

*I don't even care if someone says, 'Oh no matter what you shouldn't hit your mum'.. She thought she could jump on me over a can [of alcohol] getting spilt. So then I thought, 'Fuck that shit, she actually just did that', so I went and smashed up her whole gaff, threw her Jesus, threw her cans out the window. Threw pure shit... her ornaments that she loves out the window.*

(Jodea, female, 17, YOS)

From interviewee accounts, violence towards property seemed to serve a number of functions, including catharsis, communication, retaliation, and punishment. Unlike physical violence such as punching and hitting however, the destruction of property in the home was seen as an acceptable form of aggression which had little consequence, and, at times, was discussed whilst laughing or joking.

### **Verbal, emotional and psychological abuse**

Non-physical abuse took a more central role in the everyday experience of parent abuse, with verbal abuse often having an emotional or psychological element. For some, verbal aggression such as shouting and swearing took place on nearly a daily basis, “...we was like, arguin' and fightin' all the time” (Jo, female, 14, YOS) and was perceived as a more acceptable form of aggression, “Like...I yell at her a lot... I don't wanna push her or anything out of the way, so I just shout at her to move” (Ronnie, female, 17, College). This is common to parents' accounts of abuse from children, which typically describe verbal abuse and the destruction of property as the daily aggressions (Howard & Rottem, 2008), with physical violence being less frequent and in most cases leading on from verbal aggression (Cottrell, 2001; Howard & Rottem, 2008).

However, some of the verbal abuse described by interviewees had an emotionally abusive aspect, with the use of disparaging names and character attacks, “... like I call her a rat an' that sometimes” (Dan, male, 15, YOS) – features also common to parents' accounts (Howard & Rottem, 2008). This was particularly the case when conflict escalated.

Interviewer: *What sort of stuff did you used to say?*

Ruth: *That I wished she wasn't my mum...I wish she was dead...*

Interviewer: *And why were you saying those sorts of things?*

Ruth: *To convince myself that's what I actually wanted. So I could push myself... so I could... stop loving mum... make things easier I think. And also, to I think in some ways, to hurt her.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Similar to physical aggression, verbal aggression often escalated when parents either responded aggressively to verbal attacks or initiated verbal attacks of their own – aspects of the parent abuse dynamic less often covered in parents' own accounts.

*I might be stupid yeah, but you're a fuckin' little crack head.*

(Jodea, female, 17, YOS – speaking to her mother)

Psychologically abusive behaviours – defined within this study as acts that are detrimental or intended to be detrimental to a parent's emotional and psychological well-being and sense of self – had a more intentional aspect, ranging from twisting parents' words to explicit or implied threats to harm themselves or parents (physically or legally), "*I always threaten me stepdad but... not me mum... as much.*" (Pete, male, 15, YOS). Threatening to self-harm has been highlighted by mothers as representing one of the more distressing behaviours within the parent abuse dynamic (Edenborough et al., 2008) and was discussed by several interviewees in this study.

Interviewer: When you're threatening to hurt yourself, what are you hoping will happen?

Jenn: *I don't want nuffin' to happen, I just want her to know that 'I'm angry, so leave me alone'.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

Also reported were behaviours such as threatening to make false accusations of child abuse, a form of controlling behaviour documented in previous qualitative studies (Cottrell, 2001; Eckstein, 2004) and one which highlights how the uniqueness of the parent-child relationship can determine the shape that abuse takes and the tactics that can be employed by children to control or harm parents.

*I was like, 'I'll file reports on you 'cos you hit me', even though she didn't. And I'd go to the levels of getting my friends to hit me... to make bruises...*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Non-verbal psychological 'tactics', such as following mothers around the house, was also discussed by one participant, representing a threatening form of space-restricting behaviour similarly identified by mothers (Howard & Rottem, 2008; Selwyn & Meakings, 2016).

*I would just follow her around the house... not doing anything, I would literally just... that's another tactic I used to do... it wouldn't be violent, it wouldn't be anything, I'd literally just... follow her... around the house. If she went to the toilet, I'd go into the toilet with her... She sat down, I'd sit down right next to her. 'Cos I knew it annoyed her.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Such behaviour highlights the difficulty inherent in survey research of adequately capturing some of the less obvious psychologically controlling behaviours used in abusive relationships. In the case of following parents around the house, this could easily be interpreted as typical child behaviour and it is only by understanding the intention behind it (i.e. to intimidate or antagonise) and its impact on parents that it can be understood as abusive.

## **The development of abuse**

In terms of the development and timeline of parent abuse, interviewees varied in their responses, with some not remembering when their abusive behaviours began and others describing memories of child-to-parent violence during early childhood, even as young as four years old. This reflects one of the findings of Cottrell's (2001) study in which she identified that although the onset of abuse was typically adolescence, some children had a history of oppositional and aggressive behaviour from an early age, with aggressive behaviour only coming to light once they were old enough and big enough to cause greater harm. A number of interviewees in this study differentiated between 'paddies' and 'tantrums' that occurred during very early childhood and represented 'typical' child behaviour and physical violence enacted as adolescents, which they felt was less acceptable because of the greater likelihood of harm it could cause parents.

*Well 'cos when you were younger you know if you push them it's not gonna do any harm.*

(Sarah, female, 17, College)

*... all kids have paddies, they have little arguments with their parents, and they push about, they stomp their feet, they can kick... your parents like, trying to grab you to control you, just like you try and wiggle away. That's different to me... I was full-out, I was punching her, I was like 'Get off me'. She was trying to restrain me, two years ago, 'cos I was getting really violent, and I was having none of it. And because we are the same size, and I was quite strong, I could happily flick her off me, and like aggressively hurt her.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

This defining of abuse by the potential harm it can cause is something identified in previous studies of child-to-parent violence (Charles, 1986; Gallagher, 2004b), in which parents identified that they only defined their children's violence as abusive once they were old enough for it to cause them harm.

For some interviewees, the onset of abuse was a staged process, with verbal abuse starting at an earlier age, developing to physical violence over time, with more severe violence peaking in adolescence, *"I'd say that I started breakin' things at six. Like, puttin' an umbrella through the door an' that. But, probably about nine the violence starts"* (Jo, female, 14, YOS). This is reflective of the majority of parent abuse literature which identifies verbal abuse and the destruction of property as precursors to physical abuse (Cottrell, 2001; Eckstein, 2004; Haw, 2010; Holt, 2013).

However, for a number of interviewees, parent abuse and its development was determined environmentally rather than developmentally, taking place after incidents of trauma, such as experiencing violence or abuse from peers or family members, or when new step-parents joined the family.

*I say it started probably just around when [Mum's ex-boyfriend] did that [sexual abuse] to me when I was like... ten or eleven. (Ruth, female, 18, College)*

In such cases, parent abuse sometimes ceased when healing around the trauma took place, highlighting the important role that understanding the development and root causes of parent abuse can have in addressing it.

*... and I think once she [Mum] kind of understood what was going on – when things really did escalate – then she was a little bit more cooperative to kind of understand why I was doing the things that I was doing? And that kind of started the ball rolling for things to get better.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Violence, abuse and trauma were prevalent factors in the lives of most of the young people interviewed, factors which in previous studies have been identified as playing an important role in the aetiology of parent abuse (for a review, see Simmons et al., 2018). These contexts will be discussed in-depth in the following chapter.

## **The gendered nature of abuse**

Parent and child gender was explored through the surveys and interviews of those participants whose responses (either in their interview or survey) suggested a pattern of adolescent-to-parent abuse (13 in total). This included the two cases that were considered borderline. Unfortunately, due to the small number of parent abuse cases in the survey dataset, a robust quantitative analysis of gender was not possible. However, examining those surveys meeting the parent abuse thresholds (see Table 5.2) revealed that both sons and daughters reported their use of physical and psychological aggression towards mothers, stepmothers, fathers and stepfathers. However, without the statistical power to carry out inferential testing, no more than this can be said with confidence. Instead, the surveys and interviews of the 13 interviewees reporting violent and abusive behaviour towards parents (5 College, 8 YOS; 8 female, 5 male) were examined in-depth to gain a better understanding of the gendered nature of abuse and the extent to which gender shaped the development and presentation of abuse in these cases. It should be noted, however, that as this analysis is based solely on the accounts of young people, our insight into the *impact* of abuse on parents is extremely limited. This is important because gender affects how abuse is experienced by victims (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Hamby, Finkelhor, & Turner, 2012), so any *full* analysis of how

gender contributes to the experience of parent abuse, should also include parents themselves.

## **The gendered nature of parenting**

### *Mothers as primary caregivers*

Looking in detail at the 13 cases, a complex picture regarding gender seems to emerge, focused primarily on the gendered nature of both parenting and violence in the home. In nine out of the 13 cases, mothers and grandmothers (acting as primary or secondary caregivers) were the sole victims of abuse, a finding supporting the majority of parent abuse research to date, which identifies mothers as being the most likely victims (for a review, see Simmons et al., 2018). Theories attempting to explain this disparity focus on parents' differing roles in caregiving and, specifically, mothers' role as the primary caregiver, meaning mothers spend more time with children than fathers (particularly where mothers are the sole caregiver) and therefore are more actively involved in the everyday interactions and decision-making of parenting (Gallagher, 2004a; Holt, 2013; Ulman & Straus, 2003). This often includes limiting children's movements and privileges, and asking them to do housework or school work – factors that can spark conflict, particularly as children grow older (Pagani et al., 2004, 2009). This is evident in the accounts of a number of young people in this study who indicated that episodes of conflict and violence with mothers often began as a result of requests to do housework, homework, or with everyday interactions such as choosing clothing or limiting movement or privileges.

*Could have been about anythin'. It could have been about, somethin' that, I could be wearin' and didn't like it. Could have been anythin'...I'd say 'I don't wanna wear that' and then it would start a big argument.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

*The first time I think it happened was that she took my phone off me...so I tried taking hers? 'Cos like... if you're gonna take my phone, then I'm just gonna take yours then.* (Ruth, female, 18, College)

Such episodes represent tensions that occur during the daily negotiations of power within the parent-child relationship, which become particularly acute during adolescence, when young people have a stronger sense of their individual identity (Kennair & Mellor, 2007) and a greater desire to express their personal agency (Coleman, 2011). In this study, this dynamic seemed to be most prevalent among single mothers, who comprised four of the nine mothers who were solely abused. Single mothers have been identified in a number of studies as being at greater risk of experiencing parent abuse (for a review, see Simmons et al., 2018), since they are the only available targets for abuse (Cottrell & Monk, 2004) and they lack the economic, cooperative and supportive power that comes from living with a spouse (Jackson, 2003; Livingston, 1986; Tew & Nixon, 2010). Further, single mothers are more likely to have experienced violence and abuse by an intimate partner (Biehal, 2012; Gallagher, 2004a), a recognised risk factor for parent abuse (Simmons et al., 2018). However, often the studies that highlight single mothers as primary victims draw upon samples of families who have come forward to receive support for parent abuse or have responded to invitations to take part in interviews regarding family violence, samples with a potential bias towards mothers and single parents (Holt, 2012). Nevertheless, a number of themes identified in Nixon and colleagues' (2012) exploration of the experiences of single mothers and their children are echoed by the young people in this study. For example, the intense closeness of the single-parent-child relationship, both in terms of closeness in proximity, "Cos she's in the way. When I'm angry" (Jo, female, 14, YOS), but also in emotional closeness – with both being framed as risks for abusive interactions.

*I think it's because I've lived with my mum all my life, permanently, and with my dad it's only been visits, and he was away for a year and a half, and I saw him like, for day visits when he was in prison. And then, since he's been out of prison I've seen him less and less. So I've kind of lost that connection, so it would be weird to start an argument with someone you're not... it's easier to start an argument with someone that you know every little detail about and you're that close to, because it's easier to clash. Especially because me and my mum are so similar, it's much easier to clash than it is with my dad.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

## *Absent fathers*

The theme of absent fathers was also echoed by those who lived with both parents but were only abusive to their mothers, who spoke of fathers who were often absent due to work or through separation (and were often not respected) – a theme similarly identified by parents, practitioners and adolescents in previous qualitative studies of parent abuse (e.g. Calvete, Orue, Gamez-Guadix, del Hoyo-Bilbao, & de Arroyabe, 2015; Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2017).

*I think it's because Mum's at home more. And Dad's... usually he's out at work during the day. And he comes home and he's only home for the weekend. Which usually I'm not really home for, 'cos I'm out with my friends or doing work. And I think we're just with each other more often that... we find things to argue with, but usually it's all petty and then it gets escalated.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

*I think that's partly why I probably went wrong, because I've had no role model from my dad. I look up to my mum. But obviously you've... I know it sounds really stereotypical, but you look up to your dad as well don't you – whether you're a girl or a boy – you still look up to them. And I don't think my dad exactly gave me the best role model. Like the imagery of what I needed. Like, you know... he didn't exactly portray this image of what is right and what is wrong.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

One interviewee felt that the patriarchal norms around men, women and family currently operating in the UK made it more likely that mothers would be the targets of parent abuse.

*I think personally they'd be more likely to hit mothers, because even... I mean even in the society we're living in today like, it's more likely that the father's gonna be away working and we still live in... what is effectively a patriarchal society, so... like, a mother might be seen as a smaller figure than the father and the*

*father might be seen as someone who still is quite untouchable, or... or very removed from the situation, just based on work or whatever.*

(Alan, male, 17, College)

Explorations of power relations within the family (Tew & Nixon, 2010) have similarly highlighted men's power-privileged position in society as a potential reason for their lower likelihood of victimisation in the home, with their 'traditional access to positions of discursive or material power, both externally in the public sphere and through the continuing existence of an internal discursive position of 'man of the house' conferring protections not granted to women (Tew & Nixon, 2010, p. 585).

### *Mothers as safer targets*

Not only were mothers more likely to be the targets of parent abuse because of their greater presence and the greater demands they made in relation to domestic responsibilities, they also seemed to represent much 'safer' targets of abuse than fathers, in terms of both physical and emotional safety. For example, Ruth described how she feared her father would leave if she was ever abusive to him, but knew her mother would stay.

Ruth: *I don't think I have ever been aggressive towards my dad. That's one thing always Mum used to bring up as well... 'You're like this to me but you're never like it to your dad'.*

Interviewer: *And why do you think that might be?*

Ruth: *Because I'm scared of him I think. Not scared of him that he would hurt me, but... Mum has always given me love. Mum's always shown me that she's loved me. She's done so much for me. She's brought me up single-handedly. Without my dad around basically, most of the time. 'Cos even when they were together, Dad didn't do anything. It was just Mum doing it all. Dad was just sitting on the sofa high. So I knew I always had Mum's support, but I never knew I had Dad's? So I think I thought that if I was horrible to Dad he'd leave for good and he'd never come back. Whereas in a really selfish way, I knew Mum would stay... no matter what would happen. (Ruth, female, 18, College)*

Although such articulations have previously been given by mothers and practitioners (Gallagher, 2004a; Howard & Rottem, 2008), this is the first time young people themselves have voiced this reasoning.

These excerpts not only provide insight into how the gendering of parenthood shapes adolescent-to-parent abuse, but also highlight adolescents' differing expectations of mothers and fathers and the norms they hold regarding the role of mothers as nurturers and primary caregivers. For mothers, their emotional and physical proximity to their children and their role as primary caregivers seemed to make them much more likely targets of abuse, whereas fathers' emotional and physical distance seemed to act as protective factors.

### **The gendered nature of violence**

The gendering of parental roles was not the only way in which parent abuse seemed to be shaped by gender. Although complex, the gendered nature of violence within the home – both *between* parents and *from* parents to their children – also seemed to determine the victims of parent abuse and the *motivation* behind the use of physical or verbal aggression by interviewees. Where interviewees discussed the presence of domestic abuse during their early childhood, mothers were nearly always the victims and, due to the intersection of the gendered nature of parenting, became sole parents once fathers were forced to leave the family home. This, as mentioned previously, made mothers the only available targets of abuse, highlighting how gender can intersect in various ways – i.e. through violence and parenting – to shape the dynamic.

In terms of mothers being physically safer targets of abuse, when asked if she had ever been aggressive to her father, Jodea, responded: "*Me? Being aggressive towards me dad? Are you crazy?!*" (Jodea, female, 17, YOS). For Jodea, whose father had been physically and psychologically abusive towards her and had an unpredictable personality, the idea of being aggressive towards him was unthinkable. Conversely, although Jodea's mother was also physically violent to her, she spoke about her with less fear (perhaps due to her being physically weakened from drug use) but with greater resentment – particularly in relation to her perceived failure as a mother.

*I was just screamin' for hours, callin' her names, tellin' her how disgusting she is, tellin' her how much she failed.*

(Jodea, female, 17, YOS)

When combined, this seemed to make Jodea's mother a more acceptable target of abuse than her father – something echoed by Cottrell (2001) who, through her interviews with practitioners, parents and young people, found that children were more likely to abuse the parent they felt was the most vulnerable and, furthermore, that the perception of fathers as strong and intimidating often acted as a deterrent of children's abuse towards them (Cottrell & Monk, 2004).

These extracts exploring the violence of young women towards their mothers challenges the evidence and theorising proposed by several previous studies (e.g. Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Gabriel et al., 2018; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Tew & Nixon, 2010), which state that it is mainly teenage boys who fill the role of abuser when their father leaves the family home. However, in this study (as in Haw, 2010), both boys and girls used verbal and physical aggression towards mothers who had been abused by husbands or partners.

Although two interviewees did discuss their mothers' use of violence towards them, similar to previous studies (e.g. Stewart et al., 2007), the majority of accounts of child maltreatment involved fathers, stepfathers or mothers' partners as perpetrators. Despite this, the abuse experienced by interviewees was sometimes blamed (although not always explicitly) on mothers who had not been abusive, rather than fathers who had. It is possible that in the cases of Dan, Jodea, Ruth and Ronnie, who had all been abused by their fathers or mothers' male partners, that abuse towards their mothers was a reaction to a perceived lack of protection, highlighted previously by Cottrell and Monk (2004).

*...he was always hittin' my mum. And when he hit me, I used to tell me mum and she didn't used to do anything because she was scared of what he'd do to her.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

Ruth: *'Cos obviously I blame her for everything, even though it wasn't her fault.*

Interviewer: *What do you mean, with your dad? Do you mean with her boyfriend...?*

Ruth: *With her ex. Oh yeah. I blame that [sexual abuse]. Because...she kind of had...she didn't have an idea of what was going on, but she knew he was acting weird enough and she didn't ask me what was going on.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

However, as parent abuse often took place within the context of domestic abuse, it is also possible that mothers had experienced a subjugation of power – with fathers' use of manipulation, humiliation and blame undermining mothers' position within the family (Radford & Hester, 2006), placing them below their children in the hierarchy (Iwi & Newman, 2011). This distortion of the family power structure has been highlighted as a risk for mother abuse in a number of practice models attempting to address the dynamic (e.g. Iwi & Newman, 2011).

Only three of the 13 cases involving violence and abuse towards parents identified fathers or stepfathers as the primary victims and, even then, in two of these cases, mothers also experienced some form of physical and verbal/psychological abuse. In all three cases, interviewees also discussed their fathers'/stepfathers' use of psychological, emotional and physical aggression towards them, with none mentioning abuse from their mothers. Lastly, there was only one case where a young person identified being equally aggressive to their mother and stepfather. However, they ended the interview before any contextual details could be gleaned, preventing a more detailed analysis.

## **Child gender**

From this analysis of gender, we can see how the gendered nature of both parenthood and family violence intersect to shape adolescent-to-parent abuse. But what about the gender of adolescent children who are being abusive? Although most of the abusive behaviour by interviewees was by daughters towards mothers (in contrast to the mother-son dyad typically explored in the literature), there were two cases where sons

reported physical and verbal aggression towards mothers in the survey, but not in the interview. It may be that violence from sons to mothers was perceived as less socially acceptable by these young men and therefore less likely to be discussed in an interview (particularly when interviewed by a woman), whereas for female interviewees it was considered less taboo. This is reflected in the following excerpts from Sarah and Jared, who discussed how parent gender shapes the acceptability of adolescent-to-parent abuse.

*I've seen cases where people's dads have been like, a dick to them or like...bang out of order. So then, for them... if they had a fight with their dad or something you know then that's fair enough. But um... with their mum, I think it's different 'cos like... most people who are gonna turn round an' hit their mum... it's probably their fault, you know what I mean? It's not the mum's fault.*

(Sarah, female, 17, College)

Interviewer: *So when you said, because it's your mum you can't do anything... What do you mean by that?*

Jared: *Well I mean like... well for one, she's a woman and... I never hit girls. And two, she's my mum... and obviously...*

Interviewer: *What does that mean?*

Jared: *I would never do any... I would never touch her. Ever. I never 'ave.*

(Jared, male, 17, YOS)

Not only do these excerpts tap into gendered norms around violence, but they also seem to highlight an understanding that gender frames the context within which violence towards parents takes place and the extent to which it is acceptable.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the nature of adolescent-to-parent abuse, drawing on insights from both the surveys and in-depth interviews with young people. This work is unique in that it is the first UK study to take a focused look at *patterned* aggression towards parents using a survey and the first to apply a parent abuse threshold to the CTS. This is important, as historically survey research has often conflated parent 'abuse' with rates that include one-off incidents of physical aggression which may fall outside of the definition of a pattern of harmful and controlling behaviour. In fact, the findings from this study suggest that a range of physical and psychological aggressions towards parents can take place within the realms of what could be considered 'typical' for an adolescent.

This is also the first study to take a focused look at young people's *own* descriptions of their abusive behaviour, how they perceive violence and abuse towards parents and the ways in which they feel gender may influence it. This exploration reveals that verbal, psychological and emotional abuse form the everyday experience of the dynamic, with property abuse a common feature. Although physical violence was reported, it was less typical, often building up over time or in response to aggression *from* parents. Lastly, the exploration of parent gender revealed how the gendered nature of both parenthood and family violence made mothers the most available and the safest targets for abuse from their adolescent children.

# CHAPTER SIX: FINDINGS ON THE CAUSES AND CONTEXTS OF PARENT ABUSE

## Introduction

This chapter details the findings in relation to the study's second primary research question – 'How do young people understand, explain, and experience adolescent-to-parent abuse?'. Specifically, it focuses on the contexts within which violence and abuse towards parents occurs and the mechanisms through which it develops. For some interviewees, responses reflected their own experiences of using violence and abuse towards parents, whereas for others, responses were based either on what they had witnessed vicariously via friends or siblings, or were founded on more general on-the-spot hypothesising. For one or two interviewees, answers were given in the abstract, even though they had reported using physical and psychological aggression towards parents in the survey. For these young people, it may be they were not yet ready to admit or discuss their use of violence within the context of an in-person interview.

Interviewees had more to say about the causes and contexts of parent abuse than any other aspect of the phenomenon explored. Explanations included those centred around young people themselves (i.e. at the intrapersonal level or 'ontogeny'), between young people and their parents or wider family (at the interpersonal level or 'microsystem'), as well as those outside of the home (i.e. peers and school, or 'exosystem'), and at the level of cultural norms (the 'macrosystem'). Explanations for parent abuse were grouped into six main themes: *violence, abuse, and trauma*; *power, control, and agency*; *communication*; *stress*; *anger and emotion regulation*; and *blame* – the final theme exploring the language young people used to talk about their violence and abuse towards parents. These themes will now be explored in turn.

## Violence, abuse, and trauma

Fourteen of the 21 interviewees described past and ongoing victimisation experiences involving violence and abuse from and between parents, as well as from peers and those outside of the family. Of these, 10 had reported, either in the interview or survey,

their use of physical, verbal or psychological aggression towards parents, representing over three-quarters of interviewees reporting such behaviour. Furthermore, four of the 10 young people reported experiencing *multiple* forms of family violence, highlighting the constellation of violence and abuse that can be experienced by children, particularly within the home. A number of previous studies (e.g. Ford & Delker, 2018) stress the serious developmental consequences of experiencing multiple forms of violence during childhood and adolescence, with some studies finding 'poly-victims' (Finkelhor et al., 2007) the most likely to use violence and aggression towards parents (Boxer et al., 2009; Ibabe et al., 2013). Although not always connected explicitly by interviewees, such experiences did seem to play an important role in the genesis of parent abuse and, when viewed through a developmental lens, represent influential factors within the microsystem of young people's ecologies of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1994). However, as discussed by Simmons and colleagues (2018), although a number of studies have identified relationships between current and historical forms of family violence and parent abuse (indeed, family violence represents the most consistent risk factor for parent abuse in the literature), the *mechanisms* through which these forms of violence shape the development of parent abuse remain unclear. In this section, an examination of the experiences of interviewees from a critical realist perspective begins to address this, identifying three potential mechanisms: trauma, resentment and blame, and violence as an adaptive response.

## Trauma

Trauma can be defined as 'an event or experience that is emotionally disturbing and distressing and impedes on an individual's ability to cope' (Campbell et al., 2016, p. 309). A number of interviewees gave accounts of violence and abuse inside and outside of the home that could be defined as traumatic, including direct physical, emotional and sexual abuse, as well as exposure to violence and abuse between parents, which would often involve them being used as 'weapons' – particularly against their mothers.

*... we used to get, obviously abused by her different boyfriends. Not abused like sexually though thank god, but, like, just fuckin'... they used to be fightin' wiv knives or wiv, fuckin'... whatever they was fightin' wiv. And if we got in the way*

*we'd just get flung. I remember when I got flung into a baby gate and they fuckin' got off with my inhalers! And I needed my inhaler and he just took it and laughed in me mum's face. So used me as a weapon... to my mum.*

(Jodea, female, 17, YOS)

*And she showed me these messages my dad had just sent her... and they were like, 'I'm gonna take Ruth away from you right now, I'm waiting outside the flat' – like the flat we lived at – 'You're never gonna see her again'... and we turned up and my dad was actually there and he just started screaming at Mum and Mum just threw me the keys and she was just like, 'Run!'*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Later in the interview, Ruth discussed a particularly affecting episode involving her father's emotional abuse towards her and her mother; trauma that had clearly remained with her, even though she was recollecting an event which had happened in her early childhood.

*And my dad tried playing the whole, 'I'm going to kill myself if you leave me'... And tried taking an overdose in front of me when I was in the bath. And that's one thing I do... I do remember that.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Trauma in childhood, particularly that which stems from victimisation that is 'interpersonal, intentional, and chronic' (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014, p. 2), can have serious developmental consequences throughout the life course (see Kar, 2019 for a review). Specifically, trauma involving exposure to domestic abuse, or experiencing direct violence and abuse – particularly by close and trusted family members (Campbell et al., 2016; Hester et al., 2007) – have been linked to a range of psychosocial and cognitive difficulties, such as poor mental and emotional well-being and an escalated risk of future violence perpetration (e.g. Costa et al., 2015; De Bellis, 2001; Ibabe et al., 2014; Izaguirre & Calvete, 2017; Radford, Richardson Foster, Hargreaves, & Devaney, 2019; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2014). This is particularly true for those children who experience multiple forms of victimisation who, as 'poly-victims', are more likely to

experience trauma symptoms and develop emotional and behavioural difficulties as a result (Cater, Andershed, & Andershed, 2014; Diez, Fontanil, Gomez, Alonso, & Ezama, 2018; Finkelhor et al., 2007; Radford et al., 2011).

### *Trauma and emotion regulation*

Developmental traumatology, which involves the 'systemic investigation of the psychiatric and psychobiological effects of chronic overwhelming stress on the developing child' (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014, p. 2) has highlighted the biological consequences of such trauma, including a range of deleterious structural and functional outcomes as a result of 'toxic stress' (Kar, 2019; Shonkoff et al., 2012). For example, trauma can hamper the body's ability to regulate its response to stress which, in some, can mean higher cortisol levels and a 'primed' system that will respond acutely to further stressors or traumatic reminders (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014; Maughan & Cicchetti, 2002; Shonkoff et al., 2012). This could even extend to 'fearful, enraged, or avoidant emotional reactions to minor stimuli that would have no impact on secure children' (van der Kolk, 2005, p. 10). Such over-reactions can be observed in this study through the accounts of Jenn, who experienced severe stress and anxiety in relation to two incidents of serious peer violence, which extended to a more generalised state of arousal affecting her day-to-day life.

*I get stressed over the most tiniest of things. Like... if I thought my phone was on charge and it's not been, because the plug's came out, I'll end up gettin' dead stressed like, I'll end up screamin' me head off just at myself, like 'Orrrr!'. Know what I mean? I'd probably end up tryin' to throw the phone...*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

Specifically, Jenn linked the onset of her violent and abusive behaviour towards her mother to the violence she had been victim to, explaining, "... all that's in my head now, after what's happened, is just violence...". Further, she identified her lack of emotion regulation as the mechanism through which this occurred, "I can't stop myself from doin' it. It just happens and I'm like... I want to stop but my brain's gone". This was identified by another interviewee who had both witnessed his father abuse his mother and experienced direct abuse from his father himself, stating, "... when I kick off, I kick

*off really bad. And it takes about an hour to get me to calm down"* (Dan, male, 15, YOS), again indicating a possible hampering of emotion regulation for those children exposed to early violence. One possible explanation for this is that trauma can result in 'overactive threat appraisals', meaning that because of the trauma they have experienced, any stressor or act from a parent deemed *potentially* threatening could result in feelings of intense anger, from which violence is more likely to occur (Berthelot et al., 2014).

Poor emotion regulation in the form of low frustration tolerance and stress adaptability has previously been identified as a predictor of parent-directed physical aggression in a clinical survey study of 2- to 14-year-olds (Nock & Kazdin, 2002). It has also been identified as a characteristic of parent abuse cases in a number of qualitative studies involving parents and practitioners (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Perera, 2006). However, although a number of large-scale prospective cohort studies exploring the intergenerational transmission of violence theory have found both direct and indirect childhood experiences of violence to be strong predictors of future intimate partner violence perpetration and victimisation as adults (Ehrensaft et al., 2003; McKinney, Caetano, Ramisetty-Mikler, & Nelson, 2009; Stith et al., 2000; Widom et al., 2014), to date, none have explored the connections to parent abuse specifically, or the role emotion dysregulation might play. Only one small-scale longitudinal survey study of parent abuse has explored these relationships (Margolin & Baucom, 2014), but found that emotion dysregulation neither moderated<sup>17</sup> the relationship between childhood victimisation and parent abuse, nor predicted parent abuse directly. However, as the study involved a relatively small sample, further investigation is needed to fully explore these associations.

As explored later in the chapter, a lack of emotion control, getting angry, or having a temper were the most common explanations given for young people's use of violence towards parents. It has been referred to by some as 'expressive violence' (Gallagher, 2008) or 'reactive aggression' (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2015); referencing 'behaviour that is primarily an outburst rather than being intended to control others' (Gallagher, 2008, p. 35). Gallagher (2008) notes that expressive violence is a categorisation commonly applied to traumatised children who may be communicating

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<sup>17</sup> Moderator variables determine the *strength* and/or *direction* of the relationship between two other variables (in this case, childhood victimisation and subsequent parent abuse).

their distress through violent outbursts. This was articulated by Ruth, who framed her violence as a way of 'crying out for help' after her experience of abuse: "*I was cryin' out for help but I was doing it in ways that actually were just making people not wanna help me*" (Ruth, female, 18, College). This has also been identified in previous studies drawing upon parent, practitioner and youth accounts (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Gabriel et al., 2018). However, Gallagher (2008) warns that expressive violence can easily turn into more instrumental forms of violence intended to control parents, with 'no unambiguous boundaries between these forms' (p. 35).

### *Trauma and anger*

A number of studies exploring the possible relationship between childhood experiences of family violence and later (teenage/adult) perpetration of intimate partner violence have found that, rather than having a direct effect, childhood victimisation experiences often operate *indirectly* via trauma symptoms such as anger, anxiety, stress, dissociation, and substance misuse (Anda et al., 2006; Berthelot et al., 2014; Faulkner, Goldstein, & Wekerle, 2014; Taft, Schumm, Orazem, Meis, & Pinto, 2010). Insight into the potential connection between trauma and anger was provided in this study through the accounts of Alan, who, although not abusive to his parents, had witnessed the abuse of his mother by his stepfather, and experienced emotional abuse from him. In his accounts, Alan described finding anger an easier emotion to cope with than sadness or distress, meaning he would transform his depressed feelings into anger as a way of coping with them.

*I kinda channel everything into anger... 'cos I know how to deal with that. Like if I feel really depressed, I'll make myself as angry as I can... 'cos I can deal with it.*

(Alan, male, 17, College)

This could explain how the emotional damage resulting from victimisation experiences can result in violent and abusive behaviour towards parents, as anger – which interviewees articulated as a common pre-cursor to violence towards parents – may be a more manageable emotion for young people than sadness, betrayal or shame, emotions commonly connected with childhood maltreatment (Sheehan, 1997a). This is particularly relevant given that anger has been identified as a predictor of child-to-

parent aggression (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2015; Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2013) and poor anger management a quality of abusive adolescents (Holt, 2011; Holt & Retford, 2013; Jackson, 2003).

### *Trauma and mental health*

In addition to the biological footprints of trauma, trauma related to interpersonal violence, and particularly caregiver violence, have also been identified as having a profound impact on young people's emotional and mental well-being, with studies linking early violent trauma to a greater risk of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), low self-esteem, self-harm and suicide (Cater et al., 2014; Gabriel et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2007; Howell, 2011; Kar, 2019; Sheehan, 1997a; Smith, Kouros, & Meuret, 2014), particularly for children in the 11 to 17 age range (Radford et al., 2011), which includes most young people in this study. Further, a Spanish survey study conducted by Ibabe (2014), although only cross-sectional<sup>18</sup>, found that the emotional problems developed by teenagers experiencing family violence (including low self-esteem, depression and somatisation) mediated<sup>19</sup> the relationship between family violence and 'child-to-parent violence' (physical, psychological, emotional and financial). This was supported by the accounts of several interviewees in this study who had experiences of childhood trauma, and described patterns of self-harm, suicide attempts, and ongoing struggles with depression and anxiety.

*I went through a really bad stage of just being really depressed and suicidal. And I started self-harming and then... would try to kill myself... and that's what I meant by 'when things got really bad', because it was only when I ended up in hospital and nearly died that I think Mum kind of realised that there was something... a bit more... severe going on.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

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<sup>18</sup> Cross-sectional studies cannot establish the direction of causal effect.

<sup>19</sup> Mediator variables *explain* or account for the relationship between two other variables. In this case, emotional problems *explain* the relationship between family violence and parent abuse.

Interviewer: What is 'better' to you?

Jenn: Just normal. Not arguin', not feelin' stressed. Not feelin' upset or low every day... Not havin' anxiety and all that feelin' in me.

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

For both Jenn and Ruth, their violence and aggression towards their mothers took place within the context of poor mental well-being, specifically connected to their experiences of violent trauma. For Ruth, her mental health difficulties also acted as a point of conflict with her mother, who threw her out of the family home upon discovering she had self-harmed.

*The only reason my mum saw it [cuts], was because I was in the shower... And she ran in and she was like, 'What is that?'. And she said, 'As soon as you've had your shower, pack a bag and go'. She was like 'I don't want you in the house'.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

In such cases, it appears that parent abuse takes place within the context of children struggling with their mental health and parents struggling to properly support and respond to their children's mental health needs. Ruth confirmed this through her account: "... they don't really understand mental health too well. And the only way I could make them understand was just by acting up". Links between adolescent mental health and parent abuse have been identified in a number of previous studies (for a review, see Simmons et al., 2018), including mothers' accounts of violent children who also self-harmed (Biehal, 2012; Edenborough et al., 2008; Haw, 2010) and practitioners' accounts of adolescents using violence as a way of preventing depressive breakdowns (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014). However, only two small-scale qualitative studies of parent abuse (Gabriel et al., 2018; Haw, 2010) have highlighted the potential role that childhood histories of violence and abuse can play in this, with no studies providing accounts from young people themselves. This is important as any attempts to address adolescent-to-parent abuse should include an understanding of its potential root causes, highlighted through Ruth's accounts of her violence ceasing once her history of abuse was recognised and addressed.

*I think once she kind of understood what was going on [the abuse] – when things really did escalate – then she was a little bit more cooperative to kind of understand why I was doing the things that I was doing... and that kind of started the ball rolling for things to get better.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

In some cases, it was difficult to disentangle the extent to which mental health problems were a cause or a consequence of parent abuse. The accounts of this study suggest they can be both, with two interviewees describing the distress they felt as a result of their violent and abusive behaviour, particularly in relation to their sense of self-worth.

*And I think obviously, you are gonna feel like... I felt like I wasn't good enough and I was not good enough for anyone because I was violent and stuff, so obviously I took the overdose.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

*I just felt like... she'd probably be better...without me there.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

### *Trauma from peer violence*

Trauma was not always connected to violence from parents. In one case, it was severe violence from peers that resulted in trauma symptoms and the resultant use of violence towards a mother. Although bullying has been previously indicated as a potential contributor to the dynamic (Cottrell & Monk, 2004), this is the first time that the impact of severe peer violence and the trauma resulting from it has been explored in the parent abuse literature.

Jenn: *I think what it was... it [the attack] just made me violent and aggressive and... I don't know.*

Interviewer: *Why do you think that is?*

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

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

## **Resentment and blame**

Young people who had experienced violence and abuse from parents, parents' partners, or those outside of the family, often carried a lot of anger and resentment in relation to it.

*I was like, 'Why did you overdose in front of me? Or telling me I'm a shit daughter? Well you're a shit dad!'. I was like... 'Why did you do all of these things? I hate you'.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

However, as discussed previously on the gendered nature of parent abuse, interviewees often blamed the abuse (either explicitly or implicitly) on mothers who had not been abusive to them.

*I would get frustrated at my mum because I didn't understand why she couldn't retaliate... and why she couldn't stand up for herself. So I remember... like I did have a go at her actually. And I get really sad thinking about it because I love my mum to bits. I guess from me it was coming from a place of protection of ourselves but... I said, 'Why are you being like a robot, do you not see what he's doing?'*

(Shreya, female, 18, College)

Although for some interviewees (such as Shreya), this resulted in minor episodes of conflict, for others, the resentment and anger around their victimisation developed into an abusive dynamic whereby young people would redirect the hurt they felt towards those closest to them.

*And at the time it was really weird. It was almost like I had a little devil and angel, and the angel was like, 'Oh my god, go and apologise'... and the devil was like, 'Ha! That's funny, she's crying. I'm crying on the inside, she's crying on the outside, I guess we're even' – that's what was in my head... thinking. But I didn't realise I think, how far it was pushing her.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Children blaming mothers for past victimisation has been reported in a handful of previous studies of parent abuse (Cottrell, 2001; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Gabriel et al., 2018) and domestic violence and child abuse (Hester et al., 2007), and has been identified as a phenomenon existing in society more broadly (Hartley, 2004; Jackson & Mannix, 2004; Moulding, Buchanan, & Wendt, 2015). It has been conceptualised by many feminist researchers as a form of victim-blaming and a revictimisation experience for women (Holt, 2016a; Hunter et al., 2010; Radford & Hester, 2006; Stark, 2007; Toews, Cummings, & Zagrodny, 2019). Such victim-blaming can be observed by the use of Parenting Orders in cases of parent abuse, where (typically mothers) are legally punished for the violent behaviour of their children towards them (Holt, 2016a), as well as through social care intervention, such as Child Protection Plans, where mothers are often framed as 'failing to protect' – in cases where they themselves are the victims of domestic abuse (Moulding et al., 2015). It has been argued that such policies and practices represent a form of structural violence towards women and mothers (Holt, 2016a), with policy and practice mirroring the control strategies used by abusive partners of manipulating the mother-child relationship (Radford & Hester, 2006; Stark, 2007). It is therefore unsurprising that, given society's tendency to blame mothers for the violence and abuse witnessed and experienced by their children, children would lean towards that same tendency, representing a macrosystemic influence within their developmental ecology. The specific ways in which young people constructed blame through their recounting of violence towards parents will be explored in detail later in this chapter.

## Violence as an adaptive response

### *Violence as normal*

Interpersonal violence had become a normalised part of family life for several interviewees, demonstrated by their minimisation and justification of parents' violent and aggressive behaviour when recalling abusive episodes.

*... he just got angry and started shaking me... but that's all he does.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

Interviewer: *So has your dad been physically violent towards you?*

Jodea: *He has been yeah. Only slaps in me face. Not like, beatin' me down, but I think it would come to that if I even... he's threatened to kill me and attack me, says he's gonna throw me off his balcony and shit.*

(Jodea, female, 17, YOS)

*... I know I've pushed her before... I think it's because she tried to slap me... But she had a reason for it.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

Children's normalisation of violence is a phenomenon identified for those exposed to enduring interparental domestic abuse or child abuse and has been connected to children learning that 'aggression is "normal", tolerated and accepted' (Temple, Shorey, Tortolero, Wolfe, & Stuart, 2013, p. 8). This was articulated as a cause of violent behaviour in children by one interviewee who had experienced domestic violence in the home.

Interviewer: *What kind of impact do you think that being aggressive in front of children has on them?*

Alan: *I think it normalises the aggression. I think it normalises... like, violence and abuse in the home. And I think when you get that danger, you get the danger of them growing up to be abusive and aggressive.*

(Alan, male, 17, College)

### *Violence as learned*

Some interviewees who were violent towards their parents acknowledged how their behaviour – and indeed, how they themselves – were similar to those parents who were also violent and abusive. Contrary to same-sex theories of modelling, however, this occurred for both a son and a daughter who, in both cases, identified with their violent fathers.

Ruth: *... 'cos I felt like I was acting like my dad and I think... the one thing she [Mum] said to me before I started pushing away was, 'You're act...', something like, 'You're so like your dad'.*

Interviewer: *Do you know what some of those behaviours were she was referring to?*

Ruth: *Aggressive. Loud... not loud, but like... just gettin' angry wiv' everything. Um... recklessness... I just didn't care what I did. I'd do what I wanted, when I wanted an' if no one would let me do it, I'd find a way to do it. And that's exactly what my dad used to be like.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

*I get aggressive with others in my house, I must get it from my dad.*

(Ant, Male, 16, College – survey response)

These excerpts show interviewees' attempts at meaning-making regarding their violent behaviour, which here may represent either acknowledgement of aggression as being *learned* from a parent who demonstrated similar behaviour – in line with social learning theory – or as *inherited* – i.e. 'I must get it from my dad [through genetics]'. This second conceptualisation being more in line with a psychobiological approach to the

development of aggression. Either conceptualisation fits broadly within the metatheory of the intergenerational transmission of violence, which, although widely criticised for its deterministic qualities (e.g. Baker, 2012; Hester et al., 2007) – particularly in relation to its gendering of victim and perpetrator behaviours (Newburn & Stanko, 1995) – draws on a variety of theories such as social learning, genetics, risk factors and official bias (i.e. police) to explain how children with violent parents are more likely to become violent than those with non-violent parents (Besemer, 2018). Social learning theory, although only partially supported through the accounts of young people in this study, posits that children learn to use violence either via direct experience or through observation and imitation of others (Bandura, 1977) – a process referred to as ‘modelling’. The modelling of violent behaviour by parents has been identified in numerous parent abuse studies as a potential explanation for the phenomenon (Simmons et al., 2018), where children witnessing interparental domestic violence and abuse acts as a blueprint for their own behaviour, resulting in internalised beliefs that violence is the best way to resolve conflict (Laurent & Derry, 1999). This has been supported by a number of cross-sectional and longitudinal survey studies where interparental domestic violence and abuse has been found to be strongly associated with, and a predictor of, parent abuse (Boxer et al., 2009; Ibabe et al., 2013; Izaguirre & Calvete, 2017; Ulman & Straus, 2003), as well as in qualitative studies involving focus groups and interviews (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014; Cottrell & Monk, 2004), where the modelling of aggressive behaviour by parents has been cited by practitioners, adolescents and parents as one of the causes of parent abuse. However, it is important to say that even in survey studies exploring the possible intergenerational transmission of violence, the majority of children experiencing interparental domestic violence and abuse do *not* go on to use violence in their relationships with parents. It is therefore important for studies such as these to investigate what may be different for those who do.

Social learning theory also argues that child aggression can develop through a process of cognitive mediation, whereby ‘the child can incorporate the belief that the use of violence is acceptable’ (Calvete, Orue, Gamez-Guadix, del Hoyo-Bilbao, et al., 2015, p. 936). This can be observed in the accounts of Pete, who demonstrated a general acceptance of violence when discussing his stepfather’s use of violence towards him: *“I ain’t bothered me. If someone wants to fight, bring it on”* (Pete, male, 15, YOS). It was also highlighted more explicitly by Ruth and Ant, whose fathers had taught them to use

violence as a method of conflict resolution, specifically in relation to being bullied at school. Ruth directly linked this to her subsequent use and enjoyment of violence.

*We used to get bullied, so my dad... me and my dad used to do taekwondo – my dad's a black belt in taekwondo – I used to be quite good at it when I was younger. And he always said to me, 'Just use your taekwondo... if someone punches you, you punch 'em back', 'cos obviously I think that's where I got my violent side from because me and my sister would just get in fights. First of all we didn't want to, but then once we realised that we could actually fight people, we were just starting fights because we'd find it fun.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Although fathers encouraging aggression towards school peers was something noted by Sheehan (1997a) in her exploration of parent abuse and family therapy, the direct teaching of violence to children as an acceptable form of conflict resolution is yet to be identified in the parent abuse literature as a potential contributor to the dynamic, with research focusing instead on the direct and indirect modelling of violence through witnessing and experiencing domestic violence and child abuse. Further, in most studies citing social learning as an explanation for parent abuse, the modelling of violent behaviour is nearly always articulated as being a same-sex phenomenon, with the focus being mainly on adolescent boys learning from fathers that violence towards mothers is acceptable. Although young people's accounts in this study broadly support the imitation of violent behaviour, this encompassed daughters as well as sons, something only previously identified in the survey study of child-to-parent physical violence by Ulman and Straus (2003), where daughters were just as likely as sons to be violent to parents in the context of interparental domestic violence. However, as this was solely a survey study, further in-depth investigation is needed to explore how gender may shape the modelling process.

### *Responding to violence with violence*

The second aspect of social learning theory – learning via direct experience – posits that children learn through positive or negative reinforcement that violence will achieve either a positive outcome (such as control or blaming others), or the

desistance/avoidance of a negative outcome (such as harm or punishment) (Bandura, 1977). This aspect of social learning theory can be seen in the accounts of interviewees who described instances of responding to parents' aggression and violence with violence of their own – which, in some cases, clearly involved mirroring parents' behaviours.

*And like she [Mum] threw somethin' at me but it didn't hit me, it went on the floor. And like, I picked a vase up from the side and I threw it on the floor. And it hit the floor. And then she kicked it near me – the glass – and I picked the glass up, threw it at the floor and I cut all me finger.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

*I think he [Dad] was just teaching me how to fight... and then... I accidentally hit him quite hard... An' then he kinda got a bit aggressive. An' then constantly said, 'Hospital food for you', 'cos he finds that funny.*

(Ant, male, 16, College)

In fact, for a number of interviewees, violence *towards* parents seemed to represent an adaptive defensive response to violence *from* parents and was identified as an acceptable context for parent-directed violence.

*... if a mum hit her daughter and the daughter hit back... I think that's alright... because it's self-defence sort of thing.*

(Sarah, female, 17, College)

Parent-to-child violence has been identified as a potential explanatory factor for child-to-parent violence in previous survey studies (Boxer et al., 2009; Browne & Hamilton, 1998; Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014; Izaguirre & Calvete, 2017; Margolin & Baucom, 2014; Ulman & Straus, 2003), where children's violence has been conceptualised as a functional response to parental aggression and an instrumental coping strategy for dealing with abuse (Brezina, 1999). This can be seen in this study where several interviewees used violence in a defensive or retaliatory manner.

*I think when she [Mum] didn't know I smoked, I stole a cig off her... and she was gonna slap me so like, I stopped and I pushed her. And that gave me a bit of time to move away.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

*Like, he'll push me and then I'll punch him [stepdad].*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

Drawing on general strain theory (Agnew, 1992) and coercion theory (Patterson, 1982), Brezina (1999) argued that adolescents' use of aggression and violence towards parents comes about initially through the strain of parental aggression and persists as a result of the negative reinforcement that comes from its desistence (Granic & Patterson, 2006). This was evidenced by Dan who described how his mother had stopped asking him to do chores around the home because of his aggressive outbursts.

## **Summary**

The majority of interviewees being violent and abusive to parents had also been abused by others, most commonly parents or parents' partners. In some cases, interviewees experienced multiple forms of historical and ongoing violence, which in the parent abuse literature represents the most commonly identified explanation for the phenomenon. This study also reflects the findings of previous parent abuse studies (e.g. Browne & Hamilton, 1998), in that although interviewees described incidences of physical violence towards their parents, it was more common for parents to be physically violent towards them. This, combined with previous evidence that demonstrates parental reluctance to admit to contexts of family violence (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014), highlights the importance of speaking with young people about their own histories and experiences, something this study adds to the developing literature. Interviewees' experiences of violence in and outside the family seemed to shape the development of parent abuse through three key mechanisms: first, through the developmental and emotional consequences of trauma impacting how young people were able to engage with parents and deal with everyday conflicts inherent in the parent-child relationship; second, how trauma resulted in anger and resentment which

was blamed and taken out on mothers in a form of emotional displacement; and third, through learning that violence was functional, desirable and acceptable. Rather than happening in isolation, however, interviewees' accounts suggest that these mechanisms often operated simultaneously, supporting the findings of previous studies (e.g. Gallagher, 2004a) that mono-theoretical accounts of parent abuse are insufficient to fully explain the phenomenon. New insights include challenges to same-sex modelling theories, with daughters and sons mimicking the behaviour of violent fathers and mothers, and lastly, the role of peer violence in the development of abuse.

## **Power, control, and agency**

The theme of parental control was evident across all interviews and was seen as a point of conflict between parents and adolescents. For some, the tension between parental expectations and interviewees' own developing sense of agency – often relating to their need for physical and emotional 'space' – resulted not only in conflict, but in some cases, in a damaging pattern of violent and abusive behaviour towards parents, as a means of wrestling back power and control over their lives.

*I think because when it comes to parents... they have a lot of control over you. They control you financially... if you're under 18... they feed you, they clothe you, they give you a house over your head... and then like, I think physically... that [violence] could be the only way you could get... any kind of way to control... feel like you're controlling yourself... rather than your entire life being controlled by somebody else.*

(Alan, male, 17, College)

Parents' attempts to control the behaviour and movements of interviewees were an everyday aspect of the parent-adolescent relationship which, for some, triggered bouts of violent and abusive behaviour, when the wants of interviewees and parents were in opposition. This was compounded by interviewees' feelings of dependence, which jarred with their developing sense of agency and desire to be seen and respected as individuals.

*I was on the trampoline and... she said no to somethin', so I got annoyed and ran off the trampoline and into the kitchen and rugby tackled her.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

Parental attempts at control focused on two main areas: controlling and determining privileges and responsibilities; and controlling and constraining space and movement.

### **Privileges, entitlement and responsibility**

Common to interviewees' accounts of the triggers of violent conflict with parents were incidences of parents removing or withholding privileges such as television, mobile phones, and other material goods. In fact, far from being viewed as 'privileges', part of interviewees' frustration came from their sense of entitlement around having such things and feeling that parents were being overly strict or unfair by withholding them.

Interviewer: *What are the triggers that wind you up?*

Jo: *Like say if she says, 'Oh, that doesn't go with that' or 'I don't like them shoes' or 'You're not gettin' this, you're not gettin' that'.*

Interviewer: *So do you feel sometimes that you're frustrated because you want certain things?*

Jo: *Yeah.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

*I asked for money and she said she didn't have any. And then my little brother asked for some money, for some sweets from the shop, and she give 'im some. So I was goin' mad because she didn't give me any – she told me she didn't have any.* (Dan, male, 15, YOS)

*I think that teenagers want... well you know, they want everything. They're not gonna be happy until they get it.*

(Marcus, male, 17, College)

Children's sense of entitlement has frequently been cited as a contributing factor to the parent abuse dynamic (Gallagher, 2004a, 2004b; Howard & Rottem, 2008), with children who use violence against parents found to have higher levels of demandingness and lower levels of frustration tolerance (Nock & Kazdin, 2002). This indicates a likely pattern whereby children have higher levels of wants and expectations, then struggle to manage their emotions when these are not met. This was confirmed by Calvete and colleagues (2013) who found that instrumental and proactive aggression, rather than reactive aggression, predicted 'child-to-parent violence', with children and adolescents using violence 'to obtain reinforcements and to avoid certain tasks' (p. 765). The reasons interviewees gave for aggression were similar, relating to obtaining permission to get home late and use things such as computers and television – also identified in studies drawing on police reports (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988), probation records (Kethineni, 2004), clinical outpatient records (Perera, 2006) and parent reports (Howard & Rottem, 2008; Sheehan, 1997a).

The refusal or removal of privileges/goods that were addictive, such as cigarettes, sweets, television and mobile phones, were significant triggers of violent events towards parents, particularly where interviewees framed objects as providing emotional support. Potentially, this could be reflective of the emotional and physical dependencies young people had on these objects, with greater dependency meaning greater volatility upon removal/refusal.

*It was because I couldn't have any cigs, so I started shoutin'. And then she started shoutin'. So it made me shout more... and then that made her shout more.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

*The first time I think it [violence] happened was that she took my phone off me... so I tried taking hers? 'Cos like... if you're gonna take my phone, then I'm just gonna take yours then.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

*If I've been in trouble, she'll come in and try and take me TV an' I'll be like 'No. Just leave it, I'll give it ya in a minute when I calmed down', but obviously she'll want to get it.* (Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

For Ruth, however, privileges were articulated as being more than just the objects or freedoms themselves, but rather symbolic of control, with removal framed as 'losing' in the face of an 'enemy' – the sort of 'zero-sum game' often characteristic of the relational power play within the family system (Holt, 2013) and also discussed by parents and practitioners in previous studies of parent abuse (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014).

*... at the time, my phone was like my biggest comfort blanket... I would always sit on my phone, go on social media, you know... talk to my friends... and I overreacted I think also to try an'... this is not right at all but... it's tryin' ta assert a level of... not control, but... 'I'm not just gonna let you take my phone off of me!' sort of thing. Like I wasn't gonna let her just... at the time I really just thought she was my enemy, and I wasn't gonna let her walk all over me, which is what I saw it as at the time... Even though I know that... mother-daughter... the hierarchy, Mum has the right to punish me if I do something wrong. That doesn't mean I can do it back in the sense, because I'd already done something wrong in the first place. So I think it was more a sense of tryin' ta... establish... some sort of... hierarchy. And that she wasn't above me. I wasn't tryin' to say that I was above her... I was tryin' to almost beat... make her realise or try an' make her believe, that I was on the same level as her... So by taking her phone I thought that... obviously where I was doing the same thing to her... that she'd back off. But she didn't.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Ruth went on to explain that her use of violence was twofold: to equalise the power imbalance in the relationship, which would in turn reduce the conflict (or so she thought), and by doing so, it would enable her to do more things she wanted to do, such as going out and seeing her friends, and staying up late. So, in this sense, Ruth saw violence as a means to gain power and control over herself and to exert her personal agency.

Interviewer: *And why do you think you wanted it to be equal?*

Ruth: *Because the arguments would stop? Because before that violence we were used to arguing like all the time, it was just never violent, it was just really loud, shouty, arguments. But I hoped that if I was on the same level as her that maybe*

*we wouldn't argue. Or that it wouldn't be as bad... and she'd let me go out. An' I'd be able to see my friends. An' I could stay up until whenever I want (laughs). The typical things a teenager wants, you know.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Outside of the parent abuse literature, entitlement has been highlighted as playing an important role in abuse more broadly, with abuse conceptualised as taking place when an individual's sense of entitlement outweighs their sense of responsibility (Jenkins, 1990). Many of the interviewees who had used violence seemed to lack a sense of responsibility towards their parents or the family home, with parental expectation around household contributions often met with refusal. In some cases, disagreements over household responsibilities led to violence and aggression from young people – something also identified as a trigger in previous parent abuse studies (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988).

Interviewer: *So what does 'really bad' mean?*

Dan: *When I start punchin' the walls an' that... there's lots of holes in the walls.*

Interviewer: *And why would that normally happen?*

Dan: *Small things, like little arguments...like, I've not cleaned me room or summit.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

*... like 'Ah, you didn't put the dishwasher away' and I'll shout; or 'You didn't do this, you didn't do that'.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

Occasionally, interviewees' aggression led to a reduction in parental requests to do chores, which, although stated as reducing conflict, does in fact represent a pattern of coercive control, with mothers altering their behaviour to avoid aggressive outbursts. Such behaviour has previously been reported by parents themselves (Cottrell, 2001; Haw, 2010).

Interviewer: *So do you think your mum's doing something different?*

Dan: *Think she's just tired of arguin' wiv' me.*

Interviewer: *Do you think she's asking you to do less things?*

Dan: *Yeah...a lot less things (laughs).*

Interviewer: *And do you think she's doing that to...*

Dan: *...to not get shouted at.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

In their reflections on 'battered parents', Harbin and Madden (1979) highlighted how children can often resent their parents for reminding them they are dependent and below them in the hierarchy – for example, by telling them to do chores. Violence can therefore be a way to distance themselves from that dependency. In several cases, interviewees blamed their parents for their violent reactions to requests to carry out household chores, claiming it was *the way* their parents told them to do chores that triggered their tempers.

Jenn: *Like, it's not the stuff that she says, most it's how she says it.*

Interviewer: *Like what?*

Jenn: *Like... [shouting] 'Go and do your pots!', or...my stepdad will just go [calmly] 'Jenn, do you mind doin' your pots please because I've just done the rest'... 'Yeah fine'.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

*... obviously, it's stressful for her because I haven't done something which she has to then go and do, but then I'm like 'It's a little thing, what does it matter?', but she'll shout at me and I'm like 'Do you really need to shout?', and it just gets me annoyed.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

## Space, movement and socialising

*I wanted my freedom, even though I didn't deserve it, and I wasn't safe to have it... (Ruth)*

Adolescence is a developmental period marked by an increased desire for personal autonomy and privacy, with the outcomes of parental autonomy-granting determined by the interactions between adolescents and their environments (McElhaney & Allen, 2001). For parents, adolescence represents a time of challenge, attempting to balance their children's desire for increased autonomy, their need to experiment, learn and become self-sufficient, with parents' own perceived need to implement boundaries and keep them safe from risks (McElhaney & Allen, 2001). Although recognised as a necessary part of the individuation process (Blos, 1967; Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002), the negotiation of adolescent autonomy has frequently been cited as a context for parent-child conflict and was a prominent theme during interviews.

### *Freedom to move, freedom to socialise*

Young people's desire for personal space and freedom of movement came out strongly in the interviews, both for those who had been violent and abusive to parents and those who had not. This included the need for both physical and emotional/relational space and often connected to young people's increasing desire to spend more time with friends and less time with parents, a widely acknowledged characteristic of 'Western' adolescence (Coleman, 2011). For several interviewees who had used violence towards parents, parents' attempts to constrain their movements often acted as triggers of conflict.

*They [arguments] could start from the stupidest of things, it's ridiculous. Like one could be like, 'Oh I'm gonna go see my friends' and my mum's like 'No you can't' and then we'll just have a massive clash.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

*Well, like two and a half months ago they wouldn't let me... 'cos I went out, just for a breather...the social worker said 'don't let him back in the house', so they didn't, so I started kicking through the door, and then my stepdad come out, so I go 'let me in', he pushes me away from the door, so I smack him, about three times, and then I go in the house and the police end up turning up, arrested me, and then taking me into care.*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

Ronnie: *Yeah it escalates quite bad sometimes. Like I yell at her a lot...an' then sometimes she would refuse to let me leave... an' stuff like that... like block me from the door. Like she would stand in front of it but obviously I don't wanna push her or anything out of the way, so I just shout at her to move.*

Interviewer: *Does that work?*

Ronnie: *No. It just gets worse.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

Conflict around interviewees' movements also tended to intersect with their desire to see friends, or when curfews were broken because of staying out late with friends, particularly when parents did not know their whereabouts.

*I think there was a time that I was saying to my mum that I needed... like well... I'm old enough to do something like, going out with my friends... and she didn't want me coming back at 10, she wanted me coming back earlier. And we had a full-on argument.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

*'Cos I wouldn't come home, I'd be like, 'I'm refusing to come home, I'm not telling you where I am'.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Sometimes 'staying out' intersected with parents' concerns over the use of alcohol and drugs, although, contrary to much of the parent abuse literature to date (see Simmons

et al., 2018 for a review), this came up only once as contributing to the parent abuse dynamic, with the majority of discussions instead focusing on the calming qualities of substances such as cannabis.

*I kind of vaguely remember the argument. I think it's 'cos I went out drinking with my friends on a school night. Mum didn't mind me drinking – to a certain degree, like, I could have a drink with the family, that's fine – but she didn't like the idea of me being out drinking underage. And stuff like that. Especially if I wouldn't tell her.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Young people's refusal to keep parents informed of their whereabouts is a characteristic of the parent abuse dynamic commonly reported by parents (Cottrell, 2001) and within this study, seemed to represent an attempt by interviewees to exert their agency and demonstrate the control they had over their own lives whilst, in a sense, rebelling against the inherent dependence of childhood. However, in some cases, interviewees' withholding of their whereabouts was clearly a tactic designed to punish or hurt parents emotionally, with the knowledge that doing so would result in mental anguish and concern.

### *Emotional and relational space*

For a number of interviewees, their need for emotional space, and their frustration around not getting it, often resulted in conflict, and in some cases an escalation to violence.

*And I'll be annoyed and then she'll be there and she'll ask me questions about it and I get annoyed and take it out on her then.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

Interviewer: *The ones that turn into fights – what tips it into fights do you think?*

Jo: *Probably because I get to the point where I just have to hit somethin' and she's just there... 'Cos she's in the way. When I'm angry.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

*I push her out of me room but I don't kick her, I don't punch her – I couldn't. I think I kicked her once but that was when I was... she was really annoyin' me and I was just like 'Move Mum' and she wouldn't go. Like she doesn't leave me alone when I'm angry, which is what I do... I speak to her about like 'Mum, when I'm angry, will you leave me alone, because obviously, that's when somethin' takes over me and I just... I'll prob... my body will just naturally hit you and I don't want to. So, leave me alone' but she doesn't.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

The need for space during conflict could potentially connect to interviewees' lack of capacity around managing complex emotions, with them needing space to calm down rather than pushing through to 'resolve' an argument.

### *Separation from parents*

The theme of emotional and physical space also extended to interviewees' understandings of how to resolve the parent abuse dynamic, which often involved them leaving the family home to spend time apart from (nearly always) mothers – again highlighting the gendered nature of the phenomenon.

*I think we were having arguments and a hard time that month, it was a bit unsteady, and I think I was like 'I'm gonna move to my granny's for a bit' and that, she was like 'No', and that's what kicked it [the violence] off I think.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

*... at one point I was begging her to put me in care... 'cos my dad didn't want me to live with him... so I was just like... I didn't want to be around her and stuff like that. As... I dunno, it was just... I can't describe it, it was just really difficult.*  
(Ruth, female, 18, College)

*But, I know my mum will never give up on me. She said that to me, she said 'I'll never give up on yers' and I said 'But, Mum, there's no point in tryin' because...I just feel...I just know it's not gonna get better 'til you leave me alone' so...*  
(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

Although personal space has been briefly mentioned in one small UK parent abuse study (Gabriel et al., 2018), this is the first to properly explore the importance and meaning of spatiality through the perspectives of young people themselves. Through interviewees' accounts, space and movement can be seen as playing a key role in adolescents' emotional and social development which, when constrained, contributed to the parent abuse dynamic. Although clearly not the only factor in the development of parent abuse (as nearly all children will at some point experience constrained movement, but only a small number become abusive to parents), understanding how best to manage adolescents' needs for space and movement, whilst also maintaining appropriate parental control, will be important in finding ways to reduce violence and abuse towards parents while encouraging and respecting young people's sense of agency.

## **Parenting**

Parenting and parent behaviour was one of the most widely cited explanations given by interviewees for parent abuse and parent-child conflict more broadly, intersecting with all the previous themes of power, control, parental expectations, child entitlement and agency. This mirrors the trend of parent abuse literature to date, which has often focused on parenting styles and characteristics as a way of explaining the dynamic. The two parenting characteristics articulated by interviewees as potentially contributing to parent abuse, were overly constraining and authoritarian, and conversely, lenient or permissive parenting.

Parenting 'styles' has been one of the major areas of investigation in relation to parent abuse, having been recognised as a key ecological factor shaping children's social environment and, in turn, their social, emotional and behavioural development (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2018). Most parent abuse studies exploring the role of parenting have utilised the theoretical frameworks of Baumrind (1967, 1991) and later, Maccoby and Martin (1983), the latter having proposed a four-typology model of parent socialisation styles based on the two concepts of responsiveness (warmth) and demandingness (strictness). Various combinations of these two core concepts produced four distinct parenting styles: *authoritative*, where parents are strict with their children, but also warm and responsive to their needs; *authoritarian*, where parents are strict but use punishment to exert tight control and, unlike authoritative parents, are neither warm nor responsive. The remaining two styles are both permissive in nature (i.e. neither strict nor demanding), with *indulgent* parents characterised by being warm and responsive and relinquishing control, allowing children their independence, and lastly, *neglectful* or *uninvolved* parents, who, in addition to being neither strict nor demanding, are also neither warm nor responsive, leaving them largely absent from the caregiving role. Studies exploring these parenting styles have traditionally found that the authoritative style relates to children who are well-adjusted and 'competent', with the authoritarian and permissive styles relating to a range of externalising and internalising symptomology (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2018).

Studies investigating the role of parenting styles in the aetiology of parent abuse have identified both permissive and authoritarian styles as contributing to the dynamic, with the former being the most commonly cited (for a review, see Simmons et al., 2018).

### *Strict parenting*

In this study, interviewees more frequently described parenting that was overly controlling, strict, harsh and not age appropriate, with parental levels of control being unresponsive to interviewees' developing sense of agency, independence and 'maturity'. As previously discussed, common causes of conflict (which in some cases led to violence) often involved a divergence of opinion around the appropriateness of going out, seeing friends and using technology uninhibited by parental constraint.

*'Cos at the end of the day, if you're controlling about something... they're gonna be like, 'Oh no, fuck you' sort of thing... an' especially if you're a teenager as well.*

(Sarah, female, 17, College)

*And I just think that she's just so strict like, when I was 15 I had to ask to go on my iPad, and like plan within a week advance to go see someone, when all my friends were going like 'Hey, do you want to come out' like, that night or like that day, and my mum would be like 'No, you didn't plan it'. And I'll be a bit like, frustrated, because, she's just not lenient enough, and I'm 15/16, I would like more individuality and like more, dependence, on myself, rather than having to rely on my mum for stuff, having to ask for silly, petty little things, when I was growing up.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

Interviewer: *What are some of the escalators, that increase the level of conflict?*

Ronnie: *Probably her [Mum] thinking that I'm the younger child still. Because she definitely treats my older sisters differently. But she thinks of us two... still young and still children, when we're not now. Like, I'm nearly turning 18 and she would still think I need some responsibility around like, being looked after when I don't. So usually we would disagree with each other and then turn into an argument.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

A handful of parent abuse studies suggest that parenting practices that are more appropriate for younger children can serve to make older children feel infantilised, resulting in feelings of humiliation and resentment (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Ibabe & Bentler, 2016). This seemed to be the case for some in this study who felt that the levels of control imposed on them by parents were not reflective of their age or maturity, resulting in frustration and aggressive power struggles. Within this context, it seems that parent abuse was a way to wrestle back power and control from parents who were perceived by their children as being overly controlling. This is not necessarily surprising given that several child development studies have found disparities between adolescent and parent expectations of autonomy (Daddis & Smetana, 2005; Feldman & Quatman, 1988), with adolescents considering many of their behaviours and actions to be beyond parental control and regulation (Smetana, 2000).

## *A perception of permissiveness*

Interviewees also gave accounts of permissive parenting, describing parents who were indulgent and did not set boundaries or consequences for behaviour. However, those who had been violent towards parents tended to ascribe their violence to more authoritarian styles of parenting, with permissive parenting mentioned either more generally (i.e. not as a specific reason for parent abuse) or more in the abstract, when discussing views on why they thought other people were physically violent to parents. Such accounts reflect the commonly held parent and practitioner perspectives on parent abuse, which often place parents' lack of boundaries and consequences at the heart of the issue (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Holt, 2012a; Hunter et al., 2010; Miles & Condry, 2015; Tew & Nixon, 2010) – something that both explicitly and implicitly places blame for the dynamic firmly on parents themselves (Holt & Retford, 2013; Nixon, 2012).

*I think it's maybe the way... there may be less discipline, or the way the parent produces discipline – they might just get wound up an' just... maybe argue like they might do for a friend or their own sibling... And they didn't really put much discipline into them, so they [children] won't think much of it [being violent].*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

Ant: *When say they [Mum/Dad] do put their foot down, I feel a bit upset because... I'm used to them not doing it. I mean, if anyone normally says the word 'No' to me, I just feel really... guilty an' upset... of the fact that I can't get my own way (laughs). 'Cos it's just the way I am I think.*

Interviewer: *So would you say that generally you do get your own way?*

Ant: *Most of the time yeah.*

(Ant, male, 16, College – admitted to violence in the survey but not in the interview)

*... they [friends] didn't have any discipline or anything. They did get a lot of what they wanted like... she had a horse, she had everything she wanted and she would get annoyed for petty things. And they didn't think much of their mum, just, 'the giver'. And nothing like, love really, there.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College – discussing two friends who had been violent to their mother)

### *Equal power dynamics*

A significant portion of the parent abuse literature discusses how equal power dynamics between parents and children can be a risk factor for parent abuse (Cottrell, 2001; Harbin & Madden, 1979), with parents who interact on a level more akin to friendship resulting in children feeling insecure about who is in charge and having less respect for parents as boundary-setters, perceiving them instead as 'weak' and 'ineffective' (Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014; Routt & Anderson, 2011). This was reflected by two interviewees when discussing what led children to be physically violent towards their parents.

*I don't think they think of them as much of a parent... maybe more like a sibling or... kind of like a friend or something? They don't really think of them as a parent. So they feel like they're at the same level.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

Interviewer: *Do you think that would happen regularly, that parents would let their children 'get away' with things?*

Sarah: *Yeah, I think so. It depends on... like, if you're quite a weak person... then you're gonna let them get away with it [violence], because you're gonna think, 'Oh, they'll grow out of it' sort of... or they let them walk over them because they don't know what to do... and they're too embarrassed to speak about it, like, 'My kids hit me'.*

(Sarah, female, 17, College)

Although the quote by Sarah again highlights the favoured narrative of parental blame and 'weakness', it also indicates the stigma surrounding the issue and the need for parent support. This is an important element to focus on as it moves the conversation away from one of parent blame, to one of parent support; of understanding how parents can be enabled by policy and practice responses rather than disabled by them. This is also important given studies have found that parenting which lacks boundaries or behavioural control can in fact be a result of parent abuse, rather than a cause of it, with parents' – particularly mothers' – lack of confidence in the wake of abuse leading to a lack of action to address it (Biehal, 2012; Contreras & Cano, 2014; Tew & Nixon, 2010). This is particularly relevant for mothers who are survivors of domestic abuse, who can be disempowered by fathers in their relationships with their children (Radford & Hester, 2006).

## **Summary**

Along with interviewees' histories of victimisation, negotiations of power and control in relation to their autonomy, space, and behaviours in and outside of the home were significant in explanations for why violence and aggression towards parents arose. Such explanations for abuse nearly always placed blame on parents themselves, creating a narrative whereby parents 'caused' the violence through, most commonly, trying to control young people's movements, behaviours and privileges. This is similar to male perpetrators' accounts of domestic violence, who frequently cite women's curtailing of 'freedoms' along with attempts to subordinate them as having 'caused' the violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1998). Although rare, explicit discussions of power, control and the parent-child hierarchy did take place, but only with those college students with the knowledge and language of these sociological concepts. When they did arise, such discussions highlighted the important role that power-play has within adolescent-to-parent abuse, and how the dynamic can reflect a wrestling for power and control that has winners, losers, enemies and zero-sum games (Omer, 2016).

Those who struggled to manage the everyday negotiations of power and control with parents tended to be those who had a lower tolerance for frustration and who had experienced violence and abuse as younger children. As the majority of children do manage to successfully negotiate parent-child power relations without resorting to violence and abuse, there needs to be an acknowledgement of what may be different

for those who do not. Histories of victimisation, poor mental health and neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD, were prevalent in this sample of young people. Although struggling for power and control within a context of developing agency may act as a trigger for abuse, it seems more likely that the root causes lie in those factors affecting adolescent mental well-being in the first place. Further, it is also important to note that some mothers were parenting as survivors of domestic violence and abuse themselves, recognised in the literature as impacting significantly on parenting and the mother-child relationship (Radford & Hester, 2006). Indeed, interviewees' mothers were often attempting to parent children who had experienced violence in the home, whilst also dealing with their own trauma around that violence. The gendered nature of domestic violence and of parenting also meant that, in several cases, mothers were doing this alone, with separated fathers impacting upon the power dynamics at play – either through their absence, or by their continued harmful interactions with mothers and children, “... *they won't talk unless I physically make them talk. Everything goes through me. And it has done since I was about 12*” (Ruth, female, 18, College). Here we can clearly see the interconnectedness of explanations for parent abuse, with violence, power and gender all intersecting in the development of the phenomenon.

## **Communication**

Communication was a theme in nearly all interviews, providing insight not only in relation to parent abuse, but into the wider context of parent-child conflict and relationships more broadly. Communication shaped the dynamic of parent abuse in various ways, from raised voices and aggressive language acting as an escalator of conflict episodes, to an avoidance of open and honest ‘emotion talk’ having implications for how parents and young people were able to resolve their differences and effectively express their feelings. Family communication patterns therefore acted as triggers of episodes in their own right, as well as laying the foundations for future interactions through social learning and the reproduction of communication behaviours. For some interviewees, their histories of family violence shaped the development of parent-child communication, with subsequent adolescent-to-parent physical violence acting to further damage and reinforce previously established communication habits.

## **Shouting and raised voices**

Parents shouting and raising their voices was commonly cited as an escalator of parent-adolescent conflict, with interviewees reporting that it triggered feelings of anger, which sometimes resulted in violence towards parents.

*Dan: I just don't like people shoutin' at me and arguin' wiv' me... it just gets me really angry.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

*He'll start raising his voice. And then, I go out... well sometimes it'll go a bit further than that.*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

Shouting has been identified as a common escalator of conflict in numerous studies in the wider conflict literature (e.g. Resick et al., 1981; Tusing & Dillard, 2000) triggering adrenaline and the physiological stress response system (Aloia & Solomon, 2015), which, in turn, can increase the perception of actions as aggressive (Murray & Arnott, 1993). However, aside from one young person connecting shouting to sibling violence (Biehal, 2012), this is the first parent abuse study to properly explore the role of conflict volume in the development of the dynamic. Although previously both communication (Eckstein, 2004) and anger have been cited as individual contributors (Gallagher, 2004b; Haw, 2010), to date, a connection between the two has not been made. The accounts of young people in this study provide insight into that connection. That is not to say that parents shouting is the *cause* of parent abuse, but a recognition that it is instrumental in escalating parent-adolescent conflict, which is often the precursor to physical violence towards parents.

## **Aggressive and hurtful language**

For a number of interviewees, threatening and abusive language from parents and parents' partners preceded their violence towards them. Aggressors were often stepfathers or mothers' male partners and aggressive language often directed towards

sons, potentially as a demonstration of masculinity and male power, in an attempt to establish or reinforce their position at the top of the family hierarchy.

*He [mother's partner] said if I came any closer 'I'll knock your effin' teeth out'...  
And I think I grabbed 'im, like, by the neck.*

(Marcus, male, 17, College)

*... he always makes the effort to... kinda just escalate it, to a point where he's  
back on top of the hierarchy I guess in his mind. So, I think, if I was ever... to full-  
on snap at anybody, I think it would be my stepdad.*

(Alan, male, 17, College)

Aside from being a trigger of violent conflict, parents' aggressive language can also act as a blueprint for future child behaviour, teaching young people that aggressive forms of communication are both necessary and acceptable within the home, locking parents and their children into 'coercive cycles of relational aggression' (Pagani et al., 2004, p. 535).

*If they're screamin' at you and you're screamin' back, you're gonna be like, 'Oh  
they're screamin' at me, I'll scream at them, right?', and it looks like what you  
should be doin', but it's not.*

(Kirby, male, 16, YOS)

Two interviewees also suggested that such negative communication could result in children feeling that parents did not like or care for them and that this lack of positive affect and interaction could result in parent abuse: "obviously, one of my mates used to be violent against his mum but I think it was because his mum didn't really care about him" (Jason, male, 16, YOS). Such feelings were compounded for one interviewee by her mother comparing her unfavourably with others – making her feel unloved and like the 'black sheep' of the family.

*And having your mum compare you to someone else... like to another person... an' what they wish you to be like, makes you... to me personally, it made me feel like that I wasn't enough and that... almost felt like I was the broken one... the broken child that just couldn't be fixed. I think that's why I kept hitting a brick wall of kinda like... 'Why am I even trying? Why am I even trying?'*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

This quote demonstrates the harmful dynamics that can be created through the reciprocal interactions between parents and their children which can culminate in abusive behaviour. For Ruth, the backdrop of historical domestic abuse towards her mother and her own sexual abuse hampered her and her mother's ability to effectively communicate, with Ruth's aggressive behaviour and risk-taking around drug use and staying out – symbolic attempts to disclose – being compared to those of her abusive father. This resulted in Ruth further distancing herself and convincing herself she was unloved, providing the context of resentment and distress which led to her violence: *"Cos I thought, the more I was around my mum... and feeling like she didn't love me... the worse I was gonna get"*. This is a good example of the intersection of gender, violence, and communication in the parent abuse dynamic.

Although only a few parent abuse studies have explored parent-child communication, a number of survey and qualitative studies (Biehal, 2012; Paulson et al., 1990), particularly in Spain (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, & Orue, 2014; Calvete, Orue, Gamez-Guadix, del Hoyo-Bilbao, et al., 2015; Sampedro, Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, & Orue, 2014), have revealed that young people engaging in psychologically and physically abusive behaviour towards parents typically report lower levels of parental warmth, affection, care and positive communication, 'perceiving them as less warm, more rejecting, and less inductive' (Contreras & Cano, 2014, p. 901). Furthermore, Spanish studies of individual and family risk factors for 'child-to-parent aggression' identified emotional rejection by mothers as a predictor (Ibabe et al., 2013), with one longitudinal study identifying that perceived parental rejection mediated the link between low parental warmth and subsequent child-to-parent aggression (Calvete, Orue, Gamez-Guadix, & Bushman, 2015). This is particularly salient for interviewees in this study, as many had experienced emotional and physical abuse, as well as parent separation, which they themselves connected to feelings of resentment and rejection.

However, it is important to note that, as with 'permissive' parenting behaviour, a lack of parental warmth could be a *consequence* of violence and abuse from adolescent children, rather than a *cause* of it (Contreras & Cano, 2014), with several qualitative studies involving mothers pointing to the conflicting emotions that can further hamper the mother-child bond and interactions (Jackson, 2003; Stewart et al., 2007). This was highlighted by interviewees when recounting how their parents felt about them and their abusive behaviour.

*Like, 'This is not what I had in mind when I had a child, I wasn't expecting like, this to happen, or you to turn into the way you have'. 'You're a monster, I don't recognise you'... 'I still love you, but not in the way that I should love you as a daughter'.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

*I feel like they love me but I feel like they're not... lovin' this type of Jenn.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

### **Listening, honesty and emotion talk**

A number of interviewees who had engaged in violence and abuse towards parents described relationships with parents that lacked open and honest discussions about feelings, which often made them feel they were not heard or understood. In some cases, this resulted in frustration and hurt which then acted as a trigger and escalator of conflict. There were various reasons given for this lack of honesty and emotion talk, such as a fear of reigniting previous arguments, a family culture of avoiding such talk, taking defensive positions during interactions, a reluctance of both parents and children to discuss difficult issues, and a lack of openness to others' perspectives. Attributions of blame in relation to this issue was mixed, with some interviewees taking responsibility for 'keeping stuff in' and 'not being an open person', whilst others acknowledged the reciprocal nature of communication. However, for some, the issue was framed in a way that blamed parents.

*... when we get into an argument, she doesn't listen to me, an' then I don't listen to her... an' we end up clashing.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

*It's really such a communication barrier that was between us, and I think, if we just learnt to let that barrier down, let that wall down, and just sit down and talk more, about everything, then it would just stop everything arising.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

*I prefer forgettin' about it [the violence], because... knowin' me and her, if we talked about it, we'd disagree on somethin' and then it'd start again.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

*... in the house like, we don't talk about what's happened [the violence]... it's just something we don't do.*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

Accounts of young people in previous studies have pointed to similar communication issues between parents and children, with youth in Cottrell and Monk's (2004) study describing how feeling 'invisible' and 'not heard' triggered anger which, in turn, triggered abusive behaviour. In their longitudinal study of 'child-to-parent violence', Paulson and colleagues (1990) found that children aged 9-17 years who hit their parents were less likely to talk to their parents about their personal problems. They also felt less respected and less understood. However, as this was a cross-sectional survey study, it was not clear to what extent these issues preceded or were the result of children's violent behaviour.

For two female interviewees, parent abuse arose from a context whereby feelings around their past victimisation were either repressed or not understood by parents. Here, violence and abuse was a means of punishing parents and releasing repressed feelings.

*Because in my head hurting Mum was what I needed... because she was hurting me. 'Cos she wasn't understanding me.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

*'Cos if you look back a few years ago before I got battered 'n that, you wouldn't think... I wouldn't had to be in the youth offendin' or anythin', I'd be a normal teenager. Bein' in school an' that like... Yeah but it affected me 'cos I kept it in and obviously I've just... I've just burst.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

As discussed earlier, experiences of violence and abuse can have serious developmental consequences for children, extending from their emotion regulation capacities to their social interactions and future relationships. Further, domestic violence and abuse has been identified in the wider literature as something that 'often directly and indirectly undermines the relationship between mothers and their children' (Humphreys et al., 2006, p. 53). This occurs through mechanisms such as a lack of attention given to children, an inability to talk openly about the abuse whilst it is taking place, and the anger children and mothers often feel about their experiences (Humphreys et al., 2006). Further, Visser and colleagues (2016) found that the quality of mother-child dialogues was poorer in cases where mothers and their children had been exposed to domestic abuse, involving less elaboration, less sensitive guidance from mothers, and less cooperation and exploration by children. This was highlighted through the accounts of Ruth when describing her mother's resistance to discussing past experiences of domestic abuse.

Interviewer: *You said that you felt it was maybe you first that pushed away... do you have any sense about why you might have done that?*

Ruth: *I didn't wanna hurt her I think. Because obviously I was very well aware of what my dad had put her through... And that really, really I think... as much as she won't admit it, you know it damaged her, 'cos when you talk to her about it... when I have started speaking to her about it, she... she does not wanna go there... And if she does, she's really brief about it and you can just see she doesn't want to.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

What did come out clearly in the interviews was that in those cases where parent abuse had ceased and been effectively addressed, this was framed as being due to an increase in the amount and quality of communication between interviewees and their parents.

*... and then in the evening, we had like a long chat about his [stepdad's] past an' stuff... and he didn't exactly have a great past either... So I was able to kinda connect with him... in that sense. And I think that's what kind of made me stop doing what I was doing, because I had someone that I felt understood where I was coming from... I knew that actually things could be better. I just need to start acting good!*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Open, calm and emotionally honest communication allowed young people to express and process feelings relating to trauma and upset, whilst also enabling the repairing of the parent-child relationship – articulated as vital to the healing process in much of the therapeutic literature (Micucci, 1995; Paterson et al., 2002; Sheehan, 1997a), where avoidance of such talk is limiting of change (Charles, 1986; Cottrell, 2001). However, for those, usually younger interviewees still engaging in violence and abuse towards parents, there was a reluctance to acknowledge that open and honest conversations may be a way to resolve or progress the issue, perhaps because they lacked the emotional literacy to engage in emotion talk and/or their parents were unable to effectively guide them through it. As highlighted by Cavanagh and colleagues (2001) in their study of men's accounts of violence towards female partners, '[t]alking might also mean acknowledging emotions such as guilt and shame' (p. 709), emotions that are notoriously difficult to manage.

### **Violence as communication**

For those interviewees who struggled to communicate their feelings to parents verbally, physical violence or destruction of property often acted as forms of non-verbal communication, used as a cry for help and attention in the wake of experiences of abuse and conversely, as a warning for parents to stay away and give young people the space they felt they needed.

*I wanted her attention. I wanted Dad's attention at that... I didn't want the whole world to know. I just wanted my family to know how I felt. And the only way I felt like doing that is something they didn't really understand... they don't really understand mental health too well. And the only way I could make them understand was just by acting up.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

*... you can't verbalise what you're trying to say, so the only way you can say what you want to is through physical action. Like that's... in a sense, your voice.*

(Shreya, female, 18, College)

Cahn (1996) suggests that adolescents resort to violence as a form of communication when they are unable to express themselves verbally to parents or have their opinions acknowledged (Eckstein, 2004). In a study by Cottrell and Monk (2004), service providers described violence towards parents as a means of communication in parent-child relationships where the emotional bond and interaction was lacking, with young people (as in this study) indicating it was a symbolic way of 'telling' parents about undisclosed abuse they had suffered (Cottrell & Monk, 2004).

## **Summary**

Through interviewees' accounts, it is clear that poor communication played an important role in both the development and maintenance of the parent abuse dynamic, acting not only as a trigger and escalator of individual episodes of parent-adolescent conflict, but also as modelled behaviours to be reproduced within future conflict episodes. A lack of good quality communication between parents and interviewees also limited opportunities for disclosure of trauma and distress and for the resolution of disagreements, which resulted in pent up tension and needs going unmet. Interviewees' violence towards parents then served to reinforce these poor communication habits and perceptions, highlighting the reciprocal nature of parent-child interaction within the abuse dynamic. Further, parent communication that was critical and lacked warmth (potentially both a *cause* and *consequence* of parent abuse)

impacted on interviewees' sense of self, further alienating them from their parents and damaging the parent-child bond, resulting in more distress, more violence and even poorer communication. Lastly, violence also acted as a form of non-verbal communication in contexts where young people were unable to communicate verbally – either as a warning for parents to stay away or to alert them to the need for greater support and understanding. Unfortunately, for the majority of young people, this often had the reverse effect to that intended.

## **Stress**

Parent abuse does not take place within a vacuum; rather, the individuals involved all exist across multiple environments, each with their own set of associated stressors. For interviewees, these 'contexts of stress' often acted as the backdrop to their violence towards parents and were given as potential explainers of parent abuse by those speaking in the abstract. Stressors impacted on young people and parents, as well as the whole family unit, reducing the emotional resources available to peacefully negotiate conflict within the parent-child relationship.

Conceptualised as a transactional process between an individual and their environment (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a, 1984b), stress can be understood as an explanatory factor for parent abuse operating at the micro- and exosystemic levels – in the form of environmental stressors and external coping resources – as well as at the ontogenic level – as enduring emotional states of distress/anxiety and internal coping resources. Stress theory can help to provide an explanatory framework linking young people's past and ongoing experiences of victimisation, their negotiations of power and control, and their communication with parents, to the emotional responses that emanate from them, such as anger and frustration. For example, Worrall and May's (1989) 'person-in-situation' model of stress explains how the interplay between 'core' (historical/built-up), 'ambient' (day-to-day), and 'anticipatory' (anticipated) stress can determine individuals' 'emotional volatility' immediately prior to stressful events and thus their tolerance for and reactions to environmental stressors. This was reflected in the accounts of interviewees who described the heightened emotional states of both themselves and parents immediately preceding violent episodes, sometimes (but not always) due to stressors operating in the background.

## Young people's stress

Young people's stress was given as an explicit reason for why violence and abuse towards parents might take place, with parents conceptualised as 'safe' targets for young people to take their stress 'out on', due, in part, to the lower likelihood of (particularly legal) sanction or reprisal. In this sense, interviewees were hypothesising that young people's emotional struggles in- and outside the home, combined with the unique relational space parents occupy, could account for abuse.

*... Or the kids just might have stress, that's why they might try and hit their parents.*

(Anthony, male, 16, YOS)

*Sarah: Oh, then it's probably 'cos they've got a lot of stuff going on outside and they're stressed, so they're taking it out on that family because they know their parents aren't gonna do anything about it, they're not gonna get in any... well, not aren't doing **anything** about it, I mean they're not gonna get any like... they're comfortable enough to be an asshole around them.*

*Interviewer: What sort of things do you think would have to be going on to cause a young person to be aggressive to their parents?*

*Sarah: Well it could be... I dunno... college, school, friends, relationships. An' just... I dunno, anything really.*

(Sarah, female, 17, College)

Stressors typically included things like school and friends, but also (and sometimes less explicitly) parents' mental health problems and drug use. Difficulties with school and interpersonal relationships have been identified as the most common 'chronic stressors and daily hassles' (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2008, p. 3) in adolescents' lives, with parents reporting in previous studies (Biehal, 2012; Murphy-Edwards, 2012; Stewart et al., 2006) that school and social stress were 'contributing factors to the onset of threatening and/or violent behaviour' from their adolescent children (Stewart et al., 2006, p. 307). This study supports these findings, highlighting how the stress of exams and friendships acted as the backdrop to physical and verbal aggression towards parents.

Interviewer: *What about if you're stressed? Do you think it works the other way as well?*

Ronnie: *Definitely, yeah. Because like... especially in the exam period, they kept on saying that I kept on arguing a lot. Or if I had a bad day at school like...*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

*I think one example would be when I was in year ten and we had our mocks going on so I was really stressful at that time. Had a lot going on with friends at that time. And me and my mum clashed over something and I got quite violent and I kind of was like... punching, kicking, I think. And the last straw, 'cos I ran out the house afterwards, I smashed her head against the wall.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

Bullying at school, sometimes extending to peer violence within the community, was also a point of stress and strain for several young people being aggressive to parents. For Jenn, multiple assaults by peers had led to a general state of anxiety which affected her daily life, including her interactions at home with parents.

Interviewer: *So what do you feel anxious about? Do you know?*

Jenn: *I think it's goin' out. Like I used to have to look behind me to see if someone was gonna come behind me and grab me hair. D'ya know what I mean like? I've got a bit... I'm like, dead cautious and then anxious when I do go out because it's happened that many times.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

Pippa: *And then if there's other stuff going on... they might just direct it to the first thing which annoys them, which could be their parents.*

Interviewer: *So, what sort of 'other stuff' would you think could be going on?*

Pippa: *Bullying in school... or just like... they just might be struggling in general.*

(Pippa, female, 17, College)

Parents have described bullying as a potential contributing factor to their adolescent children's violence and abuse at home in previous studies of parent abuse (Calvete, Orue, Gamez-Guadix, del Hoyo-Bilbao, et al., 2015; Murphy-Edwards, 2012), with researchers such as Cottrell (2001) highlighting that adolescents can often redirect their stresses surrounding school and bullying towards parents in the form of violence. However, as already discussed, interparental domestic abuse and child maltreatment in the home also acted as significant contexts of stress for a number of young people interviewed.

As argued by Harold and Sellers (2018), childhood victimisation experiences are stressors that can have negative repercussions on the body's ability to respond to future stressors, acting to keep young people on 'high alert'. This has been highlighted in previous studies of parent abuse, where mothers have described the physical and behavioural stress symptoms resulting from post-separation contact with violent fathers, including children's violent behaviour towards mothers themselves (Gabriel et al., 2018). Further, longitudinal cohort studies exploring the possible connection between childhood adversities, adult stress, and intimate partner violence (Roberts, McLaughlin, Conron, & Koenen, 2011) found that individuals with histories of childhood adversity and high levels of past-year stressors were at greater risk of perpetrating intimate partner violence in adulthood, with the interaction effect hypothesised as representing individuals' greater 'stress sensitisation'. The same process could potentially be present in cases of adolescent-to-parent abuse.

Robert Agnew's (1992) 'general strain theory' (GST) provides a framework by which to organise these various sources of stress or 'strain' and unpick the 'complexity of the associations between stress, emotional reactions and harmful behavior' (Sigfusdottir, Kristjansson, Thorlindsson, & Allegrante, 2017, p. 1085). The theory proposes three main types of stressors that may elicit negative emotional and behavioural responses from adolescents: valued goals that remain unachieved, such as success in school or in friendships; valued stimuli that are removed or withheld, such as mobile phones, privileges, or romantic partners; and negative situations or events, such as family violence and conflict or other forms of victimisation such as bullying or abuse (Sigfusdottir et al., 2017). Agnew (1992) argues that these forms of strain can manifest in a range of negative emotional reactions, like frustration and anger which, in turn, can lead to harmful behaviours such as violence, self-harm and drug use (Sigfusdottir et al.,

2017) – prevalent behaviours within this study’s sample of interviewees (specifically, in thirteen, five and eight cases respectively). Furthermore, all three sources of strain were reflected in the accounts of interviewees who frequently described feelings of frustration around school, peers, privileges, and family violence, a number of which acted as the immediate contexts for parent abuse.

For a number of interviewees, although not necessarily articulated as ‘reasons’ for their abusive behaviour, multiple contexts of stress were evident; for example, mediating between separated parents, living in local authority care, living with or supporting parents with mental health difficulties, substance misuse problems, or financial difficulties, and seeking the attention of parents who were either absent from or flitting in and out of their lives. Absent parents, parental separation, moving between homes and family members, and parents with alcohol and mental health problems have all been identified as prevalent factors in the lives of children and adolescents being violent and abusive towards parents (Biehal, 2012; Calvete, Orue, Gamez-Guadix, del Hoyo-Bilbao, et al., 2015; Gallagher, 2004a) although, until now, these have not been explicitly conceptualised as stress factors. However, studies exploring young people’s experiences of living with parental substance misuse (e.g. Bancroft, 2004) have found that constant unpredictability and family stress – such as changes to parental relationships, violence, and changes in care arrangements – are characteristic of young people’s experiences. These intersections were evidenced by several interviewees in this study, with violent interactions with parents sometimes triggered by parents’ behaviour whilst under the influence of drugs or alcohol and fuelled by histories of neglect. Although it is likely that other cognitive and emotional processes involving resentment and blame were also operating as a result of these stress factors, there is no doubt that these contexts put young people under considerable stress and strain.

### **Coping with stress**

The majority of young people do, however, manage to negotiate the stressors inherent in everyday adolescent life (even those which are less common, such as experiences of traumatic events) *without* resorting to being violent and abusive towards parents. So how can the concept of stress help to explain what is different for those who do not? Why do some young people respond to stress with aggressive behaviour towards

parents? Although the previous stress theories presented can help us to understand the contexts of stress within which parent abuse can arise, it is the coping behaviours of the young people within those contexts that determines the outcomes of stress.

Strasburg's (1978) 'stress theory' states that young people resort to violence because they are exposed to high levels of stress (either continuous low-level or traumatic events) and do not have the 'natural defences' to deal with it effectively. In this sense, violence 'may develop as an alternate means of coping with intolerable stress' (Strasburg, 1978, p. 83). This is supported by Nock and Kazdin (2002), who found that abusive adolescents referred for outpatient therapy were found to be less adaptable to stressful situations, and also by Murphy-Edwards (2012), whose study proposed children's domestic property violence (DPV) as a form of maladaptive stress release. However, perhaps a more useful conceptualisation can be found in Hammer and Marting's (1988) work on *coping resources*, which suggests that the relationship between situation and coping behaviour is determined, in part, by a person's *perceived* internal and external resources to cope. Internal resources include the ability to reframe events positively, control emotions, and problem-solve, with external resources relating to things such as social supports. Interviewees in this study using a range of maladaptive coping behaviours, such as self-harm, drug use, violence towards parents, and 'cathartic' activities like destroying property, can thus be conceptualised as doing so in the absence of other healthier coping resources to draw upon. Unfortunately, such forms of coping were destructive to both the young person and the parent-child relationship, exacerbating pre-existing difficulties and acting as further triggers of conflict.

*Because I was doing the drugs to stop myself from feeling like Mum hated me... if that makes sense? Cos it played on my mind every day that Mum hated me... 'I'm gonna go home, Mum's not gonna be there... she's probably moved out, locked the doors' – you know – 'and never gonna let me in again'. And... the first time my friend introduced me to drugs, I was kinda like (resigned tone) 'Oh, okay'... tried it, and then I felt great and I was like... 'Oh this might actually kind of...I think, help me and my mum out, because if I'm not stressed about it, I'm not gonna go home and start act... being like aggy with her an' like, arguing'. But it didn't, it just made things worse. It, it really did. Because as soon as I'd start coming on a comedown I'd be ten times worse than if I was sober... And then it would just literally be... I*

*was so argumentative... even if Mum just looked at me, I'd be like, (shouting) 'Why are you looking at me?! Errrr', and kick-off so... I felt like a monster when I was like that... (Ruth, female, 18, College)*

This conceptualisation in terms of internal and external coping resources is particularly relevant given that internal resources, such as positive communication, anger management, and feeling loved, were often stated as lacking by interviewees using violence towards parents, whereas the addition of external resources, including family counsellors, mediators, confidants, and neutral family members (discussed further in Chapter Eight), were seen as active components in addressing parent abuse. This is important for practitioners and programme developers as bolstering the internal and external coping resources of both young people and their parents could potentially reduce the use of maladaptive, destructive and violent coping strategies.

### **Parent and family stress**

Contexts of stress were not limited to young people, however, with interviewees describing a range of stressors affecting parents and the wider family. These were framed as reducing parents' emotional capacity to deal with parent-child conflict whilst also increasing the household's overall 'emotional volatility'. Common stressors included partner and child mental health problems and difficulties at work, with change and loss relating to births, separations and family deaths also putting parents and families under strain.

*My stepdad's got depression, so he can get sort of quite down sometimes, which is a bit stressful on my mum, 'cos I can get down sometimes as well and she's got to deal with all of us and I think it gets her quite stressful.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

*... I think it also is for her [Mum], stress as well, because she works in the hospitals and she comes home and tries to destress, but if she sees something happening, she'll get annoyed at it and carry on wiv her frustration.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

From these accounts we can see that parents – particularly mothers – were often parenting within a variety of stressful situations, trying to juggle the needs of partners, children and the household. In the literature, parent stress has been identified as a risk factor for parent abuse (Nock & Kazdin, 2002), with qualitative studies providing accounts from mothers and practitioners which highlight the contexts of family stress that often act as the backdrop to abuse (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Gallagher, 2004a; Harbin & Madden, 1979). These studies frequently describe parents – typically single mothers – as struggling to cope with the pressures of childcare, social isolation and finances – the latter also highlighted by one interviewee in the present study.

*... if I was a single parent, you're a good kid, an' I was tryin' a bring the kid up an' he was a teenager obviously – like you gotta pay for a lot of stuff for a kid when they're a teenager ya know what I mean? Clothes, or... what they want an' that, birthdays, Christmas – and yers was a single parent, you'd struggle. An' like, I don't think a lot of kids understand that.*

(Kirby, male, 16, YOS)

Cottrell and Monk (2004) highlight how such pressures often result in 'increased tension and conflict in the family' with parents having 'less energy to respond effectively in situations of conflict' (p. 1086). However, as pointed out by Holt (2009), being a victim of parent abuse is distressing and likely to result in changes to parenting, with mothers describing their reduced confidence in the wake of abuse from their children. This, Holt argues, is particularly so for single mothers who, as already discussed, lack the economic, cooperative and supportive power that comes from living with a spouse and, in some cases, who are parenting in the wake of domestic violence and abuse (Howard & Rottem, 2008).

## **Summary**

Interviewees' accounts highlighted a range of 'contexts of stress' which often set the scene emotionally for their violence and abuse towards parents, typically relating to stress involving school or friends, with histories of parental violence and neglect laying the foundations for stress 'sensitisation' in early childhood. The concept of low internal and external coping resources can help to conceptualise why violent and destructive

behaviour was the 'go to' for this group of young people, rather than other more solution-focused forms of coping described by non-violent participants. Finally, young people's contexts of stress often intersected with those of their parents and wider family, creating environments of 'emotional volatility' that made it much harder to peacefully navigate conflict and the daily negotiations of power inherent in the parent-child relationship.

## **Anger and emotion regulation**

As previously mentioned, one of the most common explanations explicitly given for violence and abuse towards parents was young people's "short tempers", "anger issues" and general lack of emotional control, explanatory factors sitting at the intrapersonal level, or 'ontogeny' of adolescents' social ecologies. Although in some cases such explanations placed blame for the issue on young people themselves, for those with experience of using violence and abuse towards parents, it enabled them to frame their violence as being beyond their control – similar to male perpetrators' accounts of violence towards female partners (Cavanagh et al., 2001; Dobash & Dobash, 1998). Reasons for emotion dysregulation tended to focus on issues such as personality, 'immaturity', trauma and, in some cases, neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD, the latter being accompanied by a narrative that freed young people from responsibility and blame.

*I think sometimes when you have an argument... an' there's nothing to calm you down... you just feel that... anger, like... in your body, an' it just feels like the only way to get it out sometimes.*

(Bianca, female, 17, College)

*And he'll start gettin' like, angry an' that – he'll start punchin' shit an' that – I'm not like that. Obviously, he'll like shout at his mum. For he's one of them like – they're both like the same innit – they'll shout all day every day.*

(Jamie, male, 15, YOS – discussing his teenage uncle)

Parent abuse research foregrounding mothers' experiences have frequently identified constructions that frame children's anger and quick tempers as the cause of their abusive behaviour (Holt, 2011; Stewart et al., 2006), with violence often conceptualised as a way for children and adolescents to express their anger and frustration and 'let off steam' (Haw, 2010; Murphy-Edwards, 2012). As young people's perspectives on their use of violence towards parents has rarely been explored, it is unclear to what extent adolescent children share this conceptualisation. The accounts of interviewees within this study, however, show that many do. For example, violence – particularly towards property – was framed by some as having a cathartic function, helping to relieve pent-up feelings of anger and frustration.

*At the time I was really... obviously I was angry and upset. But when I'd smashed everythin' up I had like... I just had that relief, it just calmed me down...*

(Jason, male, 16, YOS)

Interviewer: *Do you ever hit objects instead? Like, other things like walls or...*

Jo: *Yeah, I've punched walls.*

Interviewer: *How does that make you feel?*

Jo: *It calms me down.*

(Jo, female, 14 YOS)

However, a number of researchers and therapists writing in the field highlight the dangers of conceptualisations of abuse that view violent or threatening behaviours as 'letting off steam', stating that constructions that frame abuse as 'a natural and logical response to anger and/or frustration' (Haw, 2010, p. 18) can serve to blame victims and communicate to young people that such behaviours are acceptable and excusable. As argued by both Gallagher (2004b) and Haw (2010), anger should be understood as an emotion, whereas violence should be seen as a choice. Thus, an alternative and more useful framing may be that violence is anger inappropriately expressed (Cottrell, 2001) or a destructive and maladaptive way of managing emotion (Biehal, 2012; Patterson, 1982).

Interviewees also closely linked issues around anger management and emotion regulation to young people's development and emotional 'maturity', with violence and the inability to control anger associated with both the increase in emotions during adolescence and the emotional and behavioural 'immaturity' interviewees associated with childhood – referred to by one interviewee as, "*actin' like a kid*". Emotional maturation was often discussed in the context of why relations had improved between interviewees and their parents, with maturity meaning learning how to control yourself, be more reasonable and "*knowing what to do best in those kind of [conflict] situations. You know... better to stay calm and think.*" (Ronnie, female, 17, College).

*... most I probably gone mad at me mum and dad was probably when I was a kid. But like, as you get older you sorta like, ya know what I mean, you grow... you mature an' that like, you don't... you can't act like a kid – I'm 16... and I'm not even that old, I'm 16 – but I can't be actin' like a kid.*

(Kirby, male, 16, YOS)

*Because especially when you're younger you're full of all sorts of emotions and like, you don't know where to put it, but now like, I just like, become a bit more level-headed with it all.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

Jared: *...do ya know what I mean, I was just a kid to... I'd be throwin' stuff about like. Damagin' the walls an' shit.*

Interviewer: *Why do you think you did that?*

Jared: *Cos obviously I couldn't control me anger.*

(Jared, male, 17, YOS)

However, there is a danger in framing violence and abuse towards parents as a 'natural' state of immaturity associated with being a child. First, it assumes that there is a definitive pathway from childhood immaturity to adult maturity, something that childhood studies theorists would argue is an essentialist and deterministic view of both childhood and adulthood that neglects the heterogeneity of children and adolescents and their developmental journeys (Jenks, 1996). Second, by considering

violence and abuse as a natural aspect of developmental immaturity, it takes the onus of responsibility for change away from the young person. That is not to deny that childhood and adolescent development does not play a role in shaping the parent abuse dynamic – as it certainly does – but that the pathways through childhood and adolescence are not fixed or homogenous.

A lack of self-control and emotion regulation was also connected to neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD, both by those with first-hand experience and those young people articulating instances where violence towards parents may be unavoidable and therefore acceptable. Indeed, previous parent abuse studies have connected neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD and also autistic spectrum conditions (ASCs) to the phenomenon (for a review, see Simmons et al., 2018), with ADHD stated as ‘the most common diagnosis among CPA perpetrators in contact with human service agencies in offender and clinical samples’ (Simmons et al., 2018, p. 36).

*Jason: But sometimes it does wind me up a bit, 'cos I've got ADHD and I'm a bit... d'ya know what I mean? Just gets you a little bit angry.*

*Interviewer: So you feel that ADHD gets you angry?*

*Jason: Yeah like... not, not really but... like if I'm havin' an argument like, (clicks fingers) I just switch like... I get dead angry pretty fast. Just like, now I've learnt how to calm myself down and just not react to it.*

(Jason, male, 16, YOS)

*Interviewer: So why do you think you became violent at six years old?*

*Jo: Think that's when I got diagnosed with ADHD.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

*Interviewer: Why do you think someone might not be able to help being violent?*

*Jenn: When you're out of control or you've got an ADHD issue or somethin' like that, where it's not actually you, it's just yer brain workin' like that.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

Constructions that divert responsibility for abuse away from young people because of their neurodivergence are common within parent accounts of the dynamic, which frequently frame neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD as being the 'cause' of children's violence and abuse, thereby serving to justify it (Clarke, 2015; Gallagher, 2008; Haw, 2010). However, although studies of ADHD have found emotion dysregulation to be a core characteristic (Shaw, Stringaris, Nigg, & Leibenluft, 2014), with a meta-synthesis of young people's experiences indicating a lack of control in the face of overwhelming emotions (Ringer, 2019), such constructions are problematic as they can result in parents being more likely to tolerate and excuse violence and abuse from their children when it does occur, rather than condemn and take action against it (Gallagher, 2008; Haw, 2010). As emphasised by both Gallagher (2008) and Haw (2010), although neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD might make violence from children more likely, this does not and should not excuse it. However, as several interviewees did feel ADHD was relevant to their experiences of using violence and abuse at home, it should be taken into consideration as a salient aspect of young people's framing of the issue.

## **Summary**

Young people's anger, 'tempers' and lack of emotion regulation were some of the most widely referenced explanations for parent abuse, both by those who had used violence and abuse towards parents and those who had not. However, rarely did interviewees attribute parent abuse *solely* to these influences, with the majority theorising it as a phenomenon caused by a range of possible factors relating to parents, the family environment, and young people themselves. Interviewees also provided useful insight into the potential contribution of emotional development in shaping the parent abuse dynamic – which has yet to be properly explored in the literature. Although some of these articulations did serve to reframe blame and accountability for parent abuse away from young people, understanding such views is important for those attempting to intervene in addressing abuse, as young people will likely bring such conceptualisations with them to any programme of support. Lastly, for some young people, the anger leading to violent outbursts was closely connected to the hurt they were experiencing from their family relationships or situational factors, such as domestic abuse or child abuse. Seeing anger as a result of these deeper wounds questions the extent to which anger and emotion regulation can really be a root 'cause'

of parent abuse, or merely another symptom of a deeper issue, such as family violence and abuse.

## **Blame**

The way young people described and accounted for their violent and abusive behaviour towards parents created narratives that attributed blame either to themselves, to their parents, or to environmental factors/stressors and situations. In some cases, this was done explicitly, but in the main, it was done implicitly, through the ways in which violent episodes and the roles/identities within them were framed, and through the linguistic construction of accounts. For the most part, interviewees' attributions of blame were mixed, reflecting an understanding that a multitude of factors contributed to the abuse that was happening or had taken place. In fact, only a small number placed blame solely on one individual or cause (as 'cause' usually indicates the site of blame) and this was typically when young people had been responding to violence and abuse from parents (like Pete below) or were discussing abuse in the abstract and had limited ideas about the reasons or contexts behind it.

*Interviewer: In terms of fighting with your stepdad, how often does that happen?*

*Pete: Not often... not too often and not often enough.*

*Interviewer: So does it happen once a week or once a month or...*

*Pete: Something like once a month yeah.*

*Interviewer: And what sort of stuff generally, gets it going?*

*Pete: Him being cocky.*

*(Pete, male, 15, YOS)*

For those young people being violent and abusive to parents, narratives of blame were constructed continually throughout the interviews and were often supported using a range of 'rhetorical devices' (Adams et al., 1995; LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011) to reframe the abuse in terms of culpability and accountability. In the majority, such devices were used by female rather than male interviewees, indicating a potential role for gender in how such accounts are constructed. Although attribution of blame was often mixed

and parents not always explicitly blamed for the abuse they had experienced, at points young people used *minimisation, justification, denial* and claims of *reduced competence* (Goffman, 1971) to reframe their violent behaviour into something more socially acceptable and for which they were less accountable. This closely mirrors the accounting<sup>20</sup> of male perpetrators of domestic violence (e.g. Adams et al., 1995; Cavanagh et al., 2001; Dobash & Dobash, 1998; LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011; Stamp & Sabourin, 1995), who 'attempt to rationalise their violence and use a range of tactics to minimise, deny and blame others, particularly their partner, in order to mitigate their own culpability' (Cavanagh et al., 2001, p. 696). Each of these 'tactics' will now be explored further.

## Denial

Denial of violence towards parents manifested in a number of ways within interviews: as outright denial or omitting behaviours (which in the survey had been reported as taking place); as denial of behaviour as 'violence' or 'abuse'; as denial or distancing/detachment from the 'perpetrator/aggressor' role; and through the 'selective forgetting' of events. Such devices were most commonly used by one interviewee, Jenn, whose repeated denials and distancing from identifying as a 'violent person' closely mirrored the accounts of violent men in a number of previous studies (Cavanagh et al., 2001; Dobash & Dobash, 1998).

*And I don't wanna hit her, but when I... if I ever went to hit her, it wouldn't be me, I can tell you now, it wouldn't be me. Not sayin' it's ghosts but... someone will just take over me.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

*I speak to her about like 'Mum, when I'm angry, will you leave me alone, because obviously, that's when somethin' takes over me and I just... I'll prob... my body will just naturally hit you and I don't want to.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

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<sup>20</sup> 'Accounting' in this context means to 'absolve oneself from responsibility... to mitigate culpability', through a variety of narrative techniques such as blaming, denying or minimising (see Cavanagh et al., 2001, p. 700).

Jenn: *But I don't do domestic abuse. Like I don't sit there and abuse my mum. I couldn't. 'Cos I know full well if I... if I say, like I punch my mum tonight – 'cos we've got in an argument – I'm not sayin' I would... I'd end up, in the middle of the night sneakin' out and not comin' back because I couldn't forgive myself.*

Interviewer: *Do you think your mum sees it as abuse?*

Jenn: *I don't know what she sees it as.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS – attending the YOS for 'parental domestic abuse' towards her mother)

Cavanagh and colleagues (2001) argue that the use of distancing allows perpetrators of violence and abuse to maintain identities that are more socially acceptable, whilst also freeing them from accountability and blame. Further, Jenn's references to being taken over by "something" or "someone" allow her to claim a lack of responsibility for the behaviour, it being something that will "naturally" occur in the event that her mother transgresses her 'requests' to "leave me alone". This separation from mind and body – and thus from choice – is another feature of men's narratives of their domestic violence towards women. However, the power dynamics involved in adolescent-to-parent abuse should be recognised as distinct and overall, the interview accounts were much more variable in their attribution of blame.

Two female interviewees talked about the blackouts or memory loss they would have during episodes of physical violence towards their mothers, an issue previously mentioned by just one young person in a UK study of parent abuse at the edge of care (Biehal, 2012).

Interviewer: *Do you remember what kicked it off?*

Jo: *Nope. I blackout and it just...*

Interviewer: *Does that regularly happen?*

Jo: *When I'm fightin' wiv' my mum yeah. But if I'm fightin' with anyone else it doesn't.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

*Penelope: I can't really remember much because I think I turned a blind eye to it... Like obviously I remember like, the big, big things that happened, like within the past two years, but from being five and that lot, I kind of turned a blind eye to it all.*

*Interviewer: Why do you think that might be?*

*Penelope: Guilt. And obviously I didn't treat my mum very well and it was just me and her, so it was hard for her and I just think, if I turn a blind eye to it... it just calms me down and like, makes me feel better... like, it's not that now, so if I don't think about it, then it's different now then it was.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

In the domestic violence perpetrator literature, 'selective forgetting' (Jennings, 1990) or 'selective amnesia' (Cavanagh et al., 2001) is an aspect of denial that involves 'forgetting' violent behaviour and reframing an abusive event into something justifiable, which in some cases involves perpetrators redefining themselves as victims. It has been argued that selective amnesia allows individuals to 'exercise power in relation to the meaning of their violence' (Cavanagh et al., 2001, p. 702) and potentially deny the reality of victims' experiences. However, through Penelope's account, it appears that selective amnesia/forgetting may also be protective, helping young people to manage their feelings of guilt in relation to their violence and abuse towards parents.

### **Justifying and blaming**

A number of the young people using violence and abuse towards parents provided justifications for their behaviour in a 'process of diverting responsibility and allocating blame elsewhere' (Cavanagh et al., 2001, p. 703) namely, towards parents themselves.

*Yeah. [He's] not a very good role model... like, I think that's partly why I probably went wrong, because I just... I've had no role model from my dad.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Justifications typically focused on a lack of parental capacity, such as through absence or neglect, or through overly harsh or strict parenting; being a victim of

violence or abuse; being verbally or physically provoked by parents; and parents' "unfair" behaviour, such as withholding/refusing privileges, or just being "in the way".

*I think I kicked her once but that was when I was... she was really annoyin' me and I was just like 'move Mum' and she wouldn't go.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

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

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

These justifications often involved depicting – mostly mothers – 'as the causal mechanisms which led to an episode of abuse' (Stamp & Sabourin, 1995, p. 293) and represented forms of 'victim-blaming' and 'aggressor-excusing' (LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011, p. 23). Such narratives also emphasised mothers changing their 'faulty' behaviour, identified in Cavanagh and colleagues' (2001) exploration of men's strategic responses to their violence towards women, 'in which men construe women's behaviour as somehow "faulty" and thereby legitimise the use of violence against them' (Cavanagh et al., 2001, p. 711).

*... if I've been in trouble, she'll come in and try and take me TV an' I'll be like 'No. Just leave it, I'll give it ya in a minute when I calmed down', but obviously she'll want to get it. But sometimes she goes about stuff in the wrong way...*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

*... I asked for money and she said she didn't have any. And then my little brother asked for some money – for some sweets from the shop – and she give 'im some. So I was goin' mad because she didn't give me any – she told me she didn't have any.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

However, it should be recognised that parent abuse and domestic abuse arise out of differing normative contexts. In the case of intimate partner violence, men's

justifications for their use of violence often revolve around notions of male right in a context of gender inequality – a good example being the justification of housework being completed ‘inadequately’ or the questioning of male ‘authority’ (Dobash & Dobash, 1998). In the case of parent abuse, violence arises out of ‘Western’ conceptualisations of adolescence as a tumultuous period, where adolescents are expected to bring ‘conflict and disagreement’ (Coleman, 2011, p. 87). Common to both contexts, however, seems to be a sense of entitlement and expectations relating to women’s and mothers’ role within the family.

Not only were *events* framed in certain ways during accounting, but also the *identities* of the actors within them were framed. For example, in Penelope’s account of conflict escalation below, she framed herself as “*sensible*” and her mother as someone who would “*just start shouting*” – a ‘moral assessment’ which characterised Penelope as ‘morally responsible’ whilst reinforcing her mother’s ‘moral accountability and blameworthiness’ (LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011, p. 14). Such accounting then made any subsequent violence or aggression a justified response to an ‘unreasonable’ aggressor (Stamp & Sabourin, 1995).

*... my mum used to be like... if you talked to her she'd just start shouting, when you try and talk to her about something sensible, and then I start shouting and it'll escalate from there.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

Some accounts also placed responsibility for change on mothers rather than on young people themselves.

*Like I'd happily just let her kick me out the house – not to a children's home – I just mean for one night, out on the streets, I'd do it. I'm not bovvered, like I know where to go. And she said she won't do that. I was like 'Well don't moan about my behaviour then if you're not gonna do anythin' about it' (laughs).*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

By giving her mother an 'option' for how to 'solve' the violence (i.e. by making her 14-year-old daughter sleep on the streets), Jenn could then deny and invalidate any subsequent comments on her behaviour, in the event that her mother 'chose' not to take up the option offered (even though it was unreasonable). Option-giving such as this is a common tactic identified in the domestic violence literature and another aspect of 'requests', whereby women's failure to carry out requests/demands 'effectively renders the woman responsible for the man's violence because she has not made a suitable response to his request' (Cavanagh et al., 2001, p. 710). In Jenn's case, the unsuitable response was her mother not leaving her alone with her TV and mobile phone, while in the case of Dan, it was his mother not giving him money for cigarettes. However, the dynamics of child dependency here clearly forms a unique aspect of parent abuse that is not present in men's use of violence and abuse towards women and should be considered in the analysis of relational power.

Lastly, similar to male perpetrators of domestic violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011), Jenn used metaphor and universal statements ("*because obviously...*") to frame her violence as a common-sense and inevitable response to her mother's attempts to exert control by implementing boundaries.

*Do you know if I seen someone angry on the street, I'm not gonna go up to them and make them more angry by taking their phone off 'em, d'ya know what I mean? Or tryin' takin' their drink. Because then, I'd probably just get hit wouldn't I?*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

This bears a striking resemblance to one man's account in the study by Dobash and Dobash (1998), whereby he frames his violence as an inevitable response and therefore the fault of his partner for not avoiding it, "*It's like if you had a dog who every time you took it out it would go and bite people, then if you walked up to that dog and it bit you, it would be your own fault*" (p. 162).

## Minimisation

Minimisation was a rhetorical device used by interviewees to reduce the seriousness of their actions and 'dilute the definition of behaviour as violent' (Cavanagh et al., 2001, p. 705). This meant that only "*punching*" not "*pushing*" was seen as 'real' violence and therefore did not 'count' when discussing violence and abuse towards parents (Cavanagh et al., 2001), something reinforced by the use of qualifiers such as "*just*", "*only*" and "*a bit*" (Stamp & Sabourin, 1995). LeCouteur and Oxlad (2011) claim that such minimising language acts as a 'powerful rhetorical resource' (p. 12) in promoting the discounting of behaviours as 'routine' and therefore unimportant or unremarkable.

*I've pushed her, I've not hit her. I've pushed her.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

*And I got back up and... I just went crazy. It wasn't too crazy, I was just... like I punched her a few... like... not... on the face or anything, it was more like just punching her arms and stuff like that, just trying to get her away from me.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

*'Cos it's the social worker telling her little things. Like the social worker says, er, 'if he...', if I start shouting and swearing, to ring the police immediately. And that's just shouting man. It's sad.*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

Similar to denial, minimising was achieved by avoiding such terms as 'violence' or 'abuse' but rather using euphemisms such as 'fighting' – euphemisms that reframe abusive behaviour from something involving responsibility, blame and guilt to something mutual, reciprocal and therefore justifiable (LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011).

*It's classed as domestic abuse but it's just arguin' an' fightin' wiv' my mum, but not actual physical fisty cuffs.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

Jenn's conceptualisation of domestic abuse as "*physical fisty cuffs*" also mirrors the accounts of young people in previous childhood studies on gendered violence, where only physical violence was seen as 'real' violence (Lombard, 2013).

### **Reduced competence**

Similar to the violent men in the studies by Cavanagh and colleagues (2001) and Dobash and Dobash (1998), interviewees (both violent and non-violent) provided explanations for parent abuse that focused on young people's lack of self-control, emotion regulation and 'tempers'. For those being violent to parents, this was a way of diverting blame and responsibility away from themselves and framing it as an aspect of their 'reduced competence' – seen as an inherent trait beyond their control (Stamp & Sabourin, 1995).

*'Cos like, it's not me. It genuinely isn't me. I just... it just... my body is like movin' itself and it's yankin' stuff down an' that... Yeah, well I feel like I don't... I'm not doin' it... Like I can't stop myself from doin' it. It just happens and I'm like... I want to stop but my brain's gone.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

*Yeah, I think with me I have a fine line, where I go from angry to over-the-line angry, like, aggressive. Or like, when I cross the line I do things that I don't tend to want to do. Well with my overdose, I did it because I was really angry, with myself. So being angry did it with my mum, violence was 'cos I was over-the-top angry. It's just that, if I get angry and cross the line, I can like, lose control of myself. Which is a bit annoying.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

As argued by Cavanagh and colleagues when discussing men's claims of reduced competence (2001), 'In denying their own agency, these men sought to detach themselves from their behaviour and from the fact that they exercised choice' (p. 704). Through their recounting of violence and abuse towards parents, young people in this study often appeared to be doing the same thing.

However, not all accounts of abuse placed blame on parents, with some reflecting conflicting and contradictory narratives, "... it made her feel obviously distressed and upset that she [Mum] obviously, caused me to be like that [violent]. But then I was like 'It's not your fault. I stepped over the line'." (Penelope, female, 17, College), with some reflecting that ultimately, although they may blame parents, accountability for the abuse rested with them.

*I isolated myself... but convinced myself that Mum isolated me... which caused a lot of problems... 'Cos obviously I blame her for everything, even though it wasn't her fault.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

*Because I shouldn't have done it [violence]. And if I wouldn't have done it, then I wouldn't have been in this situation I was in now.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

### **A culture of parent-blaming**

A number of interviewees speaking in the abstract attributed parent abuse to factors relating to parents, most commonly overly harsh or lenient parenting practices, setting a poor example by being verbally and physically aggressive, and being mean or abusive to children.

*I think probably... to an extent, it would have to be the parents' fault as well. Because they wouldn't have that relationship with the child... I don't really know... like, the child would never learn how to control their anger an' stuff.*

(Pippa, female, 17, College)

Such attributions reflect a wider culture of parent-blaming that currently exists within Western society (Cottrell, 2001; Holt & Retford, 2013), which makes, mostly mothers, solely accountable for their children's behaviour. This blame culture is experienced by mothers as stigma when disclosing their abuse to extended family or friends, and when

discussing their experiences with services (Cottrell, 2001; Edenborough et al., 2008; Hunter et al., 2010).

*Interviewer: And why do you think mums wouldn't want to speak about it?*

*Pippa: Because I think they would... think it was their fault that their child was violent, so they would like... if they spoke about it and social services sort of got involved... social services would first look at the parents and then that would make the parents think that it was their fault.*

(Pippa, female, 17, College)

However, as Cottrell (2001) states, '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' (p. 12). This can result in parents blaming themselves and not seeking the support needed to address the abuse.

## **Summary**

This is the first exploration of how young people talk about their violent and abusive behaviour towards parents, with a discursive analysis of interviewee narratives revealing discourses of blame and avoidance of accountability. Although young people's accounts of parent abuse revealed a multitude of attributions relating to parents, children and their environments, mother-blaming was a common feature. This is important because if young people blame others or other external factors, 'it may be difficult for them to stop their violence since owning the violence may be the first step in treating and stopping it' (Stamp & Sabourin, 1995, p. 286). Similar to men's accounts of domestic violence towards women, interviewees used various rhetorical devices when describing and explaining their violence, such as denial, justification and blame, minimisation, and claims of reduced competence, which helped them to reframe their violence as more socially acceptable and for which they were less accountable. Accounts often did the work of victim-blaming and aggressor-excusing, framing violence as 'provoked', 'deserved', or 'mutual' (Cavanagh et al., 2001, p. 701), with minimising language helping to deny the existence of violence and therefore any need to address it. Although with such a limited sample it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the role of gender in interviewees' accounting, male interviewees

appeared more likely to deny or omit their violence and abuse towards mothers altogether, with females tending instead to justify their actions. However, female interviewees were also much more expansive in their discussions of their abusive behaviour, with mixed discourses of accountability often a feature.

As Holt (2013) states, it is important to remember that 'both parents and young people need to navigate around discourses of blame and responsibility in their provision of explanatory accounts of why parent abuse happens, and this discursive context is likely to shape the particular narratives offered.' (p. 75). The accounts used in this study should be recognised as attempts at meaning-making within the context of an interview, in which young people were asked to hypothesise as to the reasons for their violent behaviour. Such on-the-spot hypothesising may have been the first time that young people were asked to reflect on and try to explain the reasons for their violence at home – explanations that may have changed upon subsequent reflection or retelling.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the study's second research question, namely, 'How do young people understand, explain and experience adolescent-to-parent abuse?'. Specifically, it has explored the contexts within which it occurs and the mechanisms through which it may develop and persist – vital 'if we are to grapple with a meaningful explanation of when and why such violence emerges, how it is used, and why it might continue or cease' (Dobash & Dobash, 1998, p. 142). In addition, it has included the first ever exploration of how young people *talk* about their violence and abuse towards parents and what this may mean in terms of attributing blame and accountability. Explanations varied from those at the interpersonal level – such as past and ongoing victimisation, parenting and the negotiation of power and control, and communication between young people and their parents – to those at the intrapersonal level, such as anger and emotion regulation. Stress connected these two levels of the developmental ecology in a transactional process between young people and their environments – an explanatory framework yet to be used within the parent abuse literature. Multiple explanations were often provided within a single interview, with single explanations for abuse rarely given, highlighting young people's recognition that parent abuse happens in a range of contexts, for a host of different reasons.

For the majority of interviewees, violence, abuse and trauma provided the backdrops to their childhoods, with accounts that included witnessing domestic abuse between parents and experiencing direct abuse from parents, parents' partners, and peers. Although not always connected explicitly to their own abusive behaviour, such experiences clearly had implications for their emotional and cognitive development, mental health, and feelings of resentment, anger and blame. This affected their ability to regulate emotions in the face of environmental stressors and to navigate the power dynamics of the parent-child relationship. In most cases, feelings of anger and resentment were taken out on mothers, representing 'safer' targets of abuse, being both emotionally and physically 'closer' than fathers – previously explored in Chapter Five.

In several cases, parents did not seem to know how to support the emotional and mental health needs of their adolescent children, resulting in young people resorting to violence as a means of coping with their trauma or communicating the distress they were experiencing. Witnessing and experiencing violent victimisation also acted as a blueprint for their future interactions, communicating that violence and abusive ways of interacting were acceptable and desirable ways of managing conflict, particularly in the context of having minimal coping 'resources' to draw upon, such as the ability to regulate emotions or communicate effectively. In this way, violent and abusive behaviour towards parents represented an adaptive response, learned by both boys and girls through watching others violently negotiate conflict or through defending or retaliating to violence themselves. This study provides the first examination of the intersections between such processes and the most in-depth examination of young people's own constructions and narratives.

The more immediate contexts of parent abuse often revolved around parents' and adolescents' negotiations of power and control, something that intensified with young people's increasing age and developing sense of agency. Many interviewees discussed their frustrations around strict parenting and the limitations placed on their privileges and movement – for example, watching television, going out with friends and uninterrupted time on their mobile phones – things they felt entitled to, particularly given their age. This finding is contrary to the majority of parent abuse literature which discusses the role of permissive parenting in cases of parent abuse. Lastly, a

particularly important finding related to young people's need for physical, emotional and relational space – something as yet unexplored in the parent abuse literature.

Managing emotions in the face of parental control seemed particularly difficult for those young people who had experienced violence, abuse and parental conflict in childhood, or for those with absent parents. In this sense, from interviewees' perspectives, violence and aggression towards parents represented an attempt at wrestling back power and control from parents who were too strict and controlling. However, as already discussed, a number of mothers who were parenting alone, were doing so as survivors of domestic violence and abuse, which is likely to have impacted upon their interactions with their children. For these mothers, in particular, the pressures and distress involved in parenting a violent and abusive child alone having already experienced domestic abuse from a partner must have been particularly acute, and would likely have affected how they parented. This highlights another important point: quite often it is difficult to establish the extent to which parent abuse is a cause or consequence of certain damaging parent-child interactions – most likely, it is both.

Parent-child communication also seemed to play a key role in the development and persistence of abuse, with parents shouting or swearing during conflict often triggering feelings of anger in young people, which then escalated the conflict to violence. Another important aspect of communication was a lack of open and honest 'emotion talk' between interviewees and their parents, something key to working out differences, expressing thoughts and emotions, and feeling heard and understood. The lack of such talk meant that young people were not getting the emotional support and closeness they needed and subsequently were unable to mend their relationships with parents after being violent towards them. However, that is not to say that parents alone were responsible for this communication 'gap'. The emotional development of young people and their ability to articulate and navigate the feelings involved in such emotion talk likely played a role, too, with interviewees discussing how their ability to communicate with parents improved as they grew older and less reactive. This study represents the most detailed examination of parent-adolescent communication processes in the context of parent abuse to date.

Lastly, a range of emotional and cognitive processes, including heightened stress states created by environmental stressors, overwhelming feelings of anger and

resentment, and poor emotion regulation were used to explain how these external factors resulted in young people's use of violence and abuse towards parents. Anger and poor emotion regulation were explanations often given for physical violence, with anger cited as an emotion that frequently preceded it. Further, physical violence, and particularly the destruction of parents' property, were described by some as cathartic activities to release feelings of pent-up anger and frustration. However, although such attributions are common to accounts of both perpetrators and victims of domestic violence (Neal & Edwards, 2017), such constructions typically serve to divert blame and accountability away from aggressors and towards victims themselves (in this case, parents). Although parent abuse was attributed to a wide range of factors at the level of parents, young people, and the wider environment, discourses of parent blame were common throughout, reflecting the wider culture of parent – and particularly mother – blame which exists in the UK today.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: FINDINGS ON THE IMPACT OF PARENT ABUSE

### Introduction

This chapter also details findings in relation to the study's second research question – 'How do young people understand, explain, and experience adolescent-to-parent abuse?'. Specifically, it focuses on young people's understanding of how adolescent-to-parent abuse may impact upon them, their parents, and wider family. It prioritises the accounts of those interviewees with experience of being violent and abusive towards parents and, in a few cases, those with secondhand experience through friends or siblings. The findings are divided into five themes: *physical harm; property damage and financial consequences; emotional harm; relationship damage; and legal consequences* – these being the various types of harm young people discussed.

### Physical harm

Where abusive behaviour towards parents involved physical violence, young people reported a few instances of injuries to parents and themselves. These ranged from fairly minor injuries to those requiring hospital treatment. Where interviewees were injured, this was due either to parents restraining or retaliating, or because they had hit or smashed objects which then cut or hurt them. Some instances of injuries included accounts of police involvement.

*I don't think we ended up with any like, major injuries... I mean I had quite a few bruises, on my arms – I had like, arm prints and stuff – but the police said both of us could've pressed charges...*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Jo: We started fightin' and then it ended up me throwin' things at her and it smashin' near her and then she was gettin' hurt... and she got badly hurt... so that's why she phoned the police.

Interviewer: What's 'badly hurt'?

Jo: I think she got like, glass in her leg or somethin'.

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

*I think as soon as I did hit her head against the wall, I snapped and I was like 'What have I done?'. And I could see her in pain and was like 'Oh no, I've stepped over...too far this time'. And I just legged it out the house and ran to school to find some help...* (Penelope, female, 17, College)

The accounts of interviewees reflect the majority of parent abuse research exploring the physical consequences of the dynamic (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Condry & Miles, 2012; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Holt, 2011; Nock & Kazdin, 2002), which describe cuts and bruises as the most common injuries experienced by parents, with more serious injuries being relatively rare.

Similar to the accounts of parents (Condry & Miles, 2012; Edenborough et al., 2008) and practitioners (Holt & Retford, 2013), interviewees described injuries to themselves that resulted from punching doors and walls in the home, or through smashing objects when conflict with parents escalated. For some, physical injuries from such action were a common occurrence and not seen as anything out of the ordinary.

*... and I picked the glass up, threw it at the floor and I cut all me finger. There, there (points) – that big scar.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

Interviewer: You punched a wall?

Jenn: Yeah, I always do. I came into school once wiv' erm, a knuckle 'bout out 'ere and it was...popped a vessel or summin'.

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

## Property damage and financial consequences

Interviewees described how they would destroy either objects in the home, or the home itself during episodes of conflict with parents. Some of the following excerpts highlight the damage such behaviour can cause; damage that has financial, as well as emotional, implications for parents, and physical implications for young people themselves.

Interviewer: *So what does 'really bad' mean?*

Dan: *When I start punchin' the walls an' that. There's lots of holes in the walls.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

*... the social worker said 'don't let him back in the house', so they didn't, so I started kicking through the door...*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

*I ripped my curtains down.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

The destruction of property in the home is a common aspect of parent abuse reported by parents (Bonnick, 2019; Cottrell, 2001; Holt, 2011) and by one young person in a UK study of children at the edge of care (Biehal, 2012). It has financial implications for parents who have to repair the damage and replace objects, as well as emotional implications resulting from breaking objects of sentimental value and the fear of physical violence (Haw, 2010). Little remorse was shown by interviewees to such damage, who saw it as a normal part of everyday life – most likely because they rarely had to pay for repairs themselves. In the one case where reparations were enforced, the interviewee described it as a helpful lesson in consequences.

Other financial harms previously described by mothers include job loss due to, most commonly, having to take time off to collect adolescent children from school or the police station and look after them at home (Cottrell, 2001). Such implications were

described by Ruth whose mother nearly lost her job several times, and which she acknowledged could also have resulted in them losing their home.

*She nearly got fired loads of times because of me truanting and school demanding that she came and got me from the police station and stuff like that. I nearly got her fired from her job and then we'd have been... probably made homeless 'cos she had no job an' stuff.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

## **Emotional harm**

*I'm not being funny but you can recover from physical [abuse]... mental abuse is like, somethin' that sticks. (Jodea)*

The emotional impact of adolescent-to-parent abuse was the harm most discussed by young people, although this also reflected the focus of the interview questions. Emotional harm was felt by parents and young people in the form of upset, worry and anger, emotions which in some cases were short-term but when repeated and sustained over longer periods resulted in poor mental health, particularly for those mothers parenting alone.

Interviewees discussing the immediate emotional impacts of abuse on parents described mothers' feelings of anger and annoyance, but also upset, distress and sadness. In one case, this was marked by a mother crying after episodes of violence.

Interviewer: *What do you think your mum was feeling, during that time when you were following her and hitting her?*

Ruth: *Sad.*

Interviewer: *Sad?*

Ruth: *I can hear her crying after every one of them. After every fight, she'd cry.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

*I think that she feels upset and annoyed...*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

*She says that it upsets her and it hurts her... and I said the same thing.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

Although only discussed once, Ruth described how her mother had been scared of her, an emotional consequence of abuse that was short term and in the moment, but also an extended state which led to her mother feeling helpless in the face of her violence. However, Ruth also explained that her mother's greatest fear was actually that she would harm herself, something highlighted previously in the literature through mothers' accounts (Cottrell, 2001).

Interviewer: *Do you think your mum was ever scared of you during that time?*

Ruth: *Yeah. Because even when I wasn't being physical towards her... even if I was just like, shouting... she'd get to a point where she wouldn't fight it anymore... and then instead of fighting, she'd just like, start screaming and crying at me... just begging me to leave her alone... But thinking about it, yeah she probably was! You never think that someone would be scared of their own child, but... I think it was 50/50 actually... she was scared of me – of what I would do to her – but I think she was also scared of what I was capable of doing to myself... I think that's what scared her the most, if I'm honest.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Shortly after this point in the interview, Ruth became upset, demonstrating just how difficult it can be for young people to reflect on the harm their abuse may have caused parents. This would almost certainly have had an impact on the insights interviewees were able to provide in relation to this aspect of the study.

Ruth: *I'm gettin' really sad now, 'cos it's just thinking about that.*

Interviewer: *That's alright, you don't have to...*

Ruth: *But no, it's fine. Um... but yeah... (crying) so it was really sad I think 'cos... I didn't like the thought that she was scared of me.*

Mothers' fear in the face of violence and abuse from their children has been explored in various qualitative studies (e.g. Clarke, 2015; Cottrell, 2001; Edenborough et al., 2008; Holt, 2011; Jackson, 2003), being indicative of the reversal of power characteristic of the phenomenon. However, this study is the first to report a young person's own experiences of this aspect.

Over the longer term, young people's accounts pointed to a wearing down of parents, with constant conflict, abuse and power struggles leading to mothers threatening to leave the family home and telling interviewees that their mental health was suffering. Poor parental mental health has previously been highlighted as a consequence of parent abuse in studies drawing on mothers' experiences and reports (Cottrell, 2001; Edenborough et al., 2008; Haw, 2010; Holt, 2009; Parentline Plus, 2010), and has been suggested as being one of the major implications of abuse for mothers (Eckstein, 2004; Paterson et al., 2002).

Interviewer: *How do you think your mum feels when this is going on?*

Dan: *Not good. Yeah, she... I think she feels upset.*

Interviewer: *Has she ever talked to you about how she feels about it?*

Dan: *Hardly. But when she does, she always tells me like, she's upset when I shout at her an' that. And erm, she said to me once that she didn't want to be here anymore because we were always arguin' back wiv' 'er an' that.*

Interviewer: *She said that she wouldn't be there anymore?*

Dan: *Yeah. She said that erm... one day, I'll wake up and she'll be gone.*

Interviewer: *And how did that make you feel?*

Dan: *Upset.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

*I remember her mentioning... but I don't know if it was just an off-the-cuff comment, that I'd actually made her start to feel suicidal, 'cos she couldn't deal with the way I was being.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Violence and abuse towards parents also impacted emotionally on interviewees, with feelings of guilt and regret occasionally mentioned. To date, this has only been explored once using young people's accounts (Cottrell & Monk, 2004). However, when discussing feelings such as regret and guilt, interviewees were much less expansive, using minimising language or, in the case of Dan and Pete, avoiding labelling the emotions themselves. This last characteristic may indicate a lack of emotional development around recognising and naming emotions, as well as an aspect relating to gender and emotion expression – with women reported as being more verbally expressive of emotion than men in Euro-American cultures (Brody, 2009).

Interviewer: *How do you feel when you have these big arguments?*

Dan: *Erm, I wish I never argued.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

Interviewer: *So after the fight with your stepdad, how did you feel?*

Pete: *I was a bit upset and annoyed still but, I was kicking off at the police an' all.*

Interviewer: *What about it made you feel upset?*

Pete: *'Cos I battered him.*

Interviewer: *So, just tell me if I'm wrong, because I don't want to misrepresent what you are saying, but did you feel bad because you had hit him and you felt guilty?*

Pete: *Yeah, yeah.*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

*I mean, sometimes it gets a bit violent, but on my behalf. Which is obviously something I really regret.* (Penelope, female, 17, College)

Feelings such as anger and annoyance were also described, both as short-term and longer-term emotional consequences, highlighting the conflicting mix of emotions that can be involved.

Interviewer: *And when arguments kick off like that, how do you feel in that moment?*

Pete: *Annoyed.*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

Interviewer: *So how did that make you feel... that dynamic being a daily thing? What sort of impact did that have on you?*

Ruth: *It made me really angry.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

A number of interviewees commented how the emotional hurt they caused their parents and family was actually what hurt them the most – revealing the impact that parent abuse can have on the wider family.

Interviewer: *And what did you feel like?*

Jenn: *Upset.*

Interviewer: *Why did you feel upset?*

Jenn: *'Cos like, I'm fightin' and I'm hurtin' my family... and my brothers are watchin' me fight wiv' my sister and that's not very nice.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

*So I knew my mum felt horrible about it, and that made me feel a bit worse. Like, 'Why did I have to do that?'*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

*... it makes me feel bad for her [Mum]... 'cos like, I don't wanna make her feel like she can't tell me to do somethin' because I'll just go mad at her.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

One of the longer-term emotional implications of parent abuse for young people was feeling exhausted, with daily conflict with parents taking its toll emotionally and physically.

Interviewer: *And what about when you were having really angrier arguments with your mum, how often was that happening?*

Dan: *Like near enough every day.*

Interviewer: *What did that feel like?*

Dan: *It felt exhausting.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

For some young people, the parent abuse dynamic impacted upon their sense of self-worth and identity: "...almost felt like I was the broken one. The broken child that just couldn't be fixed" (Ruth, female, 18, College). For Ruth and Penelope, this culminated in their attempting suicide, an outcome of parent abuse never before explored in the literature and one that highlights its severity, for both parents and young people.

*I mean obviously I was that guilty for so long, I kind of had a sense of... I think as soon as I did hit her head against the wall, I snapped and I was like 'What have I done?'. And I could see her in pain and was like 'Oh no, I've stepped over...too far this time' (voice wavering, teary). And I think obviously, you are gonna feel like, I felt like I wasn't good enough and I was not good enough for anyone because I was violent and stuff, so obviously I took the overdose. Yeah.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

*If I'm honest, it [the suicide attempt] was kind of a mix between the way I felt about Mum and how I was treating her. I almost felt like I'd got to a point of no return with her and that... I was a burden as such. Not like a full like, she hated*

*me... I knew... I thought... I thought she hated me, but I knew that obviously where she was mum she'd still love me. But... I just felt like... she'd probably be better...without me there.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Similar to the study by Sheehan (1997a), suicide attempts had the positive outcome of increasing the support and understanding shown by parents, which eventually resulted in the ceasing of the parent abuse dynamic.

As explored in the previous chapter, parent abuse quite often took place within the context of child abuse, which can have long-lasting consequences for young people in terms of their emotional well-being. Jodea's accounts highlight this well, describing her immediate emotions of intense distress and loss following her mother's use of violence towards her and her own violent retaliation, which she went on to describe as impacting upon her GCSE examinations, as well as her willingness to trust others.

*Jodea: I felt crazy afterwards. I was walkin' down the street, felt like (exhales), I felt like yeah... more life had changed for a minute. I've got no parents, got no family, just not give a fuck one bit. I just fuckin' walked round the street like I was fuckin'... you don't understand, I was goin', insane, I was just talkin' dead fast to who I was wiv', and I was explainin' to 'im, that, I feel like I just lost my mum. No I felt like, I just lost all the respect I had for my mum, and I was just askin' myself 'How am I ever gonna respect anyone? I can't even...' I don't...it just felt like...I don't know, I felt mad, I felt mad, I felt crazy, I felt like, nuthin' mattered. I didn't care what happened then, I didn't care about... it didn't even make me upset, I was just like, totally feelin' like, what... like, fuck the world. Fuck it. Fuck the world. I didn't do my GCSEs because I was in that mind frame.*

*Interviewer: What impact do you think having that kind of conflict with your mum has had on your life?*

*Jodea: I just don't give a fuck anymore about anythin'. Basically, no boyfriend I will ever get will ever break my heart because it's fuckin'... I don't even think there's a heart there...*

(Jodea, female, 17, YOS)

Jodea's account reveals some of the distressing contexts within which violence and abuse towards parents can arise – in this case, contexts of child neglect, abandonment, child abuse, domestic abuse and parental drug misuse.

## **Relationship damage**

The extended patterns of conflict characteristic of interviewees' accounts often resulted in damage to their relationships with parents. This was particularly so for relationships with mothers, given that they were the most common targets of abuse and in many cases parenting alone. Interviewees described feeling regretful of their behaviour because of such damage and, in some cases, upset that they did not share the same close bond siblings had with parents. Further, deterioration in the relationships between parents and their adolescent children exacerbated the parent abuse dynamic.

*Ruth: So I think we were arguing about that [staying out/drinking alcohol] and it just escalated to the point where I was telling Mum she hated me; I was saying to Mum, 'You hate me, you hate me'... And I think to try and get a reaction, Mum went, 'You know what? At the moment I do'. And I think that's when I kind of (laughs) went a bit... psychotic and just pulled a knife out. And I think she worried that I was pulling it out on her... Yeah, so she called the doctor's and they told her to call the police... and then it went from there.*

*Interviewer: So did you actually feel like she hated you, or were you saying that to hurt her? Do you know?*

*Ruth: No, I felt like she hated me at the time. And I wouldn't have been surprised... I wouldn't have blamed her if she did! I really wouldn't have done, because I was... I was awful to her.*

*(Ruth, female, 18, College)*

*Jo: She says that it upsets her and it hurts her...and I said the same thing.*

*Interviewer: That it hurts you?*

*Jo: Yeah*

Interviewer: *And why do you feel that it hurts you? What hurts about it?*

Jo: *Because it's ruined my relationship between me and my mum.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

Damage to the parent-child relationship has previously been articulated through mothers' accounts (Cottrell, 2004; Haw, 2010) but, until now, not through the accounts of young people. Specifically, mothers have described the conflicting feelings that are characteristic of the dynamic (Edenborough et al., 2008; Holt, 2011; Stewart et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2017), made even more difficult due to the social norms and expectations around motherhood and of being a 'good' parent (Cottrell, 2001; Jackson, 2003; Paterson et al., 2002). Such conflicting emotions were highlighted by Jenn when discussing her parents' feelings towards her, and by Ruth in recounting her mother's words during a family therapy session.

*I feel like they love me but I feel like they're not... lovin' this type of Jenn.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

*Like, 'This is not what I had in mind when I had a child, I wasn't expecting like, this to happen, or you to turn into the way you have'. 'You're a monster, I don't recognise you'... 'I still love you, but not in the way that I should love you as a daughter'. (Ruth, female, 18, College)*

Similar to mothers discussing the longer-term implications of parent abuse (Howard & Rottem, 2008), Ruth also emphasised that the damage done to her relationship with her mother could not be easily fixed, even with family therapy.

*... And that [healing] meant stripping back my relationship with Mum to nothing. Which it... it basically already was anyway. And build it back up. An' it was a level of accepting things can't just go back to how they were... like... at the click of the fingers... it doesn't work. Espe... even... even if it is in someone... who's the closest person to you.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

## Separation of parents and children

For some young people, their violent and abusive behaviour towards parents (and in some cases, siblings), resulted in them being looked after by other family members, or as a final resort, being taken into care. This was the case for Pete, whose violence towards his stepfather had become so frequent that he was separated from his family and looked after in a residential home.

*Interviewer: And is that why you don't live at home now?*

*Pete: Yeah yeah, 'cos I kept on fighting with my stepdad.*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

And for Jenn, whose violent and abusive behaviour towards her mother resulted in her social worker enforcing weekend respite at either her father's or aunt's homes.

*But, on Saturdays, when I sleep out – 'cos I have to, the social worker said I'm not allowed to stay in my house, it's either my dad's or my auntie's...*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

The outcome of these separations seemed to be mixed, with Pete saying he was “not bothered” where he lived as, “... it's just the same...I get shit off the staff. I get shit off the kids.” However, he also acknowledged he was fighting less with his stepfather since not living with him, while Jenn acknowledged she quite liked living with her aunt as she was allowed her phone at night time – described as one of the main causes of conflict between her and her mother. Removal of adolescents from the home as a way of addressing parent abuse has been reported in a few studies (Cottrell, 2001; Edenborough et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2007), giving mixed outcomes. Whereas mothers in the study by Stewart and colleagues (2007) stated that in order to cope with separation, they distanced themselves emotionally from their child – which further damaged their relationship – parents in the studies by Cottrell (2001) and Edenborough and colleagues (2008) highlighted some of the positive outcomes, such as having time and space to address the underlying causes of the abuse, as well as noting improvements in their child's behaviour. However, the present study is the first to

provide insights into young people's experiences of being removed from the home because of violence towards parents.

For Ruth, her relationship with her mother was so poor that she attempted to refer herself into children's social care to escape the dynamic. However, although this was how she framed the incident, it is also possible that her meeting with a social worker was an attempt to hurt her mother emotionally in retaliation for her "off-the-cuff" comment about placing her in care, which unfortunately cemented her fears about her mother not loving her.

*And I was like, 'Why didn't you just go and put me in care?' Mum was like, 'You know what... I will!'... off-the-cuff... didn't realise. I came back from school, and I'd... over the last few days I'd been speaking to a social worker and asked them to give me forms... for Mum to sign... And I came back with them. And Mum was like, (quiet voice) 'What's this? Why have you done this?' Then Mum went for a meeting with the school an' stuff and said that she didn't want that to happen so... they left it. But I genuinely just wanted to get out. 'Cos I thought, the more I was around my mum... and feeling like she didn't love me... the worse I was gonna get.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Family separation due to parent abuse was also reported as causing conflict between parents who, at times, had different ideas about how to address the problem. This seemed to be complicated further by the presence of other children in the home who were being affected and also when step-parents were involved.

*Like my brother, like I said...[he]'s moved out of my dad's... 'cos they shout at each other all the time... and scream. And it causes conflict between my dad and my stepmum. 'Cos my stepmum thinks we should do this with him, my dad thinks we should do something else an'... there's obviously a two-year-old and a three-year-old there.... who it's... it's not really a good environment, having them around people shouting.*

(Bianca, female, 17, College)

*I just punched 'im, but obviously me mum got me done for that. Me stepdad dun't wanna press charges but me mum did it anyway.*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

Parent abuse has previously been highlighted as contributing to parental conflict (Charles, 1986; Cottrell, 2001) and, at times, parental relationship breakdown, when mothers and fathers differ over how to address the abuse and have less time and energy to put into their relationship with each other (Micucci, 1995).

### **Relationships with siblings**

Parent abuse can also have knock-on effects on the relationships young people have with other family members such as their siblings – either as a result of siblings attempting to protect parents or through their own victimisation. Violence towards siblings as part of the parent abuse dynamic has been highlighted in a number of previous studies (Biehal, 2012; Haw, 2010; Holt, 2009, 2011; Laurent & Derry, 1999) and demonstrates the impact this pervasive issue can have, not only on the parent-child relationship, but also on the relationships between all family members.

Interviewer: *Did it have any other effects on the other bits of your life, do you think?*

Dan: *... yeah like my brother started to fall out wiv' me. And like... I didn't really speak to 'im as much, because like.... he fell out wiv' me because I was just shoutin' at his mum all the time... And er... that made me feel a bit bad... because he didn't talk to me.*

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

*I wanted her [Mum] to leave me in my room to calm down which I kinda did. But then, my sister Kerry, she came and stuck up for Mum, I kicked her I think to get out of me room, she's got Coke, spat it all over me and then we're throwin' mugs at each other... like I cut myself...*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

## Legal consequences

Finally, for a few interviewees there were legal implications of parent abuse, including being arrested and spending time in custody. For Jenn, Jo, and Pete – three of the younger interviewees from the YOS – their violence towards parents was what brought them to the service in the first place, an outcome identified in previous studies (Holt, 2011; Holt & Retford, 2013; Miles & Condry, 2016) and something that can have serious implications in relation to education, work, health and well-being (Hoskins, 2018; Stacey, 2018).

Speaking about the aftermath of a violent outburst towards her mother, Jo described what it was like being taken into custody.

*Jo: I got arrested and got erm... oh what's it called? Where I had to go and get my fingerprints done and my picture and everythin'.*

*Interviewer: Did you get charged?*

*Jo: No, I got a caution thing.*

*Interviewer: And what was that for?*

*Jo: Erm, for violence towards her. And I got sent here as well.*

*Interviewer: How did that make you feel?*

*Jo: At the time I didn't really feel anythin', but then after I did it, I was pretty gutted, because I got put in a holding cell for a night.*

*Interviewer: How did that feel?*

*Jo: It was horrible.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

Warnings and cautions were the typical responses from police to calls from parents regarding their children's violence towards them. Such responses to parent abuse have previously been reported by mothers as inadequate (Holt, 2011).

*... an' the worst thing that ever happened, was I pulled a knife out of a drawer... but she thought I was aiming it at her, when I was pointing it at myself... and so she called the police. And all they did was just give me a warning I think.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Unfortunately for Pete, the violence towards his stepfather resulted in a particularly aggressive and distressing arrest by the police, followed by his admission into care, underlining some of the more severe consequences of abuse for young people.

Pete: *...before they cuffed me, they dragged me outside innit. And then, I tried walking off... and then obviously what happened is, they've err... one of them has gripped me by the throat...*

Interviewer: *What, a police officer?*

Pete: *Yeah. And just ragged me to the floor. Which I think that's wrong.*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

However, none of those interviewed discussed any legal implications for parents, aside from Ruth who mentioned that when the police attended their home, they told her she could also press charges due to the bruises she sustained whilst her mother attempted to restrain her, a consequence of parent abuse also reported by parents and practitioners (Cottrell, 2001; Eckstein, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

This study represents the first detailed examination of young people's accounts and perceptions of the harm caused by parent abuse. Interviewees discussed a range of harmful consequences including physical injuries, emotional and relationship damage, damage to property and the home, and legal implications. Although these were mainly felt by parents – particularly mothers – young people themselves were also distressed and damaged by the abuse dynamic. This aspect has yet to be properly explored in the literature. Some of the more severe consequences for both parents and young people appeared to involve mental health implications, with one mother voicing her thoughts

of suicide to her daughter and two young women actually attempting suicide<sup>21</sup>. This is particularly striking given the small number discussing their experiences. Emotional, relational and physical consequences also extended to other family members, highlighting the pervasive nature of abuse. Further, the various harms described by interviewees – as with any form of abuse – were not restricted to the nature of the acts themselves. For example, through young people’s use of violence towards property, psychological and physical harm also occurred.

Compared to other areas of investigation, interviewees (particularly males) had much less to say regarding the impact of parent abuse. Although this may have been reflective of the focus of interview questions, it is also likely that understanding the impact of violence and abuse would have been difficult, involving an engagement with the harm and distress caused to parents and wider family members. Unsurprisingly, older interviewees tended to find it easier to discuss a range of emotional impacts of parent abuse, whereas younger participants often showed a lack of understanding or willingness to consider its harmful effects. This was demonstrated through very brief responses to questions about parents’ feelings and a tendency to redirect the conversation to interviewees’ own feelings, or how their parents were to blame. Clearly, considering how their behaviour had impacted on parents was too uncomfortable for some to do in much depth. From the previous chapter’s exploration of interviewees’ use of denial and minimisation, it is possible that the complex emotions surrounding their actions had been avoided prior to the interview, making recollection difficult. This was highlighted by interviewees Ruth and Sarah, who stated it was easier to remember and discuss things parents had done to them rather than the hurtful things they had done or said to parents.

*I can deal with the questions about... how mum made **me** feel...*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

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<sup>21</sup> Although three female interviewees reported having attempted suicide, only two were connected explicitly to the parent abuse dynamic. The third took place in the context of family histories of abuse and parental abandonment.

Interviewer: *When you're having arguments with your parents, do your parents ever tell you how it makes them feel?*

Sarah: *Occasionally they do an' then I'll try an' like...sort it out or whatever.*

Interviewer: *What do they say when they do say it?*

Sarah: *Um... tryin' to think like... err...(laughs) can't really remember to be honest.*

Interviewer: *It's alright, it's quite hard to recall specific things sometimes isn't it?*

Sarah: *Yeah...um... I don't... I think especially when I know I'm the one being a dick not them.*

(Sarah, female, 17, College)

Further, understanding the emotional or physical impact of violence on others is often contingent upon their disclosures, which, as previously discussed, may not necessarily have been forthcoming, with families generally avoiding emotion talk or discussions about incidents of violence. This was highlighted by Jenn who said that her mother would be unlikely to disclose how the abuse made her feel, for fear of upsetting her, thereby highlighting the complex interplay of gender, emotion and parental role within the dynamic.

*I think it gets her upset, but I don't know because... I don't really know... I don't ask her how she's feelin' because she knows I'd probably get upset, if she's upset so...* (Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

Finally, for some, reflecting on the consequences of abusive behaviour was both insightful and helpful. This was revealed by Ruth, who had become upset when talking about how the abuse had impacted her mother but reflected that actually, having challenging and reflective conversations was an important part of moving forward.

*Thank you. No, I'm okay, I just... I think that question just kinda threw me... but no it's fine... I'd rather talk about it than not talk about it at the end of the day, 'cos... I guess now... actually... that might make me understand...hmm, I dunno. I've still got questions I should probably ask myself about why I did half the stuff I did!*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

## CHAPTER EIGHT: FINDINGS ON PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING PARENT ABUSE

### Introduction

This chapter details the final set of findings in relation to the study's second primary research question – 'How do young people understand, explain, and experience adolescent-to-parent abuse?'. Specifically, it focuses on young people's understandings of how to address or prevent violence and abuse towards parents. It draws on the accounts of both those with and without experience of being violent and abusive towards parents, although prioritises those with first-hand experience. However, as only a few interviewees had experience of successfully moving past parent abuse, some of the themes do draw on evidence from a limited number of young people.

When asked about ways of preventing or addressing parent abuse, interviewees' insights fell into eight themes: *communicating and understanding*; *space*; *quality time*; *managing anger*; *understanding consequences*; *punishment and establishing authority*; *professional help: confidants, challengers and advisors*; and *barriers* – referring to those things getting in the way of positive change, or interventions that were meant to help but did not. Within each of the themes, interviewees discussed ways in which parents, services, and young people themselves could work to address the abuse dynamic, although, overall, the greatest emphasis was on what parents could do, potentially reflecting the construction of parent abuse as a problem of parents, rather than young people.

### Communicating and understanding

Having already identified communication as an important driver of adolescent-to-parent abuse (see Chapter Six), it made sense that interviewees' views on how to address the issue also focused on how young people and their parents communicated. Although this included how interviewees were spoken to by their parents, more

explicitly, it was open and meaningful discussions around disagreements or difficult issues that were considered vital in working through the dynamic.

*It's really such a communication barrier that was between us, and I think, if we just learnt to let that barrier down, let that wall down, and just sit down and talk more, about everything, then it would just stop everything arising.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

Interviewer: *Is there anything you can think of that might help with parents and young people who are having these really high stress, high conflict, violent relationships?*

Anthony: *They should just sit down and have a chat and that and just speak about it.*

(Anthony, male, 16, YOS)

Talking things through was not just a way of communicating feelings and perspectives, it also enabled young people to feel understood, which deepened their bonds with parents and made them feel less alone.

*... and then in the evening, we had a long chat about his [stepdad's] past an' stuff... and he didn't exactly have a great past either... So I was able to kinda connect with him... in that sense. And I think that's what kind of made me stop doing what I was doing, because I had someone that I felt understood where I was coming from... I knew that actually, things could be better. I just need to start acting good!*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

## **Talking about trauma**

For Ruth, the understanding shown by her new stepfather sat in contrast to the lack of understanding she felt her mother had shown her, at a time when she was experiencing

acute distress in relation to the sexual abuse she had experienced by her mother's previous boyfriend – something she was struggling to disclose.

*Interviewer: If you could take the place of your mum... what do you think you might have done differently?*

*Ruth: Despite how angry I would've been, I would've wanted to understand why they feel the need to hurt themselves, or end their life.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

This highlights another aspect of addressing the parent abuse dynamic; for some young people who are being violent to parents, addressing their poor emotional well-being and the trauma that may have led to it may be the first step in improving their relationship with parents and disrupting the cycle of abusive behaviour (Evans, 2016; Sheehan, 1997a). However, whilst recognising the importance of working with young people's trauma in cases of parent abuse, Gallagher (2004b) also warns that addressing some of the possible underlying issues, such as histories of family violence and abuse, is usually a long process, emphasising the importance of addressing the immediate risks of violent behaviour towards parents before moving on to deeper, more long-term therapeutic goals.

### **Re-establishing lines of communication**

To re-establish positive communication between Ruth and her mother, they eventually attended family therapy, where a practitioner helped them to safely and honestly communicate their perspectives and feelings in relation to the violence, as well as the trauma that had precipitated it. This was transformative in Ruth stopping her violent and abusive behaviour towards her mother.

*If you hurt them, you have to make it better, and that's what I had to realise... that I had done wrong and I needed to own up to what I'd done. And that's why I demanded family therapy because I knew that me and Mum could talk, and say how we felt, in an environment which was safe, and that we'd had someone who could mediate the situation. That if I was gettin' too aggressive...'Ruth stop, take*

*five minutes, blah blah blah'. If mum was gettin' really upset or angry, then... send her out... you know? And I'm glad I did it because, me and Mum... we were brutally honest... (laughing) and there were a few times I was like, 'You're horrible for sayin' that mer'. And wouldn't talk to her for like, the rest of the day afterwards. But I got over it because in my eyes... Mum could've just said anything she wanted to me. Because I'd hurt her that bad... I deserved it! And I thought actually, her being horrible to me now – not horrible, but really like, hitting me where it hurts – would actually help me... and it did.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

The literature on family therapy as an approach to addressing parent abuse highlights its many benefits, taking a systemic and ecological view to understanding and addressing the issue, which allows parents and their children to safely communicate their individual accounts and experiences of the abuse, whilst managing and minimising interruptions and blaming (Sheehan, 1997a).

### **Lowering the volume during conflict**

For several interviewees, parents or caregivers staying calm and not shouting during disagreements helped to de-escalate conflict. However, in cases involving young people who were violent or abusive to parents, those quiet and calm caregivers were often not their primary caregivers (i.e. not mothers), meaning that rather than being a reflection of parents' ability or inability to remain calm during conflict, it might instead have been the nature of the relationship and the differing relational power that enabled those calmer, quieter interactions. This is emphasised by Tew and Nixon (2010) who argue that 'responses to parent abuse, as with domestic violence, need to be founded on an understanding of power relations' (p. 580).

Dan: ... *the only person that can calm me down is me nanna (laughs).*

Interviewer: *And why do you think that is?*

Dan: *I don't know, she just comes to me house, when I'm arguin' wiv' me mum and then she just takes me to hers, sits me in her room, gives me a cig and then... just calms me down, talkin' to me.*

Interviewer: So what do you think is the difference between your mum and your nan?

Dan: Erm, me nan dun't shout (laughs).

(Dan, male, 15, YOS)

Although most interviewee insights on communication concerned what parents did or did not do, a few acknowledged that calm and respectful communication with parents was a two-way process which helped them to be heard and reduced the escalation of conflict. Such views often came from those who had ceased their violence towards parents and were drawing on their reflections on what had made the difference.

Ruth: *If you want something or if you want your opinion to be heard... or to be taken seriously... if you abuse that person or... disrespect them... what's the chance of them listening to you? So when me and Mum argue now... if we start shouting... I say to her, 'Look, just give it 10 minutes. Give it some time and we'll come back an' talk about it in a minute...when we're a bit calmer.' And I find that we always manage – both of us, it's not just me – to get our points across... without being angry. And there is no point-scoring... That's the best thing because I did point-score. And Mum agreed, she would do it as well... she thought, 'What the heck, I might as well'. An' I don't say anything that I wouldn't say to her on a good day.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

## Space

Like communication, space was also framed as a driver of parent abuse. For interviewees, 'space' was something which, if created during times of conflict, could help to prevent escalation to violence. However, space also meant having respite from the parent abuse dynamic, either via informal or formal care arrangements – something interviewees felt could help to disrupt unhealthy cycles and encourage the mending of relationships over the longer-term. When discussing reasons for positive change, some interviewees cited parents' willingness to give them space during

conflict, which helped to take the heat out of arguments and allowed space to think, rather than act in the moment.

Interviewer: *Is there anything you've done or that she's done that you think's helped?*

Jo: *Yeah she's probably... when I go on a mad'n, she just lets me walk out, she doesn't say anythin'.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

Penelope: *I think from being in hospital, they gave me techniques... My mum was told that if I need to walk away from a situation that she has to let me walk away. So I can have time to calm down and like, take a step before I do cross that line.*

Interviewer: *And do you find that helpful?*

Penelope: *Yeah, definitely because obviously if you're still in the heat of it, it's gonna build up more and more and then if you take a step back, it's easier just to calm down before you go into it any further.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

Although for the most part, the emphasis was placed on the need for parents to 'give' young people space during conflict, in some cases this was done proactively by young people themselves, who either left the house or retreated to their rooms during escalating conflict. This was also a suggestion made by those interviewees not being abusive to parents.

Interviewer: *What would you say to other young people about how to de-escalate arguments with parents and avoid conflict?*

Alan: *I think again it depends on the parent and how they are acting towards you, but I think if they're set in a room and you went to them and then the argument started, I think then just leave the room. If needed, leave the house for a bit, but do come back. Or talk to them, over the phone or over text, but I think if they came to you, then leave the house and go somewhere safer... Because then you know it can't get physical.* (Alan, male, 17, College)

*If she's going absolutely crazy and she's shouting, I won't even stand in the same room, I'll walk off. And Mum knows that's the cue just to kinda leave it. And then I'll come down later and be like, 'Do you wanna cuppa tea?'... and then we'll sit down and talk about it.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

However, space was not only conceptualised as something that could prevent conflict from escalating to violence. It was also seen as something that could help address the parent abuse dynamic in the longer term, giving both sides the emotional and physical space to safely work through problems. Interviewees' ideas to achieve such space often meant separation from parents and the home, either as informal respite via friends and extended family, or more formal arrangements through children's social care or inpatient psychiatric facilities (for those experiencing acute mental health problems).

*I thought that if I was away from her, maybe me an' her not being with each other all the time would make things better? I think it would've actually been a benefit if I'd moved out. Because we wouldn't have been in each other's hair all the time, I'd 've had time to think and sort myself out. So would Mum. And actually get some sleep at night! I think if I could turn back time, I'd 've pushed for something to happen... whether that'd be me going to live with someone, or like a friend or something. Or even worse case scenario, temporary care... or anything. That would've been, I think, one of the solutions to our problems... 'Cos obviously, if you're seeing someone like, every day... and you don't really get on with them... it's literally just kinda like a fire, an' you're just adding paper to it.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Alan: *I mean... obviously removal of the children... just like some like safer... like a psychiatric ward or... just a hospital in general. Just separate them and then either slowly rehabilitate them... together, or away from each other, whatever is more appropriate... 'cos I mean, they're individuals, so you can't like... there's gonna be no one perfect [solution].*

(Alan, male, 17, College)

## Quality time

Although mentioned by only two interviewees, improving relationships with parents within the context of adolescent-to-parent abuse meant spending quality time together and sharing activities the young person was interested in. For Ruth and her mother, guidance around spending quality time together was given by their family therapist and was identified by Ruth as helpful in rebuilding the connection with her mother.

*And build up a relationship again... by going out and doing stuff together. So we'd go out for like lunch an' stuff, or even just go out for a walk, or a bike ride. Or we'd watch a film together. Get some chocolate, watch a film, you know. And... I felt like actually, that really helped.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Interviewer: *What do you think might help other families who are going through this sort of thing? To help it to stop.*

Pete: *Do summit the person enjoys.*

Interviewer: *What sort of stuff?*

Pete: *Like, going mooching up hills or summit.*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

Although only mentioned in a few studies, shared activities have been identified as a way for parents and children to connect and reconcile within the context of adolescent-to-parent abuse (Evans, 2016; Omer, 2016), with the joint engagement in fun activities enabling a cycle of positive interaction to develop (Omer, 2016).

## Managing anger

As discussed in Chapter Six, one of the most common explanations given by interviewees for adolescent-to-parent abuse was a lack of control over emotions and, in particular, struggling to manage feelings of anger. Thus, ways of avoiding 'losing

control' and being violent to parents focused on the importance of young people not acting when they were angry and calming themselves when feeling overwhelmed by anger or frustration – aspects built into a number of parent abuse programmes (e.g. Routt & Anderson, 2016).

*... and don't make decisions when you're angry... or sad.*

(Jodea, female, 17, YOS)

*... better to stay calm and think.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

Ways in which young people calmed themselves during heated conflict with parents included listening to music, going for walks, talking with friends, going to the gym and using punchbags, smoking cannabis, and using therapeutic techniques such as snapping loom bands and filling in colouring books. Such activities were distracting, calming and cathartic, but also allowed young people to discuss their feelings with others to gain useful perspectives.

Interviewer: *What kind of things de-escalate for you? Like how do you calm yourself down... what things help?*

Ronnie: *I listen to music or I talk to my friend about it all. And she kind of makes me remember, it's all petty and it's not really anything worth [worrying] about. But it's nice getting it all out... rather than keeping it in, otherwise I would have just stayed angry for the whole time.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

Interviewer: *Have you got any things that you do which help to de-escalate conflict?*

Jason: *Me? Really, just go and have a spliff... That's what I do, I go an' have a spliff and then calm me down and then walk back an' then... just... that's it... then just speak to everyone as normal then.*

(Jason, male, 16, YOS)

## Understanding consequences

Three interviewees discussed the important role that understanding the consequences of abuse had played in helping them to stop their abusive behaviour at home. For Jo, it was the YOS highlighting the potential legal implications which deterred her from violence towards her mother.

Interviewer: *You talked a bit about the team here giving you tactics that you can use to calm down. Is there anything else that they've done to help with your relationship with your mum?*

Jo: *Probably like reading these things out, like what could happen if I can be violent to her again at my age now. They said, if I carry on, and the police gets called... I can get arrested and I can get charged.*

Interviewer: *So, do you find that knowledge... do you think that does stop you from being more violent?*

Jo: *Yeah.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

For Jason, who, in a moment of anger, had destroyed his bedroom, limiting young people's privileges was a way of teaching them the implications of domestic property violence – acting to both punish and inform about the financial and material consequences of such behaviour.

Interviewer: *What about times where you've smashed up your room and stuff? What's the best course of action for parents there?*

Jason: *Take things away from 'em that they really like, or what they want or just don't give 'em spends [money] and don't take 'em places and things like that. Just let 'em feel like... how it is like... you've gotta pay for things if you break it like... take things away from 'em or make 'em pay for it, summit like that.*

Interviewer: *Did you think that helped with you?*

*Jason: Yeah. It will help, because then they'll realise they can't... like if you carry on breakin' things, you're not gonna have nothin' really. You keep on breakin' everything, you're gonna have nothin' left!*

(Jason, male, 16, YOS)

In restorative approaches to addressing abuse, young people are encouraged not just to understand the consequences of their behaviour, but also to make amends for it (Routt & Anderson, 2016). A common method being for young people to fix items they have damaged or destroyed. This serves not only to highlight the consequences of abuse, but also to turn destructive behaviour into productive behaviour, demonstrating remorse whilst also allowing the young person to feel they have made a positive contribution (Routt & Anderson, 2016).

For Ruth, her mother's disclosures during family therapy were central to her understanding the full impact of her abuse, both in terms of how it was affecting her mother emotionally but also the potential implications for herself should it continue. Getting young people to reflect on how they would like their future to look has been identified as an important therapeutic activity in cases of adolescent-to-parent abuse (Sheehan, 1997a).

*Because knowing that the only reason she stuck around was 'cos she had to... not because she wanted to... made me realise that I was obviously doing something really wrong... to make my own mum, who carried me for nine months and gave birth to me, only feel like she had to love me because of laws... because of the establishment... that that was the only reason she had to stick around. An' it helped because it gave me that kind of kick like... if my mum is saying this, what the hell are my friends thinking?! What are the rest of my extended family thinking? What picture am I showing the world of what I am? And how is this gonna affect me in later life? So havin' my mum, the closest person to me... basically... sorry, rip me to shit – which is what she did, but I let her – made me better.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

Understanding the emotional implications of abuse was also emphasised by Marcus, who felt that young people understanding the short- and long-term impacts of abuse on parents' emotional well-being would be influential in getting them to stop.

*Interviewer: What do you think might be helpful to families?*

*Marcus: ... maybe to learn, you know, what abuse can do to people... the impact on someone that's being abused, like, what... how would that affect them. Not just like now, but in the future.*

(Marcus, male, 17, college)

Recognising the harm done to victims of parent abuse is an important part of several approaches aimed at addressing the issue and is argued as moving young people closer to taking responsibility for the violence and the changes they must make to address it (Evans, 2016; Routt & Anderson, 2016).

Although, overall, interviewees felt that young people understanding the implications of parent abuse for themselves (rather than for parents) was useful in addressing it, the accounts do provide useful insight into the motivations for ceasing abusive behaviour. This is important if interventions aimed at addressing parent abuse are to connect with those young people involved.

## **Punishment and (re)establishing authority**

For a handful of YOS interviewees, the solution to (particularly physical) parent abuse was punishing young people. This included verbal or physical chastisement and forcing children to leave the family home to deter further violent behaviour – concerning suggestions that implied a normalisation of violence towards children in the home.

*Interviewer: So what about when parents try to set boundaries but then their children are violent towards them? What do you think parents could do?*

*Kirby: Errr... fuckin' give 'em a slap or summit.*

(Kirby, male, 16, YOS)

Interviewer: *If you were a parent, and you had a daughter or a son who was behaving that way in arguments, what do you think you'd do?*

Jenn: *Kick it out. 'You can go on the streets 'til you've learnt your lesson and you can come back when you're gonna not be a little... pain in the bum.'*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

Pete: *I wouldn't ring the police. No, I'd tell 'em, I'd tell 'em straight... I wouldn't hit 'em, I wouldn't hit my kids, I'd tell 'em straight.*

Interviewer: *What would you say?*

Pete: *I'd tell 'em to pack it in, I'd... shout and scream at them.*

Interviewer: *And what would you do if they didn't stop? So if they were just like, punching the walls, or hitting you. What would you do then?*

Pete: *If they were about 17 and they hit me, I'd punch 'em square in the nose. But, if they were a kid... if they were like, five, I'd threaten to ring the police, 'cos then they would stop, 'cos they'd think they'd get arrested when they really wouldn't, 'cos they're only five.*

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

Interestingly, in this excerpt, Pete makes it clear that what would work for a younger child may not work for an older child, emphasising how approaches to address parent abuse need to take into account the age and developmental stage of the child. This has previously been highlighted by mothers who found that although police involvement acted as a deterrent for younger children, for those who were older, the lack of follow-through meant that it had less of an impact (Edenborough et al., 2008).

The previous excerpts also highlight (both implicitly and explicitly) another aspect of addressing the parent abuse dynamic – the need for parents to re-establish themselves at the top of the parent-child hierarchy. This was identified by one interviewee as an area where parents may need support, particularly in terms of implementing effective boundaries.

*I think they need help with showing discipline or showing that they're the parent figure. And trying to get that barrier between. Cos' obviously it's not there. An' like...ways to avoid having those kind of arguments an' the ways to react to it. They need to know, 'cos some families are a bit clueless really of what to do when they approach those situations.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

Notably, none of the interviewees brought up police involvement and criminal punishment as a means of addressing parent abuse, although when prompted, one did say that involving the police may send a strong message that the issue was serious. However, he also argued it could be antagonising, making young people more resistant to their parents. This mirrors mothers' accounts of police involvement, which are often mixed (e.g. Edenborough et al., 2008; Holt, 2011), describing its potential to act as a deterrent of abuse but also its potential to escalate adolescent anger and blame.

### **Professional help: confidants, challengers and advisors**

*Because I know for a fact I couldn't speak to Mum... but speaking to a therapist helped. (Ruth)*

For just one interviewee, professional support in the form of individual and family therapy had been vital in helping to address the parent abuse dynamic between her and her mother, *"I don't know where I'd be if I didn't have CAMHS or anything like that. I'd probably still be where I was"* (Ruth, female, 18, College). Ruth found that her individual counselling helped her to address the trauma around her historical abuse, which, in turn, enabled her to engage in a process of mediated family therapy with her mother, where they were able to communicate in a safe and open space.

Some of the key qualities of the individual work carried out with Ruth included: it was sustained, *"I mean I was there for two years I think?"*; her counsellor built a good rapport with her, *"I got to know my counsellor really well. And she was amazing"*; she was responsive, *"...and whenever I needed her, I could call her"*; she engaged in multiple, sometimes informal ways, *"... she'd take me out for a coffee and we'd go and chat about*

*it and sort things out.”; used approaches that were creative and practical, “And it was just the different ways in which she helped me cope”; and lastly, she established trust, “I didn’t trust anyone... at all... and I felt like I could tell her stuff”. Although these insights are not necessarily specific to addressing parent abuse per se, they do help us to understand some of the qualities of support needed to address the underlying emotional trauma and mental health difficulties which underpinned the dynamic for some interviewees.*

Like Ruth, Jenn found that having a trusted key worker who was informal, focused on her needs and spoke to her, rather than *about* her to her mother, provided significant support around her offending behaviour.

*Interviewer: Do you think that positive change is mainly because of the relationship you've got with your key worker?*

*Jenn: Yeah like she's took me out for hot chocolate today... She did the other week as well like... she is nice... d'ya know what I mean?*

*(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)*

Several other interviewees being violent and abusive to parents but *not* receiving individual support felt that having someone to talk to and confide in outside of the family would be beneficial. For Ronnie, she felt that having someone to talk to when things were getting heated with her mother, someone who could advise her on how to manage that conflict, would be useful in preventing it from escalating.

*I think I would need someone to talk to at that time... rather than going off about it to her... So then I could calm down in the situation and know what to do.*

*(Ronnie, female, 17, College)*

And for Ant, it was having someone you could tell your side of the story to, without fear of judgement.

Interviewer: *What do you think it is about counselling that's helpful?*

Ant: *Well, it's the fact that someone just sits there and listens to you... and hears your side of the story. Instead of just assuming that you're lying... or telling you you're lying when you're not.*

(Ant, male, 16, College)

Central to all these accounts is young people needing a trusted confidant who can support them and listen to what they have to say, in a more balanced relationship in terms of power, focused on their experiences and needs, and with an air of informality.

Ronnie: *I just would have found it better when I was younger to have someone to talk to about it really.*

Interviewer: *So who do you think would have been good to talk to, what sort of person?*

Ronnie: *Someone like... maybe more like an adult thing, but like... not... in a way of telling you... but just having a conversation, more like friend level. But not someone from like, school or summin' like that...*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

As the earlier quote about Dan's 'Nan' demonstrated, the role of confidant was sometimes provided by extended family members, such as grandmothers, who, for some young men in this study, were an important source of emotional support.

*... well the best relationship is with my Nanna. She's the most-closest person to me, 'cos whenever I need anythin' I can go to her... 'Cos I'm ever in trouble – go to her – or... just anythin'. If I'm upset, I can go to her, if I need to tell her anythin', I can go to her.*

(Jason, male, 16, YOS)

In addition to providing a trusting and supportive, neutral relationship, counsellors or practitioners focused on giving individual support were also acknowledged as being useful for their capacity to provide practical guidance around managing emotions and

conflict – identified earlier in the chapter as important in addressing violence towards parents.

*Yeah, I think like them knowing ways to sort out when there is an argument... and ways that they could calm down if there ever is one... they need to know the rights and wrongs, like hitting a parent is wrong. And like getting into arguments isn't really good either and the ways to avoid it.*

(Ronnie, female, 17, College)

Interviewer: *What do you find helpful about support from the YOS?*

Jo: *... they give me like... what to do when I'm angry, and they give me like... tips to do like... say if, I need five minutes just to walk out and then come back.*

Interviewer: *Are there any other kind of techniques that you use that help you?*

Jo: *Like, count to 10, or... go in my room and shut the door... scream into a pillow, or... hit a pillow.*

(Jo, female, 14, YOS)

Young people who were not being abusive to parents also mentioned that counsellors or practitioners could challenge young people who were being violent, which would encourage reflection and changes in behaviour and may also uncover any underlying issues that may be contributing.

*But, to get someone in and sort of speak to them, try an' be like, 'Why are you doing this?', try an' get a counsellor in... an' see why they're doing it. An' then try an' explain to them why they shouldn't do that... an' that at the end of the day your parents are trying to be there for you or whatever.*

(Sarah, female, 17, College)

## Barriers

Interviewees discussed various barriers to addressing parent abuse, as well as services or support they thought were unhelpful. However, it was also recognised that addressing the issue was complex, with no one-size-fits-all response.

*... it depends how violent the kid's being... if he's gettin' in their face an' that... then... well... fuck knows.*

(Kirby, male, 16, YOS)

*... obviously there's things like Childline, which is really helpful... there's Parentline – they are all really helpful things – but it needs to be a more wider range of things, that... everyone knows what Childline is, but then, they might not want to call someone or email someone, it might be easier for them to talk face-to-face.*

(Penelope, female, 17, College)

Particularly for some of the younger interviewees, there seemed to be an unwillingness to engage with the support they were offered, usually because of a lack of belief in its usefulness.

Jenn: *... they're just puttin' me on medication which I've not even taken.*

Interviewer: *Do you want to tell me a bit about CAMHS?*

Jenn: *I really don't like 'em and they just... they don't actually help me. They just ask questions about ma childhood. But with this much stress I don't even remember last week, so I'm not gonna remember 10 years ago am I not?*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

Pete: Like, all I'm sick of hearing is people going 'count to 10'. It does not work!  
I'm sick of it, it's all CAMHS said...

Interviewer: What did you go for?

Pete: My behaviour it was... when I was about six, and then, when I was seven I just, didn't go 'cos it was a waste of time. 'Cos they were saying the same thing in different, many ways.

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

Jenn also struggled with her feelings around having her mother included in the work with CAMHS – a dynamic recognised by approaches combining individual and joint sessions to address abuse.

*Whereas CAMHS are just... I just hate it... Like I've gotta sit in a waitin' room for ages. I sit here like shakin' while they're speaking to me mum and I'm just like 'Okay like, if you're gonna speak to me mum, then refer her to CAMHS, not me'.*

(Jenn, female, 14, YOS)

However, Pete's reticence to engage was also because he felt that such intervention was both unnecessary and intrusive.

Interviewer: Have they helped you here with any kind of programme, advice, or any support?

Pete: Who, YOT? No. I refuse it all.

Interviewer: What sort of stuff have they offered you?

Pete: Stuff like, work with the family and that, but... I don't accept work like that.

Interviewer: Why not?

Pete: I just find 'em cheeky me. Cheeky. Like, I don't, I don't work with people who I don't need basically. Like, so the social worker, I don't think I need her, so every time she comes round I refuse to talk to her. I hate 'em.

(Pete, male, 15, YOS)

However, in this study, it was not only young people who were reticent to engage with support to address the parent abuse dynamic. Ruth's father refused to attend family therapy, which restricted the scope of the therapy and left a number of issues unaddressed.

*Ruth: I wanted Dad to come along as well. To get them two to sort their problems out... an' Dad refused. Not because Mum was there, he said he just had no interest in going to a family therapy session. And then the one time he did promise to come, he didn't turn up.*

*Interviewer: How did you feel about that?*

*Ruth: Angry really, because... yeah, part of it was to try and get them two to sort stuff out and at least be civil for my sake... but most of it was because I wanted to try and establish a close relationship with my dad. And for my dad to understand what I was feeling like.*

(Ruth, female, 18, College)

## **Conclusion**

Overall, interviewees had the least to say about how parent abuse could be addressed; most likely reflecting its complexity as an issue, its position at the end of the interview, and the fact that only a few interviewees had both experienced the parent abuse dynamic and successfully moved on. However, this study is still the first to report young people's perspectives on what they thought could help in preventing and addressing violence and abuse towards parents. For those who did provide insights, the majority focused on parental responses, such as keeping conflict quiet, giving young people space, spending quality time with them, and being more understanding – approaches currently built into a number of interventions aimed at addressing the issue. However, when discussing physical violence towards parents specifically, a few young people from the YOS took a more authoritarian approach to re-establishing the parent-child hierarchy, recommending parents use either physical or verbal chastisement, the removal of privileges, or forcing them to leave home, approaches more at odds with the parent abuse practice literature.

Although interviewees mainly focused on what parents could or should do to address abuse, responsibility for change was not always placed solely on parents, with interviewees also discussing some changes they could make to improve parent-child relationships and address their violent and abusive behaviour. Similar to their recommendations for parents, these included the importance of space and walking away, speaking calmly and respectfully, and having empathy and understanding. However, they also included ways of managing emotions, such as using distraction techniques and other methods of self-soothing, and importantly, not acting when angry.

Interviewees also recognised that when young people used physical violence towards parents, more formal services could provide a range of supports to help. The most common was one-to-one counselling, with interviewees feeling strongly that young people often just needed someone to talk to who could guide and support them and be on their side. This was particularly the case for those who had experienced family violence and trauma and were suffering with particularly poor emotional well-being. This reinforces the current practice literature on the important role confidants can play in helping to address adolescent-to-parent abuse.

## CHAPTER NINE: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

This study set out to explore young people's experiences and perceptions of adolescent-to-parent abuse, primarily through the narratives and reflections of those young people with first-hand experience. Historically, qualitative research in this area has focused on the accounts and perspectives of mothers and practitioners living or working with the issue, with the voices of young people themselves rarely heard. As with any form of family abuse, understanding the realities and perspectives of all those involved and affected is an essential part of efforts to design responses that better-reflect and engage more closely with those lived realities. Without understanding *why* young people feel they use violent and abusive behaviour at home, we are unable to meet them 'where they are' or understand what can be done to help.

The initial part of the discussion summarises and explores the findings in relation to the first primary research question of the study on the nature of parent abuse – how common it is and who and what it involves. Insights into these areas were generated through a self-report survey and in-depth interviews with young people from a sixth form college and youth offending service (YOS). The latter (and larger) part of the discussion is dedicated to answering the second primary research question on how young people understand, explain and experience parent abuse – what they think are its causes and contexts, how they feel it impacts on them and their families, and what they think can be done to prevent or address it. Insights into these aspects come solely from the in-depth interviews with young people. Where possible, similarities and differences between participants – regarding their age, gender and interview context – are drawn out and examined. As the four findings chapters included some initial discussion and framing on what is currently known about parent abuse from the extant literature, this chapter focuses on tying findings together into a coherent whole to make sense of how the mechanisms that shape the phenomenon appear to interrelate.

The discussion also situates the findings within the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Two, drawing upon feminist, childhood, family violence, trauma, stress,

communication, power, and developmental theories, and structuring them within an ecological model to highlight the interactions between them. In line with critical realist philosophy, the discussion continually reflects on the *mechanisms* through which adolescent-to-parent abuse develops and persists, as well as the ways in which young people construct meaning through their narratives. The concluding chapter then summarises the thesis' key contributions to knowledge and the implications of its findings for policy and practice, before providing reflections on the research journey, the study's key limitations and where future research efforts should be directed.

## **How common is parent abuse?**

In Chapter Four, *The Nature of Parent Abuse*, student survey data was analysed to explore the extent to which adolescent-to-parent abuse was present in a sample of further education students aged 16 to 18 – a population previously explored only once within the UK context (see McCloud, 2017). Historically, survey studies of parent abuse have tended to focus on physical 'aggression' towards parents, with rates very rarely representing the prevalence of *patterned* aggression – a defining characteristic of any abuse dynamic (Holt, 2013). This is the first UK study to take a focused look at patterned physical and non-physical aggression towards parents using a survey and the first to apply a threshold for what 'counts' as parent abuse for this age group. This is important as survey research has often conflated parent 'abuse' with rates that include one-off incidents of physical aggression that may fall outside of the definition of harmful and controlling behaviour. The results from this study highlight why this is particularly problematic, with rates reducing significantly upon removal of one-off incidents, emphasising the potential for inflated prevalence rates (Gallagher, 2008; Simmons et al., 2019).

The results of the analysis demonstrated that although rates of patterned physical aggression towards parents were relatively low, rates of psychological aggression were relatively high – closely resembling the differential findings of previous studies (e.g. Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2013; Calvete, Orue, et al., 2013). This most likely points to the greater social acceptability of psychological aggression and its common occurrence in parent-adolescent interaction – useful insight that can help to establish which profiles of behaviours fall within the scope of 'typical teenager behaviour' and which may represent patterns of harmful behaviour towards parents. Further, as

positive conflict 'negotiation' behaviours had the highest prevalence rates overall, it is clear that 'typical' adolescent behaviour towards parents can often take various forms – both positive and negative.

To generate a prevalence rate for the sample that would more closely represent cases of parent 'abuse', thresholds were applied that took into account the frequency, form and severity of aggressive behaviours. To date, this has only been done once before (Simmons et al., 2019) and with an older age group. Analysis of the data against the thresholds identified 21 cases of potential parent abuse – representing 10% of the overall sample. Cases comprised a range of abuse 'profiles', including those with combinations of physically and psychologically aggressive behaviours, as well as cases involving psychological aggression alone. This is important as it recognises the harm that non-physical forms of abuse can have on victims. Further, as a third of these respondents indicated their behaviour was in *response* to parental aggression, we are reminded of the importance of gathering supplemental contextual data to differentiate cases that may reflect defensive or retaliatory aggression from young people.

Although the prevalence figure of 10% broadly reflects previous studies of the issue (Gallagher, 2008), making comparisons is problematic given that studies are typically not reporting, or even talking about the same phenomena. In this study, the focus was on patterned physical and verbal/psychological aggression towards parents, as well as an exploratory estimate of cases that could *potentially* represent a pattern of parent abuse. In previous studies, figures have represented a range of differing metrics, such as reported cases of assault, total physical aggression towards parents, or cases of 'hitting'. Although in some cases these rates are conflated with parent 'abuse', they often refer to broader definitions of violence. Moving forward, we must be more consistent and explicit in how we define, refer to, and measure parent abuse, which may result in a more accurate understanding of its prevalence.

## **What does parent abuse 'look like'?**

As defined in Chapter Two, parent abuse involves a *pattern of intentional and harmful*, behaviour by adolescent children towards their parents, excluding that which is defensive or due to significant developmental disability. Abusive behaviour can be

physical, verbal, property-based, emotional, psychological, financial and in some cases, sexual. The reports of young people in this study's surveys and interviews support such a multidimensional definition, describing behaviours or combinations of behaviours which often included several forms of abuse.

For some interviewees, the onset of parent abuse was a staged process, beginning with verbal and property abuse and developing into physical violence over time, with more severe violence peaking in adolescence. As well as reflecting previous studies of parent abuse (e.g. Cottrell, 2001; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Kethineni, 2004), this mirrors the trends of criminological literature, which highlight a peaking of offending in adolescence (Simmons et al., 2018). In fact, although not covered extensively by the survey, abusive behaviour involving the destruction of property was a particularly common characteristic of the dynamic, framed as an alternative to physical violence or as a way of punishing parents for perceived harms. In other cases, it represented a mirroring of parental behaviour, indicating just how varied the contexts and motivations can be.

#### *A distinct form of gendered violence*

Interviewees' descriptions of abusive behaviour reflected mothers' accounts in previous studies (e.g. Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Haw, 2010), including some behaviours that leveraged specific relational dynamics such as the legal, moral and emotional obligations of mothers to care for and protect their children. These behaviours included threats to report mothers to social services for child abuse (where no child abuse had taken place), requesting formal separation from mothers, as well as threatening to harm themselves. This confirms the observations of Holt (2013) that the specific nature of family relationships and the social locations of those involved, determine the forms that abuse takes. Here, not only the parent-child bond, but specifically, the mother-child bond was leveraged as an abusive tactic to gain power and control, underlining the important role gender plays in shaping the dynamic.

### *The 'intention' question*

The reports of young people in this study support a multidimensional definition of parent abuse emphasising a range of abusive behaviours that were *patterned*, *intentional* and *harmful*. However, in terms of understanding the extent to which interviewees' aggressive behaviours towards parents were *always* intentional – i.e. whether or not they were intended to disempower or harm – this was difficult to establish. Only a few interviewees spoke explicitly of the intentions behind their aggressive behaviour, even when prompted. For many young people, the use of (particularly physical) aggression was unplanned, instead being a means of releasing anger and frustration, with no 'intention' that they were able to recall. However, in some cases, it was clear that aggressive behaviour had been intentional, with the aim of warning parents away, to hurt parents, or to avoid chores or have limitations removed. In this way, the patterns of behaviour described by interviewees seemed to involve a combination of 'reactive' and 'instrumental' aggression, although the few cases that involved the sort of 'emotional terrorism' described by Barbara Cottrell (2001) seemed to be dominated by accounts of physical, verbal and psychological aggression that was intentionally harmful and disempowering.

### **Who is involved?**

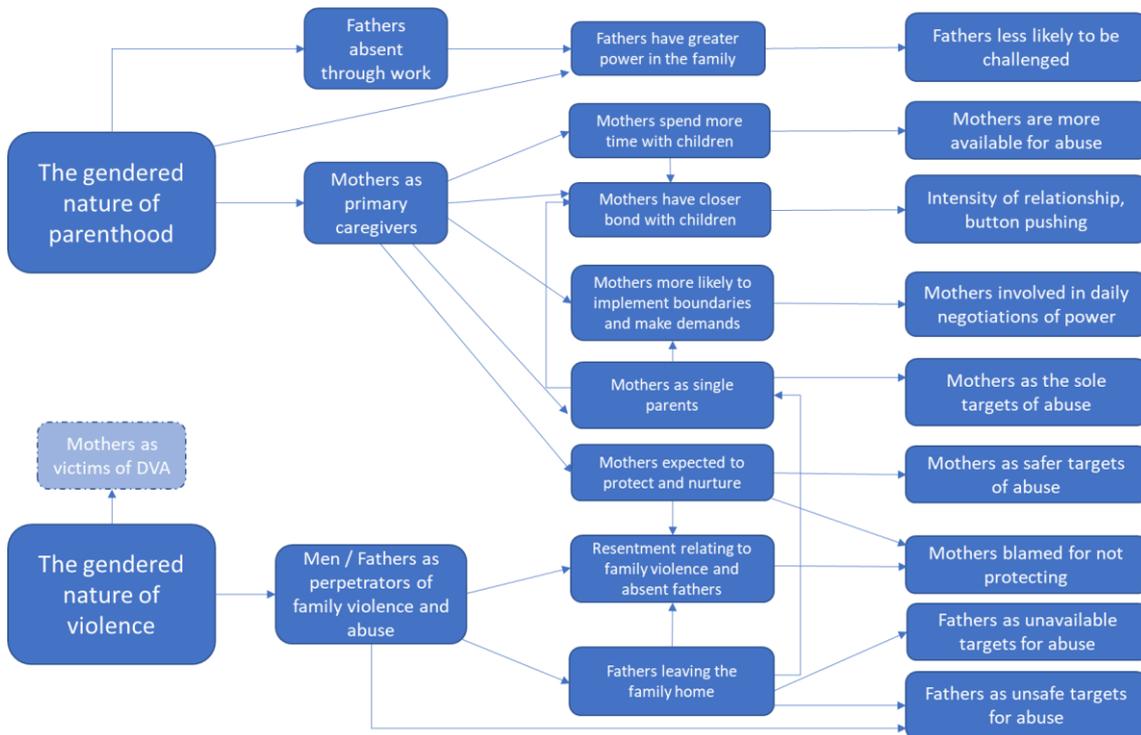
Although analysis of the survey data revealed that aggressive behaviour was directed towards mothers, stepmothers, grandmothers, fathers, and stepfathers – by sons and daughters – the sample size was not large enough to carry out more detailed comparisons relating to parent or adolescent gender, age or ethnicity. However, an exploration of gender using the interview data revealed the highly gendered nature of the phenomenon, with gender shaping the abuse dynamic through two key mechanisms: the gendered nature of parenthood and the gendered nature of family violence. Similar to previous studies drawing on feminist theories (e.g. Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Gallagher, 2004a; Holt, 2013; Ulman & Straus, 2003), these mechanisms meant that mothers were more present in their children's lives, more likely to set boundaries and make demands, and, unlike fathers, *less* likely to respond with violence or abandonment. For these reasons, mothers were significantly more likely than fathers to be the victims of parent abuse, supporting the majority of the parent abuse literature to date (Simmons et al., 2018).

### *Interactions between gender, parenthood and family violence*

The gendered nature of both parenthood and family violence were not operating separately from one another but, as *macrosystemic* influences, *interacted* to shape the parent abuse dynamic in specific ways. For example, a number of interviewees' mothers were parenting alone due to the interaction between male-perpetrated family violence and abuse and mothers' role as primary caregiver, making them the *only* available targets of parent abuse – from both sons and daughters. In fact, the presence of 'daughter-to-mother abuse' challenges the dominant mother-victim/son-victimiser narrative that emphasise same-sex behavioural modelling (e.g. Boxer et al., 2009; Cottrell & Monk, 2004), reinforcing the need for a more nuanced analysis of gender (Holt, 2013) that does not 'unfairly stigmatise teenage boys' as 'potentially violent men' (Baker, 2012, p. 273). Second, although not discussed in detail, mothers were both explicitly and implicitly blamed for the violence of fathers and partners, potentially because of the expectation that, as primary caregivers, they should have protected their children from harm – previously articulated by Cottrell and Monk (2004) in their multi-informant study of the phenomenon. Although much resentment was felt towards fathers for both their absence and their violence – which were often directly related – this resentment was nearly always redirected towards mothers, with abuse towards fathers risking violent responses or them leaving their children's lives altogether. As noted by Haw (2010), young people involved in the abuse of mothers often appear to have complex relationships with fathers. Nearly all those reporting abusive behaviour towards parents in this study also mentioned having poor, complex or absent relationships with their fathers, which, in some cases, were cited as having contributed specifically to the development of abusive behaviour towards mothers. Finally, although mothers were described as victims of domestic violence and abuse from male partners, it was less clear how interviewees felt this contributed to the parent abuse dynamic; potentially because such insights would involve a level of reflection on the inner worlds of mothers – difficult to achieve without empathy or an active dialogue. Studies exploring the impact of domestic abuse on mothers have found that communication, the mother-child bond, and mothers' confidence in parenting can sometimes be negatively impacted by such experiences (Humphreys et al., 2006; Mullender et al., 2002; Radford & Hester, 2006), alongside children's normalisation of their mothers as 'victims' (Holt, 2013). Although touched on by only one interviewee, it is possible that such factors had influenced the abuse dynamic in several other cases but went unmentioned.

Figure 9.1 illustrates the various ways in which interviewees suggested parent gender shaped the parent abuse dynamic. It is important to note, however, that the diagram represents a compilation of interviewee insights rather than how gender operated in all cases, or all the possible ways in which parent gender *could* have shaped the dynamic.

Figure 9.1: Gender processes shaping parent abuse



The accounts and reflections of interviewees have helped to shed light on parent abuse as a gendered form of family abuse, shaped by culturally-determined notions of parenthood – and specifically, motherhood – as well as the proliferation of violence towards women in society more broadly. As stated in Chapter Two, researchers have previously identified ‘a failure by both policy makers and academics to recognise the gendered dimensions of this form of family violence’ (Hunter & Nixon, 2012, p. 213) and the analysis presented here moves to address that failure. As Holt (2013) argues, the gendering of parenthood and blame are important in shaping parent abuse; an assertion definitely supported by the young people in this study.

This is the first time a theory of parent gender has been mapped out diagrammatically in relation to adolescent-to-parent abuse and the interrelations between the gendered nature of parenthood and of family violence made explicit. Moreover, this is the first time the perspectives of young people have been used to explore these intersections of gender, parenthood and violence. Although these insights are exploratory, they confirm previous thinking around mothers' greater risk of parent abuse victimisation and expand upon that knowledge. This study also widens our understanding of how gender intersects across different forms of family violence and challenges the notion that it is mainly sons who learn to be violent to mothers.

## **What are the causes and contexts?**

This next part of the discussion concerns the second primary research question – how do young people understand, explain, and experience adolescent-to-parent abuse? Drawing on in-depth interviews, this study represents the most detailed examination of young people's accounts and constructions of violence and abuse towards parents to date. One of the richest areas of investigation was in relation to causes and contexts, something which helps to reveal why – at least from young people's perspectives – such violence and abuse may occur. Key findings were grouped into six main themes of: *violence, abuse, and trauma; power, control, and agency; communication; stress; anger and emotion regulation; and blame*. These six themes are discussed in turn before focusing on their intersections within an ecological framework – helping to move us away from mono-theoretical accounts of the phenomenon.

Before discussing these themes, it is important to stress that the study findings represent the perspectives and experiences of a small number of young people involved in adolescent-to-parent abuse, which means they cannot be assumed as representing the diversity of young people and families experiencing the issue. Although critical observations and connections to explanatory theories have been made, the findings should be seen as exploratory, with a larger and more diverse sample needed to generate greater confidence in any patterns observed and to ensure a wider range of experiences, backgrounds and 'childhoods' are adequately represented. Further, as argued by Holt (2013, p. 75), 'It is important to acknowledge that both parents' and young people's explanations as to how they understand the causes of parent abuse should not be used as evidence per se as to "the causes of

parent abuse”...’. Although this study reflects the philosophical position of childhood studies, where young people’s accounts are taken seriously, understanding the realities of any form of family abuse involves drawing on multiple perspectives, all of which are constructed in the particular contexts of the research projects in which they are undertaken.

## **Violence, abuse and trauma**

This study found that over three-quarters of interviewees who had carried out physical, verbal, emotional, psychological, and/or property abuse towards parents had also been the direct or indirect victims of domestic abuse, child abuse, or peer violence in the community. In nearly all cases, interviewees explicitly implicated these experiences as having contributed to their use of violence and abuse at home. This finding supports those previous studies highlighting family violence and abuse as a significant risk factor for (typically) physical violence towards parents (for a review, see Simmons et al., 2018), whilst also adding to the literature by identifying peer violence as a contextual factor. Although peer violence and its endorsement is recognised in the criminological literature as an important influence in the aetiology of interpersonal violence and delinquency more broadly (Ali, Swahn, & Sterling, 2011; Jackson, Hanson, Saunders, Kilpatrick, & Amstadter, 2013), it has yet to be implicated in adolescent-to-parent abuse.

This study has also responded to the critique of Simmons and colleagues (2018) that although there has been much research into the relationship between past and ongoing family abuse and adolescent-to-parent abuse, few studies have explored the *mechanisms* that may be involved. Through its analysis at the level of processes, this study identified several mechanisms connecting the violence and abuse young people had experienced inside and outside of the home to the violence and abuse they used within it. These mechanisms related to the impacts of trauma, feelings of resentment and blame, and the use of violence as an adaptive response to parental violence and abuse.

### *Parent abuse as a response to trauma*

A number of interviewees with victimisation experiences described daily symptoms of hyper-arousal and emotion dysregulation. Although the connections between their experiences of victimisation, trauma symptoms, and their subsequent abuse of parents was not made explicit (and no neurological or physiological tests were performed to properly investigate), it seems possible that such trauma could have shaped the dynamic by hampering young people's ability to regulate their responses to stress – specifically stress relating to parental control, as well as the everyday stresses and strains of adolescence that were often the backdrop to violent episodes. This is particularly relevant given that difficulties in managing emotions was the most common explanation given by interviewees.

This study also found that several young people who had experienced violent victimisation as children went on to experience various mental health problems – a common outcome identified in the literature on domestic and child abuse (Cater et al., 2014; Howell, 2011; Kar, 2019; Radford et al., 2019). Interviewees' ways of coping with these difficulties included self-harm, substance use and, in three cases, attempted suicide. Within this context, parent abuse was defined by one young person as a way of communicating her need for support, which corresponds to a small number of previous studies drawing on the accounts of parents, practitioners and youth (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Gabriel et al., 2018; Gallagher, 2008), as well as therapeutic literature which frames young people's violence as a maladaptive way of coping with feelings of discomfort and vulnerability (Sheehan, 1997a). Together, the findings in this study point towards childhood experiences of victimisation as shaping the development of parent abuse through the associated trauma symptoms of dysregulation, anger, anxiety/stress, dissociation, and substance misuse – previously highlighted in studies exploring the connection between childhood victimisation and later intimate partner abuse in adulthood (Anda et al., 2006; Berthelot et al., 2014; Faulkner et al., 2014; Taft et al., 2010), although, to date, only tentatively explored in the parent abuse literature (e.g. Papamichail & Bates, 2020).

Lastly, given that a number of interviewees' mothers were parenting through domestic violence and abuse, we are reminded of the important role that parents' own histories can play in shaping the dynamic – an understanding sympathetic to systemic and

trauma-informed approaches to intervention, which look not only to the trauma and histories of children, but to that of parents, too – factors known to shape how, particularly mothers, interact, bond with and respond to their children (Mullender et al., 2002; Radford & Hester, 2006).

### *Parent abuse as resentment and blame*

Interviewees also expressed (both implicitly and explicitly) their feelings of resentment in relation to their experiences of abuse and neglect. However, such feelings were nearly always taken out on mothers rather than fathers, reinforcing the findings of domestic abuse studies on the detrimental impact of abuse on the mother-child relationship and to children's perceptions of their mothers as competent parents (Radford & Hester, 2006). The findings of previous studies on the role of 'displaced' aggression are also supported, with adolescents directing their abuse towards mothers who had also been victims of familial abuse, rather than those fathers responsible for perpetrating it (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Gabriel et al., 2018). Here we see adolescents' differing expectations with regards mothers and fathers and the ways in which gender acts as a 'mediating system of power' in the family (Holt, 2013, p. 97). Although two interviewees exposed to domestic abuse had also been victims of their mothers' violence towards them, an increase in mothers' aggression towards children has previously been identified as an outcome of domestic abuse (Radford & Hester, 2006), particularly when mothers are either still experiencing or have recently left violent relationships. Through the accounts of this study, we can see the various ways in which family abuse, gender and social constructions of parenthood (microsystemic and macrosystemic factors) can influence the development and course of parent abuse.

### *Parent abuse as functional and adaptive*

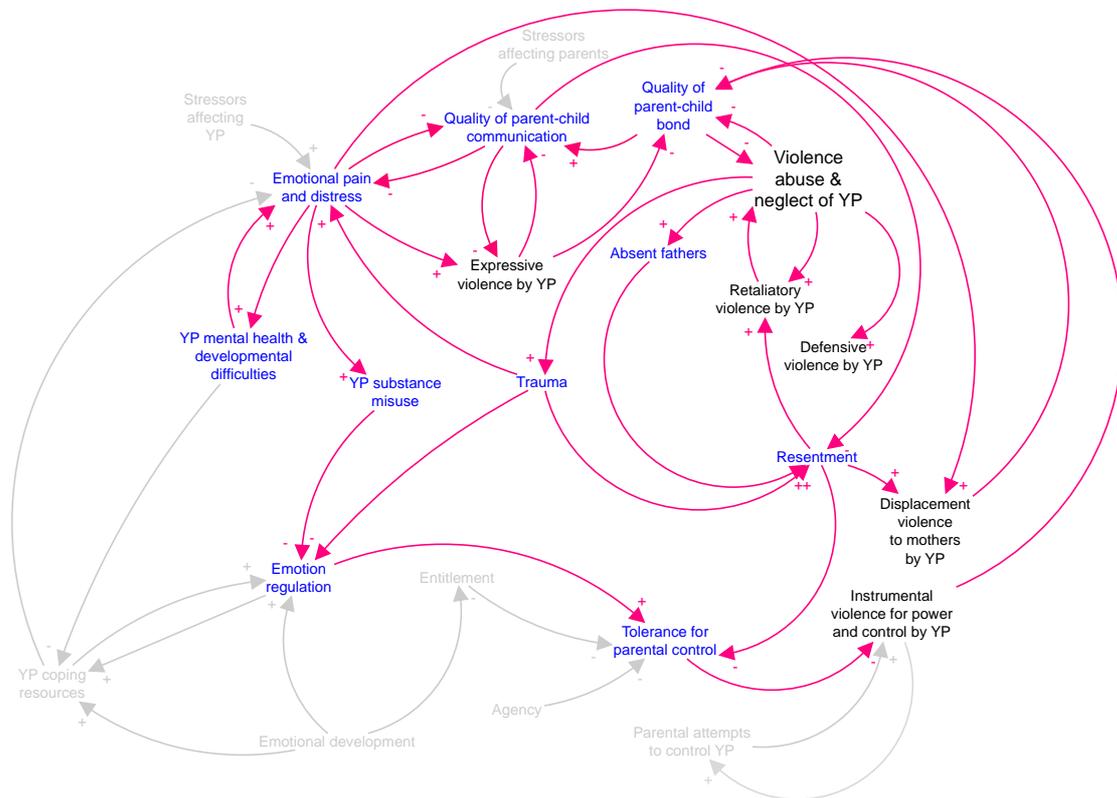
For a number of young people, violence towards parents appeared to be an adaptive response, meaning that they were responding either defensively or in retaliation to parents' use of violence and abuse towards them. Parent-to-child violence has been identified as a potential explanatory factor for child-to-parent violence in a number of previous survey studies (for a review, see Simmons et al., 2018), where children's violence has been conceptualised as a functional response to parental aggression and

a coping strategy for dealing with abuse (Brezina, 1999). Further, some recent studies have highlighted parent-to-child physical and verbal abuse as one of the strongest predictors of both physical and verbal forms of parent abuse (Beckmann, Bergmann, Fischer, & Mossle, 2017; Gallego, Novo, Fariña, & Arce, 2019; Izaguirre & Calvete, 2017), although the specific mechanisms at play have rarely been explored.

Where interviewees experienced direct violence from parents, defensive aggression was used to avoid being hit, with retaliatory aggression including responses that typically involved escalated levels of physical violence. However, similar to women's use of violence in the context of their long-term victimisation (Dobash & Dobash, 2004), children's use of more 'serious' violence could still be conceptualised as defensive, given that parents may be bigger and stronger and represent a greater danger to their physical safety. Further, as a number of young people using retaliatory violence described accompanying feelings of intense anger, this could indicate the type of 'reactive anger' implicated in women's use of violence towards abusive male partners (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Swan & Snow, 2006). However, as Dobash and Dobash (2004) highlight, it is important to analyse violent 'acts' within the historical contexts of relationships – these parent-child relationships appeared to involve histories of not only defensive and retaliatory aggression but also violence, abuse and controlling behaviours initiated by the young person. Such overlap in the various forms of family violence, as well as the lack of parents' perceptions and constructions, make it difficult to establish the extent to which these cases were indeed parent 'abuse' or rather, active forms of resistance to child abuse. Potentially, they could have been both.

What is clear is that in these cases, parents' use of violence and abuse acted as harmful contexts of aggression from which adolescent-to-parent abuse emerged. Although not discussed explicitly, in line with systemic theories drawing on notions of circular causality (Kuczynski, 2003), it is likely that interactions such as these were reinforcing in nature, in that episodes of parental violence leading to retribution from adolescents then led to further episodes of violence, maintained through the damaging of the parent-child bond and the establishment of coercive cycles of interaction (Patterson, 1982). These hypothesised reinforcing 'loops' can be seen in Figure 9.2, mediated by a deterioration of parent-child communication and young people's emotional state.

Figure 9.2: Causal loop diagram (CLD) of violence, abuse and trauma processes



**Key**

- + = As x increases, y increases
- = As x increases, y decreases

Although there was some evidence supporting a social learning explanation of parent abuse, only a few interviewees specifically framed violence and abuse as something *learned* from parents and these were not those young people using violence at home. Where young people did draw parallels between their own and their parents' violent behaviour, these statements were always ambiguous, lacking clarity around whether such similarities were perceived as being due to a process of learning, genetic inheritance, or whether they merely represented young people's attempts at meaning-making around their violence and identity. Further, in one case, comparison with the behaviour of the abusive parent originated from the victimised parent rather than from the young person themselves, highlighting how parent narratives can be 'borrowed'. Lastly, in contrast to a number of previous qualitative studies (e.g. Calvete, Orue, et al.,

2014; Cottrell & Monk, 2004), young people's accounts did not explicitly point towards a process of indirect modelling of violent behaviour. This is significant as it challenges the dominant discourse of young people's passive socialisation, which is both deterministic and damning for those who have experienced interparental violence and abuse in childhood. Indeed, most young people experiencing violence and abuse in childhood will *not* go on to be violent or abusive as older children or as adults (Holt, 2013; Radford, 2012). Likewise, not all young people in this study who had experienced family violence went on to be abusive to parents. Such messaging is important as it runs counter to the damaging, yet commonly-held beliefs and fears of parents, children and wider society that the children of abusers will become the victimisers (and victims) of tomorrow (Mullender et al., 2002).

### *Exploring the victim/victimiser duality*

By exploring young people's accounts of parent abuse within the context of their past and ongoing domestic and child abuse, this study has highlighted the dual position that both adolescent children and parents can occupy as both victims and victimisers. As highlighted in Chapter Two, such duality is unfortunately particularly challenging for systems and services that structure their responses according to rigid and polarised victim/perpetrator paradigms (Hunter et al., 2010). Further, as argued by Gabriel and colleagues (2018, p. 167), labelling young people solely as 'perpetrators' or 'victims' 'overlooks the body's response to trauma and the relational contexts of children and young people' whilst also risking pathologising them as 'dysfunctional'. Such labels can be both harmful and limiting of positive change (Gabriel et al., 2018).

As noted by Holt (2013), socio-historical constructions of parenthood and childhood concurrently frame parents as powerful, responsible and agentic, and children as passive, powerless and in need of protection. These constructions, combined with an understanding of abuse as an 'abuse of power' (Holt, 2013) make it difficult for parents to occupy the position of victimhood and for adolescent children to be constructed as abusers (Downey, 1997; Holt, 2011; Holt & Retford, 2013). This is important, as frontline services are organised around such normative constructions (Holt & Retford, 2013), with the application of victimhood and perpetrator-hood forming the basis of who to blame and who to support (Clarke, 2015).

The victim/victimiser duality also represents a challenge for parents experiencing abuse, with mothers articulating the difficulty in recognising 'that the adolescent could be held accountable for the violent behaviour whilst still recognising his/her sadness or distress' (Paterson et al., 2002, p. 97). However, once mothers were able to recognise this dual position, they found it helped them move away from a narrative dominated either by blame or by acceptance of the abusive behaviour.

Non-linear understandings of parent abuse can more readily accommodate the victim/victimiser duality, with systemic perspectives highlighting the interconnectivity of various forms of family violence and de-emphasising the importance of 'cause' in favour of 'process' (Downey, 1997). Similarly, bidirectional and transactional models of the parent-child relationship, such as the bilateral model of parent-child relations (Kuczynski, 2003), enable a reframing of the parent-child relationship to one of interdependencies as opposed to unidirectionality. Due to its conceptualisation of power as being dynamic and context-dependent, it can also accommodate changes in young people's and parents' roles over time, as well as enabling a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic and transactional nature of relational power. Further, as a bidirectional model, it fits well with childhood theory, emphasising the agency of both parents and children. Employing this power framework can allow for fluidity in the positions that parents and children occupy in relation to victimhood and perpetrator-hood.

### **Power, control and agency**

In common with all forms of family abuse (Finkelhor, 1983), this study found that power and control were central to young people's accounts of parent abuse. Disagreements over privileges, responsibilities and freedoms often acted as sites of conflict with parents, particularly mothers, which then escalated to violent and abusive behaviour – framed as wrestling back power and control in a context of dependency and developing agency.

These findings chime with the early theorising of Harbin and Madden (1979) which framed adolescents' abusive behaviour as a way of distancing from their dependency. However, this alone is not enough to account for the dynamic, as the majority of young

people do manage to successfully navigate this relational dependency without resorting to violence. The evidence from this study points to the intersection of emotion dysregulation – as a result of either trauma or neurodivergence – as helping to explain why some young people may struggle to manage the frustration that comes from parental regulation and control. Indeed, several interviewees using violence at home claimed their parents were overly strict and controlling – sitting in contrast to the dominant discourse of permissive parenting. However, such framing likely has as much to do with young people’s expectations around regulation and their sense of entitlement as it does with actual parenting behaviours. Examining the accounts of parent-child dyads and triads could help to shed light on how parenting behaviours may or may not shape the development of the parent abuse dynamic and, in turn, how they are shaped by it.

Sympathetic to transactional models of parent-child relations that consider the fluctuation of relational dynamics over time, interviewees revealed their changing expectations in relation to their entitlement to privileges and freedoms; expectations that were connected to their conceptualisation of adolescence as a time of increased agency and autonomy. Thus, parents’ differing conceptualisations of adolescence and the freedoms it should confer acted as a trigger of conflict – something as yet unexplored in the parent abuse literature. Again, we can see how macrosystemic factors – this time at the level of normative constructions of childhood and adolescence – shape the contours of the family and thus the contours of adolescent-to-parent abuse.

This study adds to the evidence base by identifying the constraining of space and movement as a particular trigger of parent abuse, connected to young people’s desire for physical, emotional and relational space, as well as for greater peer interaction. Spatiality in childhood has previously been conceptualised as an important site of social control (James et al., 1998), with children desiring greater control over spatiality within the home – particularly where it pertains to peer relations (Solberg, 2015). Nearly all interviewees in this study stressed the importance of having their own private space, with the bedroom regarded as a safe and sacred space to gain relational/emotional distance from parents, privacy, and autonomy. Importantly with regards to parent abuse, the constraining of space and movement at times when young people were feeling agitated – either due to conflict with parents or because of

other social stresses – was something framed as triggering of violent and abusive behaviour towards parents. Further, young people’s active resistance to parental control over spatiality shaped the form that abuse took, with physical violence used to leave or gain access to the home and the withholding of their whereabouts used as a way to control and hurt parents emotionally. Physical movement outside of the home and virtual movement inside of the home (online) was closely connected to young people’s desire to socialise with friends. Together, these highlight the important relational space that friendships occupy during adolescence (Coleman, 2011). Indeed, part of the potency of parents’ control over space, movement and privileges was the proxy control it had over young people’s capacity to interact with friends.

## **Communication**

Interviewees who used violence and abuse at home consistently mentioned poor communication between themselves and parents, something that appeared to moderate the relationship between parent-adolescent negotiations and subsequent violence towards parents. Although a few studies have previously highlighted parent-adolescent communication difficulties as contributing to the dynamic (Biehal, 2012; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Eckstein, 2004; Paulson et al., 1990), this is the most detailed examination of parent-adolescent communication to date.

Poor communication shaped parent abuse in various ways, acting as a proximal trigger of anger and conflict when parents shouted or were verbally abusive, but also operating indirectly, with a lack of open and honest conversations around feelings and perspectives contributing to a general sense of feeling unheard and misunderstood and a gradual decline in parent-adolescent relationships. As the parent abuse dynamic became more entrenched, young people and parents were much more likely to resort to aggressive forms of communication, leaving them less able to have calm, reflective and productive conversations respectful of each other’s experiences, feelings and perspectives. As young people felt less heard, they became more frustrated, resorting to violence and abuse in the absence of positive ways of managing conflict with parents. Further, as a result of these ongoing damaging interactions, some felt unloved and disliked by parents, an identified risk factor for parent abuse (Contreras & Cano, 2014; Sampedro et al., 2014).

Young people's capacity to calmly manage negotiations also seemed to be moderated by their ability to regulate emotions – difficult for those with histories of trauma or developmental conditions. Here, we can start to see the dynamics of the ecological system operating, with factors at the microsystemic and ontogenic levels interacting to shape the development of abuse. Systemic models are also particularly relevant here given the reference to escalating behaviours, referred to by social learning theorists as 'coercive cycles of relational aggression' (Pagani et al., 2004, p. 535).

## **Stress and coping**

This is the first study to apply a stress and coping framework to adolescent-to-parent abuse and the first to foreground such a framework in young people's – particularly young women's – own experiences of stress. This is important because experiences and outcomes of stress are not universal and gaining insight into how environmental factors outside of the family may shape those dynamics happening within it helps us to understand what support may be useful for families. Interviewees' accounts revealed a range of stressors experienced both by themselves and by parents which acted as 'contexts of stress' to their violent behaviour. For interviewees, environmental stressors relating to school exams and peer relationships, in particular (exogenous factors in their social ecology), increased their emotional volatility immediately prior to some of the more violent interactions, with young people also describing parents' own stressors relating to work and bereavement as reducing their capacity for peacefully navigating conflict.

Stress theories such as Worrall and May's (1989) 'person-in-situation' model and Agnew's (1992) 'general strain theory' are helpful in conceptualising how particular stresses and strains in the lives of young people – past, present and anticipated – can result in emotions such as anger and frustration. In the absence of internal coping 'resources' (Hammer & Marting, 1988) such as emotion regulation and conflict management skills, and external coping resources, such as quality communication with parents and wider family support, the stressors young people encounter can become increasingly hard to manage, impacting their capacity to peacefully manage conflict with parents. Parent abuse can therefore be conceptualised as a maladaptive form of coping in the absence of healthier alternatives (Strasburg, 1978) – useful as it offers potential areas or 'resources' that if bolstered, may help to address the dynamic.

Lastly, connecting back to young people's experiences of victimisation, enduring states of 'core' stress (Worrall & May, 1989) and anxiety resulting from trauma (ontogenic influences), may have resulted in 'stress sensitisation' – argued as making parent abuse more likely (Evans, 2016).

### **Anger and emotion regulation**

The most common explanation for violence and abuse towards parents was getting "*over-the-top angry*", or having "*anger issues*" and then "*losing control*". Such explanations are reflective of those studies foregrounding mothers' experiences of the issue (Holt, 2011; Stewart et al., 2006), where children's violence is framed as a way of 'letting off steam' (Haw, 2010; Murphy-Edwards, 2012). Although such framing is problematic in terms of its potential to communicate that violence is a natural and acceptable way of responding to anger and frustration (Gallagher, 2004b; Haw, 2010), several interviewees similarly stated they found violence, abuse and the destruction of property cathartic. Taking this into account, violence and abuse could be conceptualised as anger inappropriately expressed (Cottrell, 2001) or a harmful and maladaptive way of managing emotion (Biehal, 2012; Patterson, 1982). Such a definition promotes the idea that anger is an emotion, whereas violence is a choice (Gallagher, 2004b; Haw, 2010), and importantly, one that has harmful consequences.

Connecting to the theme of power, control and agency, interviewees frequently identified anger occurring as a result of parental regulation over privileges, freedoms and responsibilities, supporting previous studies emphasising the role of low frustration tolerance and a lack of adaptability to stressful situations (e.g. Calvete, Orue, et al., 2014; Nock & Kazdin, 2002). However, although poor emotion regulation has previously been connected to aggression that is 'reactive' in nature (Calvete, Gamez-Guadix, et al., 2015), its presence in parent-adolescent negotiations around privileges, freedoms and responsibilities could highlight its connection to more 'instrumental' forms.

Even when not connected explicitly by interviewees, difficulties in regulating emotion was apparent in nearly all cases of violence and abuse towards parents. That is not to say that emotion dysregulation was the 'cause' but rather a characteristic shared by

most cases. Although interviewees' explanations for dysregulation often pointed towards personality or 'immaturity', analyses identified two common pathways: victimisation experiences and early onset neurodevelopmental conditions. As already discussed, children's experiences of direct and indirect abuse are the factors most consistently implicated in the development of adolescent-to-parent abuse, with ADHD being the most commonly implicated neurodevelopmental condition (Simmons et al., 2018). Emotion dysregulation could potentially be the shared characteristic linking them both to parent abuse. Further investigation involving robust measures could help to explore this hypothesis and to better understand some of the intersecting contextual factors that make parent abuse in the context of emotion dysregulation more likely. Evidence from this study suggests these include parent and adolescent stress and a lack of resources to cope, poor parent-adolescent communication and conflict management skills, and inadequate support for mothers dealing with their own histories of trauma.

### **Blame and accountability**

Young people's accounts of violence and abuse towards parents revealed a variety of narratives as regards blame and accountability. For some, parent abuse was framed as a problem of parenting, meaning that accountability (and therefore the burden of change) lay with parents – particularly mothers. This reflects a wider culture of mother blame (Cottrell, 2001; Holt & Retford, 2013), highlighted by authors such as Holt (2016a) as shaping the parent abuse discourse, as well as the policies resulting from it. For other interviewees, parent abuse was seen as a negative component of personality, making young people accountable for the violence and abuse they were using at home. However, only very rarely was accountability placed solely with parents or young people, as it was often recognised that a multitude of factors at the level of children, family and wider society contributed to its development. Not only does this support those researchers recommending polytheoretical accounts of parent abuse (e.g. Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Holt, 2013) but it also highlights young people's capacity to contribute meaningfully to nuanced discussions around complex social phenomena.

For those being violent and abusive towards parents, narratives of blame were also often mixed, with a recognition that, although they may have felt parents were too strict, shouted too much or did not support them enough, responsibility for the violent

behaviour ultimately lay with them. Further, in line with bidirectional theories of parent-child relations (Kuczynski, 2003), young people also highlighted the reciprocal nature of parent-child interactions as contributing to the dynamic – also aligned with systemic theories of parent abuse where attributions of blame are discouraged (Micucci, 1995). The only cases where blame was placed solely on parents was in the context of parent-to-adolescent violence and historical neglect, where violence and abuse was framed as retaliatory and justified.

Despite these mixed narratives of blame, the way in which young people accounted for their violence and abuse shared some similarities with male perpetrators of intimate partner abuse (e.g. Dobash & Dobash, 1998; LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011), with rhetorical devices such as minimisation, denial, justification and claims of reduced competence (Goffman, 1971) used to shift the burden of blame. This was particularly apparent for several female interviewees who framed their violence and abuse as an inevitable response to mothers' attempts to regulate their behaviour. However, unlike male perpetrators of intimate partner violence, young people's narratives were often ambiguous and, in some cases, remorseful. This is the first study to analyse young people's parent abuse 'discourse' in this way.

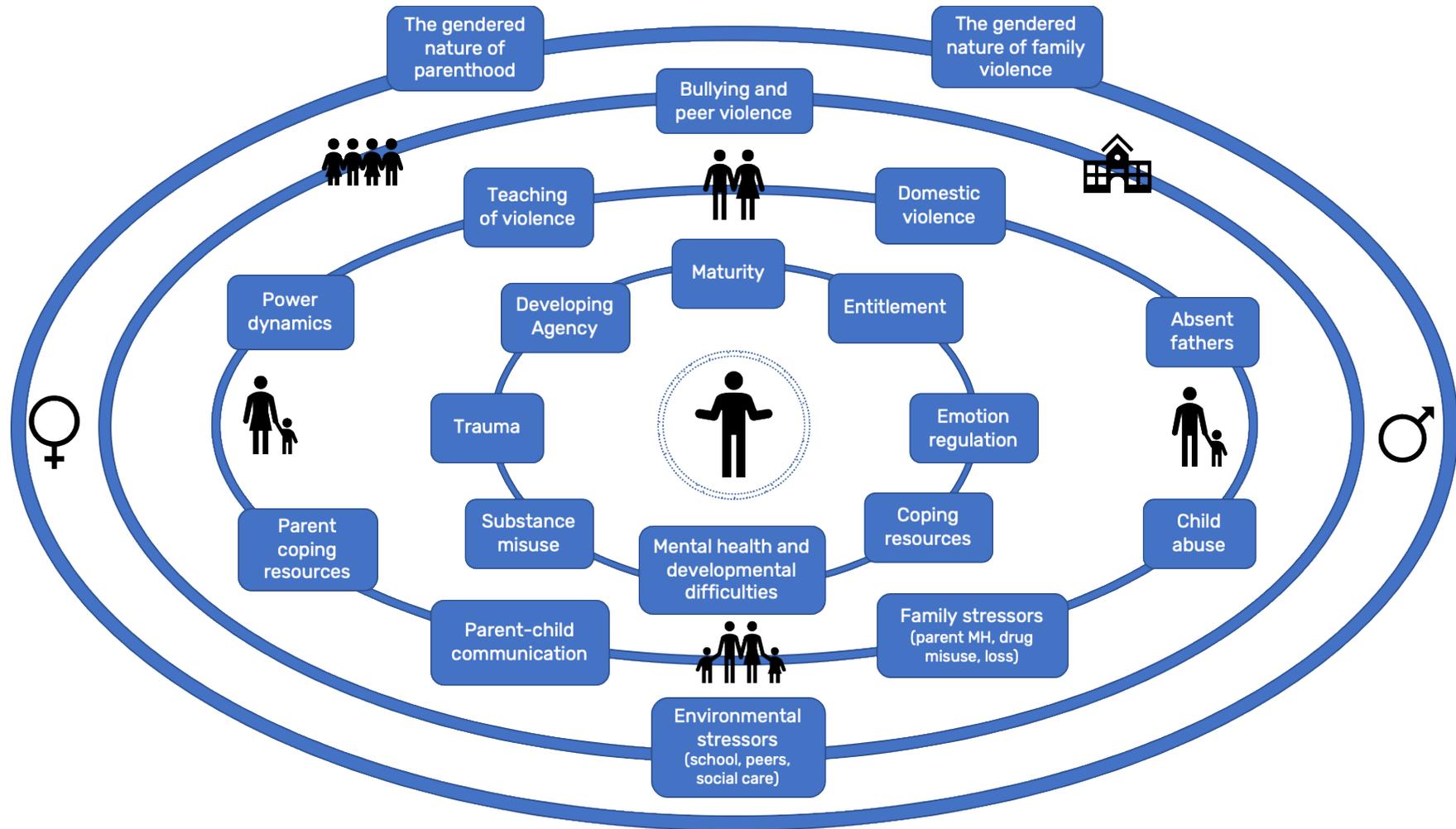
### **Exploring interconnections: a social ecology of parent abuse**

The themes identified through interviewees' accounts covered a range of factors and contexts positioned across various systems within young people's developmental ecologies (see Figure 9.3). Most prevalent were those at the levels of the ontogeny (the individual) and the microsystem (the family) – referred to by Bronfenbrenner (1994) as 'proximal processes' of development – with fewer representing explanatory factors within the exosystem or macrosystem. This is not necessarily surprising given that in studies such as Cottrell and Monk's (2004), exosystemic and macrosystemic factors originated mostly from parent and practitioner insights around negative peer-group behaviour, family poverty and supports, and the role of the media in the modelling of gender roles – issues less likely to be given as explanations by 14- to 18-year-olds. This again highlights the importance of accessing young people's experiences and perspectives when attempting to understand any phenomenon that involves them – as their perspectives can often differ from those of adults.

Many of the contributing factors identified by Cottrell and Monk (2004) were also supported by this study, including those at the level of the individual, the family and those external factors at the level of community and culture. However, new contexts and factors were also identified, including environmental stressors relating to school and friends, the quality of parent-child communication, the direct teaching of violence as a means of conflict resolution, and individual-level factors such as emotional development, agency, and entitlement. Analyses at the level of processes also highlighted the ways in which these contexts and factors – both within and between ecological systems – interacted with one another in the development of parent abuse. This is important if we are ‘to move beyond the identification of factors that appear more or less frequently in cases of parent abuse to explain *how* each contributory factor is implicated’ (Holt, 2013, p. 57).

Consistent with the theoretical framing at the beginning of the study, the mechanisms identified point towards parent abuse as a dynamic and complex phenomenon. Rather than representing individual explanations for abuse, however, mechanisms tended to shape the dynamic through their *interactions* with one another.

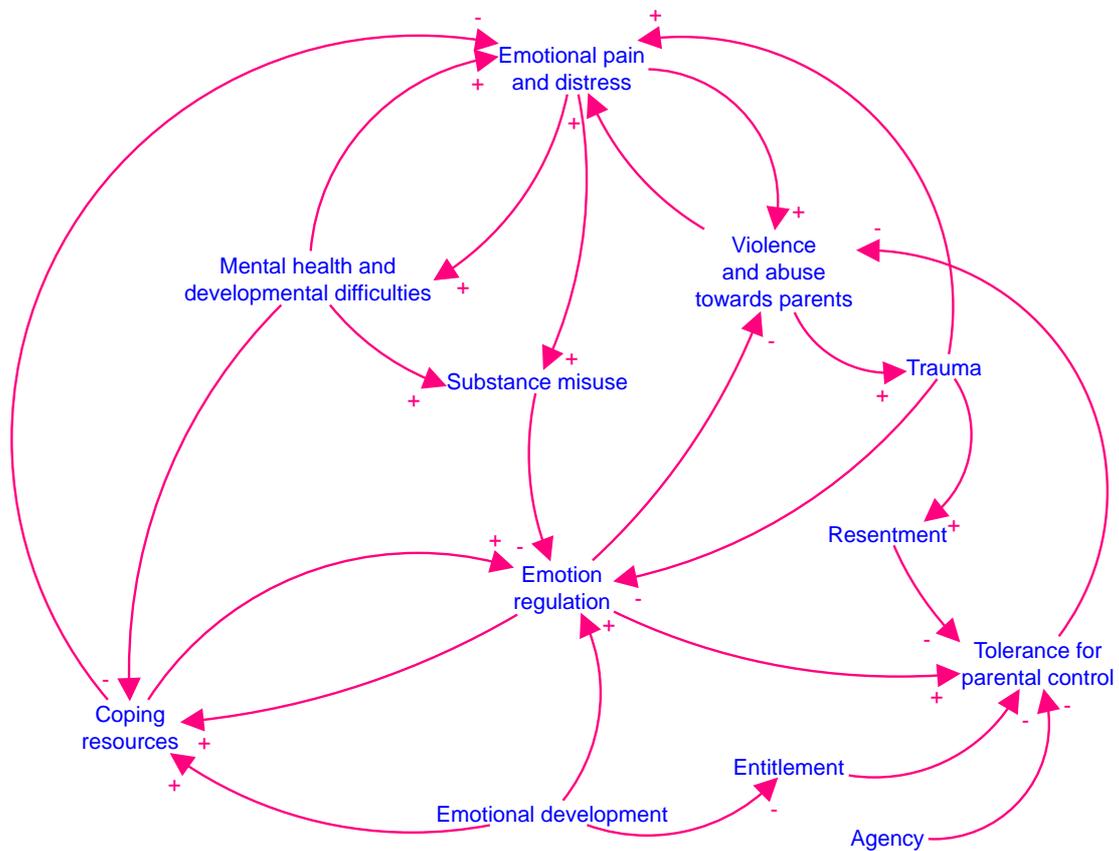
Figure 9.3: Influencing factors and contexts in the social ecology of parent abuse



*Interactions at the individual (ontogenic) level*

As seen in Figure 9.3, factors that appeared influential at the individual level included young people’s emotional development (conceptualised by interviewees as ‘maturity’), their emotion regulation, developing agency, sense of entitlement, coping resources, the presence of mental health or developmental difficulties, trauma and, in one case, their use of substances. When looking at interactions *between* these factors (see Figure 9.4 below), we can see the importance of adopting a developmental perspective, as interviewees’ social, emotional and cognitive development *over time* appeared to play a major part in both the onset and desistance of abuse.

*Figure 9.4: Causal loop diagram (CLD) exploring ontogenic interactions*



Key

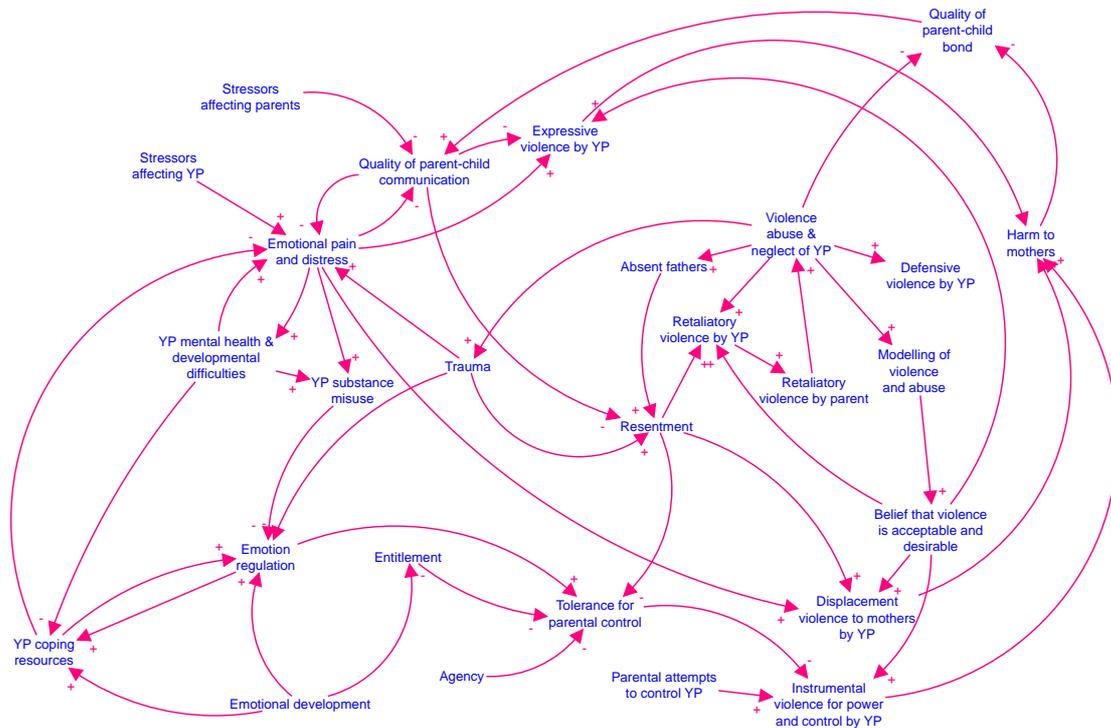
- + = As x increases, y increases
- = As x increases, y decreases

### *Interactions between ecological systems*

Moving outwards to the micro-, exo- and macrosystems, we can see that the trauma held by some interviewees was caused by their experiences of domestic abuse, child abuse and peer violence – abuses often, but not always, perpetrated by fathers or mothers' partners. Due to these abuses and the gendered nature of parenthood, a number of fathers were often absent from interviewees' lives, causing further resentment. As explored earlier, the trauma and, to an extent, the social learning resulting from witnessing and experiencing interpersonal violence and abuse, seemed to play an important role in the onset of defensive, retaliatory, displaced, expressive and instrumental violence and abuse towards (mostly) mothers. However, these experiences alone are not enough to account for the development of parent abuse in its entirety.

Environmental factors, such as the presence of stressors in the exosystem (e.g. peers, school) and microsystem (e.g. parent mental health and substance misuse, family loss) also seemed to impact both interviewees' and parents' capacity to manage conflict with one another, with contexts of stress meaning that interviewees had a lower tolerance for parental control and that, at least from interviewees' perspectives, parents had a lower tolerance for challenge and negotiation. This led to frustration on behalf of both parties which, in the absence of quality communication or conflict resolution tactics, escalated conflict. When conflict involved a young person struggling to regulate their emotions, who wanted to hurt or punish (particularly) mothers because of past trauma, or who had internalised violence and abuse as acceptable and desirable ways of managing conflict, interviewees used physical, verbal, psychological, emotional and property abuse towards parents. Although only discussed in one or two cases, over time, this pattern of parent abuse (and in some cases concurrent child abuse) appeared to damage the parent-child bond, which in turn, reduced the likelihood that interviewees and their parents would meaningfully communicate their feelings or seek resolution. As a result, a reinforcing pattern of negative behaviour emerged that distanced interviewees from their parents, with young people subsequently not feeling understood or cared for. This then worsened the parent abuse dynamic and the mental health and well-being of both interviewees and their parents (see Figure 9.5).

Figure 9.5: Causal loop diagram (CLD) exploring all interactions



Key

- + = As x increases, y increases
- = As x increases, y decreases

Such an explanation for parent abuse is sympathetic to family systems theory, which emphasises the interactions between family members and the negative reinforcing patterns of harmful behaviour that may be operating (Eckstein, 2004; Micucci, 1995; Patterson, 1982). Feminist critiques of family systems theories, however, argue that such framing removes the need for those using violence and abuse in the family ‘system’ to take responsibility for it, whilst implicating victims in their own victimisation (Goldner, 1985). Such theories are, however, useful when trying to make sense of adolescent-to-parent abuse, as they frame adolescents as active agents within the family context, enable an exploration of bi-directional power dynamics, whilst also recognising that such dynamics will alter with adolescent development. Whilst Nancy Eckstein’s (2004) application of family systems theory was useful in revealing trajectories of and responses to abusive behaviour by adolescents, this study is the first to draw solely upon young people’s perspectives to unpick some of the social,

emotional and cognitive drivers of the parent abuse dynamic using a systemic framework.

## **The impact of parent abuse**

The impact of parent abuse and the harms it causes are less often discussed in the literature, with studies focusing instead on its various predictive 'factors' and correlates. Unsurprisingly, studies that do explore its impacts draw mostly on the accounts of mothers, who are the primary victims of this form of abuse. This is the first study to explore young people's understandings of the consequences of their violence and abuse towards parents and sheds light on a variety of physical, emotional, relational, financial/material, and legal harms caused. Young people's accounts mainly reinforce our understanding of the damaging and pervasive nature of the issue, describing a range of consequences for parents, siblings and young people themselves (Cottrell, 2001; Holt, 2013). However, the findings from this study also extend the knowledge base, highlighting some of the parallel processes taking place with respects to young people's feelings of shame and blame and emphasising the severe emotional and mental health implications for those young people involved.

### *Physical harm*

Overall, injuries to parents or young people as an outcome of parent abuse were discussed relatively infrequently. Where they were discussed, young people reported bruises where parents had restrained them, but mostly described cuts or swelling from smashing or punching household objects. Although studies have previously highlighted the destruction of property as a common characteristic of the dynamic (Condry & Miles, 2014), the physical harm that can result from such behaviour is rarely mentioned. This study is the first in which young people themselves have described such injuries.

Although physical injuries to parents were discussed rarely, there were instances where mothers required hospital treatment, revealing the serious physical consequences that abuse can have. In general, interviewees' accounts reflected the majority of parent abuse research, describing cuts and bruises as being the most common (although still

fairly infrequent) injuries to parents, with more serious violence being relatively rare (e.g. Condry & Miles, 2012; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Holt, 2011). Unsurprisingly, analyses of police reports, clinical records of inpatients and outpatients, and accounts of mothers participating in parent abuse programmes typically indicate greater levels of physical injury from abuse, being reflective of those cases serious enough to come to the attention of services (e.g. Charles, 1986; Haw, 2010; Walsh & Krienert, 2007). In this study, it is possible that some of the more minor injuries went unmentioned by mothers, were forgotten by interviewees, or simply were not discussed within the interviews themselves.

### *Emotional harm*

Although reflecting on the emotional implications of abusive behaviour was challenging, particularly for younger interviewees, a number did describe a range of emotional impacts in terms of short- and longer-term consequences for parents, themselves and the wider family. The immediate impacts included distress, anger, sadness and fear, with longer-term impacts including mental health difficulties, feelings of burnout and a sense of helplessness – previously identified as impacts felt by mothers (e.g. Cottrell, 2001; Haw, 2010; Paterson et al., 2002) but, until now, impacts not identified by young people themselves.

This study is the first to explore young people's understandings of the emotional implications of their abuse towards parents. Reporting their conversations with mothers, interviewees confirmed a number of previous findings relating to the emotional consequences of abuse, including mothers feeling fearful for themselves and their children's well-being, feeling exhausted and hopeless in the face of ongoing abuse, and experiencing tensions around loving but not liking their children (Haw, 2010; Holt, 2011; Stewart et al., 2007). However, the study has also provided new – sometimes mirroring – insights, such as young people's feelings of betrayal when parents contacted the police, feeling guilty, remorseful and blaming themselves for their use of violence, and feeling loss for their damaged relationships. Such insights help to extend the knowledge base with respect to how parent abuse impacts emotionally on young people, as well as highlighting various difficulties some young people face when trying to understanding the impact of their abuse on others. This

underlines the potential role for interventions that foster parent-adolescent communication and empathy.

The emotional landscape of parent abuse was also inextricably linked to the wider contexts shaping the dynamic, such as young people's experiences of interparental domestic abuse, child abuse, and neglect; contexts also involving feelings of distress, anger, resentment, and blame. Such a mixture of emotions – again, emphasising the victim-victimiser duality – created ambiguity in several interviewees' accounts of their violence and abuse towards mothers. Some blamed themselves for the violence, whilst others pointed to parents' role. Understanding such emotional dualities and tensions is important if we are to develop interventions that respond to the realities of young people's experiences and perceptions.

### *Relationship damage*

Interviewees detailed the detrimental impact of parent abuse on family relationships, not only the parent-adolescent relationship, but also those shared with siblings – an impact previously articulated by parents and practitioners (Cottrell, 2001; Holt, 2009), but not by young people themselves. Over time, ongoing conflict seemed to impact upon familial bonds and reduce the amount of emotional energy family members had to nurture their relationships, a finding also highlighted by Micucci (1995) who described the centrality of the abuse dynamic and the subsequent decline in shared activities that help family members to connect. This in turn, appeared to weaken the relational bonds that previously may have prevented young people from resorting to violence and abuse, thereby escalating the dynamic. In cases where violence was serious and ongoing, young people had to leave the family home, either to give mothers respite or to protect other adults and children.

Similar to the emotional landscapes of parent abuse, the relational landscapes were also shaped by those contributing contexts, particularly child abuse and neglect, which, as evidenced through numerous studies, has serious implications in terms of the parent-child bond (Radford & Hester, 2006). In several cases, relationships between young people and their parents had begun to deteriorate due to these precipitating factors before further deteriorating as a result of the parent abuse dynamic.

### *Property damage and financial consequences*

Although damage to property and the home was described by a number of interviewees (8), only one discussed the financial implications of this form of abuse. Although this could have been due to the focus of the interview questions, it may also have been due to a lack of visibility of such impacts, with adolescent children not financially responsible for maintaining the home environment. Once again, this highlights how the specific relational dynamics shape the forms that abuse takes, as well as the impacts felt (Holt, 2013). Further, although only discussed by one interviewee, such financial implications would typically have been more impactful for single parents who had fewer economic resources to draw upon. As all of the single parents experiencing violence and abuse from their children in this study were women, the intersection of gender is also apparent: not only did gender shape *who* was being abused, it also determined the extent to which abuse was *harmful*. This understanding was reinforced by another interviewee who described how her single mother had nearly lost her job, and therefore their home, as a result of her behaviour. Undoubtedly, in this case, being a single mother meant having access to fewer social and financial resources to manage the additional demands of the parent abuse dynamic, which, in turn, meant greater impacts in terms of managing work and the cost of living. These findings add to the broader feminist argument that not only are women the more likely victims of domestic forms of abuse, but that for women, the *impact* of such abuse is also disproportionately greater (Dobash & Dobash, 2004).

Finally, it is important to recognise that in a number of cases, the destruction of property also involved physical and emotional harm to mothers, something not always acknowledged in the wider literature by those studies with a greater focus on acts than harms. Although it was difficult to uncover the emotional impact caused by property abuse, in several cases, the destruction of personal belongings had resulted in mothers expressing anger, as well as fear. This is mentioned in a number of previous studies where mothers interpreted the destruction of property as a threat of physical violence (Cottrell, 2001; Haw, 2010; Murphy-Edwards, 2012). Here we can appreciate the importance of obtaining both victim and victimiser accounts, since the ways in which acts are interpreted and the meaning given to them by victims, is vital in understanding their emotional and psychological impacts.

## *Legal consequences*

For a number of interviewees, the legal implications of the abuse dynamic were already evident, most commonly in the form of cautions and warnings, but also through court-ordered attendance at a youth offending service. In two such cases, younger interviewees described arrests and overnight stays in custody as experiences that had affected them both emotionally and physically. The legal consequences of parent abuse for young people have been highlighted in previous studies (Holt & Retford, 2013; Miles & Condry, 2016; Parentline Plus, 2010), with Holt (2013) suggesting that the criminalisation of social policy in the UK has resulted in parent abuse most often being constructed in terms of delinquency that requires a criminal justice 'solution'. Unfortunately, those who receive criminal records in childhood and early adulthood report a range of barriers to employment and education lasting well into later adulthood (Stacey, 2018). This underlines some of the serious implications involvement in the criminal justice system can have on young people's life chances and points to the need for solutions to parent abuse that emphasise support whilst avoiding the criminalisation of young people (Home Office, 2015; McAra & McVie, 2010).

## **Preventing and addressing parent abuse**

Interviewees' perspectives on how adolescent-to-parent abuse might be prevented or addressed focused around seven key areas for change, including: improving communication; spending quality time with parents; creating space for de-escalation and respite; improving anger management; understanding the consequences of behaviour; punishing and re-establishing authority; and obtaining professional help in the form of confidants, advisors and those who could provide challenge. Interviewees also described a range of barriers to effective support, including interventions considered unhelpful. These themes emphasised change at the level of parents, services and young people themselves, as well as suggesting change that was collaborative between parents and young people. A number of the themes overlapped with those contextual factors highlighted by interviewees as important in parent abuse developing, such as poor communication, the constraining of space and movement, and the regulation of emotions, emphasising both their importance and the ways in which young people conceptualised the problem.

This is the first study to gather young people's views on how adolescent-to-parent abuse might be addressed and, as such, represents a perspective currently lacking in the extant literature. Indeed, understanding the perspectives of young people with experience of parent abuse is a key piece of the puzzle in terms of developing services that are relevant, helpful and acceptable. This is particularly important given that young people's voices are some of the least heard in society and that the process of service design can often prioritise adult understandings of the world. It is important to note, however, that insights into this area of inquiry were the most limited, mainly informed by a few interviewees who had ceased their violence towards parents. Nevertheless, the findings do support a number of approaches currently being used to address parent abuse, as well as identifying some of the challenges involved.

### *Improving communication*

Female interviewees described how improving both the frequency and quality of communication with their mothers meant that past traumas and current disagreements could be worked through, pent-up feelings released, and the mother-child bond re-established. This is significant given that young people who feel more attached to and understood by their parents are less likely to be violent and abusive towards them (Paulson et al., 1990). Further, re-establishing lines of communication also made these young women feel more supported and less alone in the difficulties they were experiencing with their mental health. This has been identified in the therapeutic literature as being an important first step in addressing the cycle of parent abuse, particularly for those with histories of trauma (Evans, 2016; Sheehan, 1997a). However, not all young people wanted more communication with their parents; with those younger interviewees still engaged in abusive behaviour feeling that talking would reignite past arguments rather than resolve them. This highlights the important role communication-focused interventions can play in helping families to develop healthy cultures of open, honest and non-combative communication.

Better communication meant greater openness, honesty and connection as well as parents turning the volume down on conflict. This has previously been identified in the therapeutic literature as important in reducing escalation (Gallagher, 2004b), with Evans (2016) emphasising that although parents may be the victims of abuse, they too must take responsibility for their own role in escalation. Mothers describing their

positive experiences of a parent abuse programme have confirmed this, highlighting how the use of calm but active listening helped to reduce some of the interactions which often precipitated their children's violence (Paterson et al., 2002). However, it is important to recognise that, in many cases, interviewees' mothers were parenting alone and were suffering the effects of ongoing violence, abuse and daily conflicts with their adolescent children, things that would have made calm communication particularly difficult.

Improving the communication habits between parents and their children is core to a number of current approaches to addressing adolescent-to-parent abuse, such as non-violent resistance (NVR), restorative practice, and family therapy – the latter an approach identified by one interviewee as instrumental in addressing the cycle of abuse. In NVR, a family-wide commitment to non-violent and non-humiliating responses during conflict means putting the emphasis on keeping calm and coming back to disagreements 'cold' (Omer, 2016), something that aims to avoid 'reciprocal escalation'. Within restorative practice, role play and skills practice help parents and their children to master joint problem-solving during times of disagreement (Routt & Anderson, 2016). Lastly, in family therapy, a safe space is created for all family members to have their story heard, express the harms they have experienced as a result of the abuse, and collaboratively define the 'problem' to be addressed (Micucci, 1995; Pereira, 2016; Sheehan, 1997a). Specifically, family therapy aims to encourage the open and calm discussion of problems and difficulties (Pereira, 2016), a process supported by preventing the escalation of defensive responses (Micucci, 1995). Further, Sheehan (1997a) argues that the context and techniques of family therapy can encourage and enable families to express complex emotions such as grief, disappointment and distress – emotions commonly 'masked' by anger in situations of adolescent-to-parent abuse. By expressing such emotions, the communication between parents and their children can be more productive, fostering greater acceptance and understanding (Sheehan, 1997a). This is particularly relevant to the young people in this study who highlighted a lack of emotion talk and high levels of anger during interactions with parents. However, as several of the fathers and stepfathers of interviewees had been violent and abusive towards them and their mothers, family therapy within this context would likely be limited to mothers and their children.

### *Creating space*

Space had the potential to prevent escalation to violence if created at times of conflict, as well as providing the separation needed to heal damaged relationships with parents. Although space was proactively created by some interviewees, others explained how mothers giving them space to calm down and cool off when arguments became heated had reduced their use of violence and abuse towards them, an approach recommended to them by youth offending and CAMHS practitioners and one highlighted in the therapeutic and practice literature (Omer, 2016; Paterson et al., 2002; Routt & Anderson, 2016). Demonstrating the interconnectivity of these processes, the creation of space reduced closed and heated communication and instead, allowed for more open, respectful and constructive discussion. This is the first time that young people have articulated the importance of such an approach in preventing their use of violence and abuse at home.

Creating space also meant having respite, informally via wider family and friends or formally through children's social care. Such 'solutions' were seen as providing parents and young people with greater physical safety, with relational space to break the destructive cycle of abuse and conflict, and with emotional space to work things through on their own. Although there is no literature on whether such approaches do indeed improve the parent-child relationship in the longer term, mothers' accounts in earlier studies highlight the guilt, stigma and distress which often accompanies the removal of children from the home (Cottrell, 2001; Holt, 2011), as well as tension around their identity as a parent (Jackson, 2003). Respite, and as a last resort, removal of children from the family home have been identified as ways of ensuring the safety of parents and other family members such as siblings, where physical abuse is particularly prevalent (Cottrell, 2001). Lastly, although separation can be extremely distressing for both parents and children, it can provide families with the space they need to repair 'dislocated relationships' (Micucci, 1995, p. 158) and begin to address some of the underlying issues that may be contributing to the dynamic (Cottrell, 2001).

### *Managing anger*

Young people's regulation of emotions and, in particular, their ability to manage anger, was identified as an important contributing factor in their use of violence and abuse

towards parents. It therefore makes sense that interviewees' understanding of how to prevent such damaging behaviour would include young people learning how to better manage emotions, including thinking before acting and using various techniques to self-calm. These included cathartic techniques, such as going to the gym, using punchbags, snapping loom bands and talking with friends; distracting actions, such as listening to music and filling in colouring books; and techniques that created space, such as going for walks. Young people also highlighted the benefits of smoking cannabis, which helped to calm them down and enabled them to return to interactions less agitated. This observation contradicts much of the evidence on parent abuse, which often identifies the use of substances as contributing to the dynamic (for a review, see Simmons et al., 2018). However, as one of the interviewees described how her use of harder drugs such as cocaine and mephedrone had contributed to the worsening of her mood and behaviour, it may be that the impact substance use has on parent abuse depends very much on the nature of the substance and its psychotropic effects, as well as the motivations for taking them, and the perception of their use by parents – something future studies might consider when investigating the relationship.

In general, interviewees' suggestions and practices do lend support to the current practice literature, where anger management training forms part of many interventions designed to address the issue. Such training typically involves identifying and reframing triggering thoughts and emotions, physiological self-calming through distraction, distancing and relaxation techniques and, in some cases, using cognitive behavioural approaches to teach young people about their thoughts, beliefs and behaviours (Downey, 1997; Pereira, 2016; Routt & Anderson, 2016). However, although some of the young people in this study found such approaches useful in managing their emotions during conflict with parents, others did not. Again, this could be reflective of the developmental stage of interviewees, as nearly all those describing self-calming techniques and their management of anger were older. Lastly, a number of practitioners have stressed the importance of not focusing solely on anger management in cases of parent abuse, with Gallagher (2004b) highlighting the importance of young people taking responsibility for their violence, and Downey (1997) stating that, 'Whilst working with anger is obviously important, it must be done in the context of power, gender and analysis of relationships' (p. 78). The findings from this study would definitely support such an approach.

### *Understanding the consequences of abusive behaviour*

Several interviewees felt that understanding the consequences of their harmful behaviour had helped them to cease their use of violence and abuse at home. Understanding consequences meant being aware of the physical, material, financial and emotional impacts of abuse, as well as some of the legal consequences should it continue. In a number of cases, understanding or experiencing the implications of their abuse – either legally or financially – had been some of the strongest motivators of change. This is useful when conceptualising what approaches may or may not work in motivating young people to change within the context of parent abuse intervention, as focusing solely on the harms caused to victims may prove inadequate. This sits in contrast to the main focus of restorative practice, where the aim is to emphasise victims' experiences in order to 'evoke moral emotions, such as guilt, empathy, sympathy, and compassion, by helping young people to understand the harm they have caused to another person' (Routt & Anderson, 2016, p. 24). However, restorative approaches to addressing parent abuse also involve some of those things highlighted by young people as being useful, such as fixing or replacing items they may have destroyed – things that have a direct impact on young people themselves.

Detailing their restorative justice approach, Routt and Anderson (2016) argue that experiencing the legal consequences of abuse can be a powerful motivator for young people, something also reflected in parent accounts, where police warnings were described as useful deterrents of violent behaviour (Cottrell, 2001). However, the limits of this approach were also identified by other parents in the same study who felt that addressing the root causes of the abuse was more crucial in the longer term, leading to more meaningful change. Within this study, family therapy was one such approach that succeeded in doing this, described as enabling one mother to voice the harms that the abuse had caused whilst also enabling the interviewee's own trauma around sexual abuse to be addressed.

### *Punishment and (re)establishing authority*

Although only identified by a handful of YOS interviewees, parental punishments, in the form of verbal and physical chastisement and forcing young people to leave the home, were identified as potential ways of addressing parent abuse. However, such

approaches have been argued as merely escalating and entrenching patterns of violence (Omer, 2016; Routt & Anderson, 2016) and, in this study, highlights a concerning acceptance and normalisation of abusive methods of punishment. In a review of children's perspectives on parents' use of physical punishment (Carter-Davies & Bristow, 2018), the authors found overwhelmingly that children and young people reported physical punishment by parents to be both emotionally and physically damaging, as well as having a negative impact on their relationship with parents. Nevertheless, those young people who had experience of physical punishment were much more likely to identify it as an acceptable form of discipline than those who had not.

Suggestions of parental punishment were often accompanied by a belief that young people should be taught to respect their parents and that parents needed to demonstrate their hierarchical position. This is also referred to in the practice literature on parent abuse, although be it via less abusive means. Approaches ranging from the restorative (Routt & Anderson, 2016) to the therapeutic (Gallagher, 2004b) use a variety of techniques such as parent training and counselling to empower parents to re-establish their 'leadership' within the home, be firm and consistent, and thus, alter the balance of power. Indeed, parents taking ownership over re-establishing the hierarchy and implementing rules is a core aspect of NVR (Pereira, 2016). However, parents' accounts have highlighted that support which focuses on parenting inadequacies can result in them feeling powerless and even more vulnerable (Cottrell, 2001). This is where therapeutic approaches to parent abuse have the potential to be more constructive, as therapists can support parents with their parental authority, helping them to boost their confidence in their own parental competence (Micucci, 1995).

### *Professional help*

Several interviewees had experienced professional input for a range of difficulties relating to their mental and physical health, behaviour, offending, and education, via various agencies, including children's social care, youth offending and police, CAMHS, education, and health. Only one interviewee, however, described professional intervention aimed specifically at addressing the use of violence and abuse towards parents, reflective of the current evidence on the lack of specialist support (Miles & Condry, 2016). In this case, the YOS had advised the young person of the legal

consequences of her continued abuse and gave her techniques to better manage her anger. This, combined with advice given to her mother on allowing her space during conflict, had helped to reduce her use of violence at home. Although an example of a fairly light touch approach to addressing the issue, this example does reflect the multi-component approach taken by some specialist parent abuse interventions which recognise the need for change at both parent and child levels.

The most successful professional input described by an interviewee came in the form of combined individual and family therapy – intensive support provided after she had attempted suicide. This helped her to work through her personal trauma regarding childhood sexual abuse before working with her mother to rebuild their damaged relationship. Although this professional intervention was not aimed specifically at addressing the young person's use of violence and abuse towards her mother, this was the affect it had, improving their communication, helping them to disclose their feelings about the abuse they had experienced, and guiding them to reconnect by spending quality time together. Addressing the parent abuse dynamic via both individual and combined work is a common approach which allows for supportive one-to-one and collaborative relational work (Gallagher, 2004b). Individual work often takes place first, giving practitioners the opportunity to understand how each individual is being affected by the violence (Sheehan, 1997a) and to ensure that parents and their children are ready to take part in joint therapy. This is particularly important in cases of adolescent-to-parent abuse, where the adolescent child may end up further blaming and intimidating the parent during joint sessions (Gallagher, 2004b). As articulated by the interviewee who had experienced family therapy, the therapist's skills in mediating the joint sessions had been central to both her and her mother feeling that their voices were heard, whilst avoiding the escalation that was typical of their interaction.

Central to the support this young person had been given was the initial individual therapeutic input, which she felt was successful due to its sustained and intensive nature but, more importantly, because it had involved a trusting relationship where she was encouraged to work through her feelings around her trauma. Trauma-informed care is a widely recognised approach for supporting those who have experienced childhood abuse, as well as those who have been the direct or indirect victims of domestic violence and abuse (Fredrickson, 2019). Further, due to its recognition that traumatic experiences can be implicated in the development of behavioural (Kulkarni,

2019) as well as relational (Fredrickson, 2019) issues, it has the potential to offer support that is sensitive to the role that trauma may have in shaping adolescent-to-parent abuse. This is particularly relevant since a high proportion of those using violence and abuse towards parents in this study had been the direct or indirect victims of violence and abuse in or outside the home.

More broadly, young people discussed the importance of having someone to confide in: someone there to focus on them, hear their side of things and give them advice when relationships with parents became difficult. These relationships felt more balanced in terms of power, respected them as individuals, and were not overly formal, taking place where the young person felt comfortable. In some cases, interviewees stated that having someone neutral and outside of the family would be most helpful in this role. However, for some, the role of confidant was provided by extended family members and in several cases, by grandmothers who, for some of the young men in this study, provided an important source of emotional support in the context of difficult son-mother relationships. Although not acting as professional confidants, this does indicate the need that was being met by such relationships: the need for support from someone who was close, respected and trusted but not in the role of primary caregiver. The potential for wider family networks to provide mentor-style support in cases of parent abuse has previously been articulated by mothers (Edenborough et al., 2008).

Although there is little literature on the role of confidants in supporting young people who are being violent and abusive to parents, Evans (2016) emphasises the importance of carrying out individual work with children so that they can voice their perceptions and experiences, particularly as a high proportion of them will have experienced other forms of family violence in the home and thus be victims themselves. However, although Gallagher (2004b) also recognises the important role of confidants, he warns that young people should not solely be seen as victims and that the victim/victimiser duality must be held by the practitioner so that there is also space for the voice of the parent victim, as well as space for challenge, an essential component in addressing the dynamic.

Although only those interviewees who had not used violence at home suggested challenge and reflection as potential approaches, it forms an essential part of nearly all interventions designed to address the issue. Gallagher (2004b) states that challenge

should be done almost immediately when addressing abuse, indicating to the young person that violence, no matter what their own challenges may be, is never acceptable. Challenging young people engaged in violence and abuse towards parents often involves testing claims that young people are 'unable' to control themselves (Gallagher, 2004b) and that their parents are in some way to blame for the violence (Sheehan, 1997a) – narratives not uncommon among participants in this study. Sheehan (1997a) also emphasises that challenge processes can include reflection about alternative courses of action during conflict with parents, which can encourage young people's agency in stopping the violence. Reflection is also a key part of restorative approaches to addressing parent abuse, where tools such as the 'Abuse and Respect Wheels' (adaptations of the Duluth Power and Control Wheel) help young people to face their behaviours, reflect on their impact, and ultimately take responsibility for them (Routt & Anderson, 2016). In NVR, external 'supporters' in the form of extended family or friends provide this function of challenge and reflection, helping young people to face the violence they are using by reflecting back the behaviours they are seeing and being told about by parents (Omer, 2016). This underlines the important role wider social support can play in addressing abuse.

### *Barriers*

A handful of interviewees described barriers to or issues with professional intervention provided to support them with their behaviour, emotional well-being and family relationships. In one case, the repeated recommendation of anger management techniques – perceived by the young person as ineffective – resulted in frustration and a general perception that services (specifically in this case, via CAMHS) were unhelpful. As argued by Downey (1997), the framing – and therefore addressing – of parent abuse at the individual level of 'challenging behaviour', neglects family violence understandings of the issue that take into account the wider contexts of family interaction that may be shaping those more visible individual behaviours. However, as articulated by Holt and Retford (2013) and Nixon (2012) when drawing on the accounts of UK practitioners, the parameters of the policy frameworks that structure agencies' service responses determine both the ways in which social problems such as parent abuse are constructed as well as the ways in which practitioners can respond to them. This, combined with a noted lack of specialist resources (Holt & Retford, 2013), can result in services and practitioners ill equipped to effectively respond to the complexities of the issue.

In a second case, an interviewee receiving individual therapeutic work via CAMHS described feeling unable to engage at the level required because of her constant state of anxiety, which had been precipitated by her experiences of violent trauma in the community. This again underlines the importance of services that are sensitive to the trauma experiences of young people, as well as the ways in which trauma can hamper clients' abilities to engage with the support being offered (SAMHSA, 2014).

Unfortunately for those two interviewees, their frustrations with the support they had received resulted in their disengagement from and refusal of future services. This also reflected a broader belief that such intervention – particularly when involving social workers – was unnecessary and intrusive, potentially indicating that children's social care may not be the most appropriate context for addressing this form of family violence. This also mirrors the accounts of young people with complex and enduring needs in a study by Munford and Sanders (2017) who, after years of receiving multiple forms of intervention across a range of public systems, demonstrated a 'resistance' to professional intervention, which they expressed as a coping mechanism for dealing with the various challenges in their lives. This is particularly relevant in this study for those attending the YOS, who typically had all received input from CAMHS, youth offending, and children's social care and had been cycling in and out of these systems for a number of years. This highlights the importance of not only responding to the specific relational dynamics of individual cases but also to their histories and experiences of service involvement – experiences that can be key in shaping the outcomes of intervention activities.

However, resistance to intervention is recognised as being particularly common in cases of parent abuse and is an important barrier to overcome if intervention is to succeed (Gallagher, 2004b; Sheehan, 1997a). This is particularly relevant for those interventions focusing on work with young people, and not parents (Evans, 2016). As Gallagher (2004b) states, creating motivation is a practitioner's job and techniques such as motivational interviewing can help young people to move from external motivation to internal motivation – particularly relevant for young people who are court-referred to parent abuse programmes (Routt & Anderson, 2016).

Other barriers to interviewees' engagement included parents' inclusion in the intervention process; specifically, this meant practitioners speaking to parents about

the young person whilst they were in the room. In another case, it was the *lack* of parent engagement that proved difficult, with the father of one interviewee refusing to engage in a process of family therapy. A lack of parent (Pereira, 2016), and in some cases, whole family (Evans, 2016) engagement has been highlighted in the practice literature as having the potential to act as a barrier to meaningful change, particularly in cases where parent conflict is a salient contextual factor (Pereira, 2016). In a systematic review of domestic violence interventions for children and young people (Howarth et al., 2019), personal 'readiness' was identified as a vital precursor to young people's engagement and was determined by a range of factors at the individual, relational and organisational levels. These included finding a language with which to talk about abuse and feelings, trusting professionals providing support, and having mothers who were themselves ready to engage; highlighting the various intersecting factors that can influence a young person's engagement.

Lastly, a number of interviewees did recognise the complexity of addressing adolescent-to-parent abuse, with an acknowledgement that a diversity of services was needed that could cater for a variety of needs.

## CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSION

### Introduction

This study sought to voice young people's experiences and perceptions of adolescent-to-parent abuse. In so doing, it aimed to fill a gap in understanding about how young people, specifically within the UK context, experience this form of family abuse; what it looks like, the impacts it has, and its causes and contexts. As with any form of applied social research, the study also aimed to shed light on how it might be prevented or addressed and the changes to policy and practice needed to achieve this. Importantly, the research hoped to make young people's voices more prominent in the literature, where they currently remain relatively unheard. To fill these gaps in knowledge, the following primary and secondary research questions were posed to guide the study.

What is the nature of adolescent-to-parent abuse?

- How common is it?
- What forms and patterns of behaviour does abuse take?
- What are the characteristics of the parents and young people involved?

How do young people understand, explain, and experience adolescent-to-parent abuse?

- What are the causes, contexts and motivations involved?
- What are the impacts on young people and their families?
- How might it be prevented or addressed?

To answer these questions, the study employed a mixed methods design comprising a quantitative self-report behaviour survey and in-depth interviews. The survey was completed by 221 young people aged 14 to 18 years and the interviews with a purposive subsample of 21 young people aged 14 to 18 years. Participants came from one further education college in south-east England (210) and a youth offending service in the north-west of England (11).

This final chapter will outline the study's original contributions to knowledge and the implications of the findings for policy and practice in the UK. The chapter will end with some reflection on the research process, the study's limitations, and ideas for where future research efforts might be directed.

## **Summarising the original contributions to knowledge**

### *Prioritising young people's voices*

This study represents the most detailed examination to date of young people's experiences and perceptions of violence and abuse towards parents. This is important as the way in which young people experience and construct adolescent-to-parent abuse may be different to parents and practitioners whose voices are currently prioritised in the literature. Furthermore, as the study involved young people from a youth justice *and* a further education context, it was able to capture the experiences of young people from a variety of backgrounds and with a range service and system experiences – important in addressing the concern that a focus on criminal justice samples alone overrepresents those at 'the "thin end" of the wedge' (Holt, 2012b, p. 290).

### *Harmful but not highly prevalent*

Through their interview accounts young people reinforced our understanding of adolescent-to-parent abuse as a destructive and harmful form of gendered family violence; harmful towards mothers, siblings and young people themselves. In particular, the evidence base was developed through their accounts of the relational and emotional impacts of abuse on their relationships with mothers and their own mental well-being, as well as highlighting the harmful contexts that can act as backdrops to such violence – such as child abuse, domestic abuse, neglect and peer violence. This study represents the first examination of young people's reflections on the harms caused by their abusive behaviour towards parents.

However, findings from the survey suggest that adolescent-to-parent abuse is still fairly infrequent – at least in a non-service population – with the study representing the first focused analysis of patterned forms of aggression using a behavioural self-report survey in the UK and the first to apply a survey threshold for what ‘counts’ as parent abuse for this age group. The results highlighted the potential for inflated rates of parent abuse when using such research tools and the range of psychologically ‘aggressive’ behaviours that often typify the parent-adolescent relationship. With this in mind, research must be careful about labelling all forms of psychological and physical aggression as examples of parent ‘abuse’. This was particularly salient given that in a number of cases, parent aggression *precipitated* young people’s aggression, emphasising the importance of context and intention in determining what counts as abuse. Moving forward, context, intention and harm needs to be more appropriately assessed using methods that draw on both parents’ and adolescents’ accounts.

### *An exploration of contexts and motivations*

Young people’s reflections on their violence and abuse revealed various ‘intentions’ or ‘functions’ that previously have only been described by parents and practitioners. These included ‘letting off steam’; self-defence and retaliation in response to violence and abuse from parents; a means of punishing mothers for past harms; a way of communicating distress and ‘crying out for help’; and lastly, a way of gaining power and control over privileges, space and movement. In this sense, interviewees’ accounts further the debate on whether adolescent-to-parent abuse represents reactive or instrumental forms of aggression – the accounts of young people in this study, suggest it can involve both. The implications of these findings are that interventions aimed at addressing parent abuse need to engage with such intentions: with reactive aggression pointing to the need for support around managing emotions; displaced aggression, the need to work through past trauma and rebuild the mother-child bond; and expressive aggression, the need to improve the quality of parent-adolescent communication.

The intentions and functions behind abusive behaviour pointed to a wide array of contexts within which the dynamic was taking place. Indeed, exploring the causes and contexts of parent abuse elicited the richest data from interviewees, with the most significant contextual finding being the victimisation experiences that often

underpinned the dynamic. This study adds to the literature by suggesting that trauma symptoms, resentment and blame, and adaptive responses to family violence can be used to explain the relationship between young people's victimisation experiences and their use of violence and abuse towards parents. Stress and coping theories were also useful in conceptualising parent abuse as a harmful coping response to past and present stress, something yet to be fully explored in the literature. However, not all cases of parent abuse involved young people with histories of victimisation; for those without such experiences, their histories of developmental difficulties and mental health problems seemed to play a prominent role. This study has proposed emotion dysregulation as one potential mechanism the two groups have in common. Lastly, a previously unexplored area prominent in young people's accounts concerned spatiality; with constraints on space and movement highlighted as a trigger of violent behaviour and something young people felt entitled to control.

#### *An exploration of complex processes*

This study also contributes to the knowledge base through developing a comprehensive ecological model of parent abuse, providing the most detailed examination to date of the dynamic *interconnectivities* of contextual factors influencing the dynamic. This revealed some of the processes potentially connecting factors at the ontogenic, microsystemic, exosystemic and macrosystemic levels of the social ecology – illustrated through causal loop diagrams (CLDs). This is important as it moves us away from simplified mono-theoretical accounts of the phenomenon – such as the role of social learning or permissive parenting styles – to a recognition that adolescent-to-parent abuse is a complex social problem involving a multitude of intersecting relational, emotional, psychological, environmental and cultural processes. It also moves us away from the identification of individual 'factors' to the development of explanations.

#### *A gendered form of family violence*

Analyses of young people's interview accounts also reinforced our understanding of parent abuse as a gendered form of family violence, with the gendered nature of both parenting and wider family violence meaning that mothers were the primary victims of abuse – primary because of their greater physical and emotional presence in their

children's lives, as well as representing 'safer' targets. This study is the first in which young people have discussed *why* mothers may be the primary targets of this form of family violence and presents the first visual hypothesis of how some of these processes may be operating.

Further, this analysis of gender challenges the evidence base by revealing that both daughters and sons can be abusive in the wake of domestic violence, indicating that same-sex theories of behavioural modelling are too limited to explain the myriad ways in which gender may intersect to shape the parent abuse dynamic.

### *An analysis of 'talk'*

Gender also appeared to shape the ways in which young people *talked* about their violence and abuse towards parents, with male interviewees finding it harder to reflect upon and articulate their use of violence and abuse – particularly towards mothers. They also struggled to articulate the various impacts their violence and abuse had on themselves and family members, as well as the different emotions involved. This contrasted with female interviewees who were able to reflect and explore the emotional and relational terrain of parent abuse in some detail. This feeds into the wider discussion around gender and the differential reporting of interpersonal violence. However, with more expansive reflection and discussion also came a greater use of rhetorical devices such as minimisation, justification and claims of reduced competence, to reframe accountability away from themselves and back towards mothers. Although mother blaming is already well reported in the literature, this study represents the first discursive analysis of young people's accounts of their violence and abuse towards parents, something that revealed some striking similarities to those used by male perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse towards intimate partners.

### *Ideas for prevention and intervention*

This study also enhances the literature by providing the first insights from young people as to how this form of family abuse might be prevented or addressed – an area of investigation less common in the literature but vital if effective service responses are to be developed with which young people will want to engage. In addition, young

people's articulations of changes at the level of parents, services, and young people themselves reinforces the argument for taking an ecological approach to understanding and addressing the issue.

Overall, interviewees' accounts supported previous studies emphasising the need for multi-component, communication- and relationship-centred approaches to addressing parent abuse that take into account the needs and experiences of both parents and their adolescent children. However, harnessing young people's perspectives allowed for a fuller understanding of what 'improved communication' really meant to them: being able to better manage conflict; work through past trauma and difficulties; as well as providing the tools to improve parent-child bonds and feel 'heard'. This study represents the most detailed examination of parent-child communication within the context of adolescent-to-parent abuse to date.

One concerning finding from the youth justice sample was interviewees' beliefs that parents increasing their use of verbal and physical chastisement was potentially a way of addressing the dynamic. This implies a normalisation and acceptance of violence as a means of gaining power and control within the parent-child relationship. This is clearly of concern given our understanding of the damage that abusive parenting practices such as these have on children's development, their relationships, and their physical and emotional well-being. Potentially, parent abuse interventions taking place within the context of historical violence and abuse may need to attend to such normalised 'beliefs' as part of making young people 'ready' to engage. Further, services addressing anger management and behavioural difficulties in children and adolescents need to be aware of such potential contexts, ensuring the right questions are asked during the assessment process to identify those cases where experiences of violence, abuse and trauma may be underpinning behavioural issues.

Interviewees also strongly articulated the desire for individual support that meant they felt listened to and helped by someone trusted, neutral and not in the role of primary caregiver. This was particularly important given that many of those interviewed had been victims of violence and abuse in and outside of the home and, in some cases, support at the individual level had meant they could engage in meaningful change with parents further down the line. However, again, we are reminded of the importance of balancing a young person's need for support with the need to challenge their use of

violence and abuse at home – holding the dual victim/victimiser position that both young people and parents can occupy.

Not all interviewees felt positive about the potential for change in their relationships with parents; often the case for those younger interviewees who were still using violent and abusive behaviours at home. This reiterates the importance of taking a developmental and individualised approach to addressing adolescent-to-parent abuse, one that recognises both the dynamic nature of the phenomenon as well as the social, emotional and cognitive capacities of those young people involved.

Ending on a positive note, the accounts of young people in this study indicate the potential for positive change for families experiencing adolescent-to-parent abuse, with interviewees describing 'growing out of' reactive behaviours and learning to manage conflict more effectively. This highlights the importance of approaches to parent abuse that do not criminalise or label young people as 'perpetrators' of abuse; as behaviours appear less entrenched than those of domestic abuse between partners. The accounts also suggest that, on the whole, young people are more likely to engage in a range of positive forms of conflict management and negotiation than harmful patterns of aggression and that, with the right support, even those caught up in harmful cycles of abuse can move past them and heal their relationships with their parents.

## **Implications for policy and practice**

As outlined in Chapter Two, there is a relative policy 'silence' on the subject of adolescent-to-parent abuse in the UK (Condry & Miles, 2012; Holt & Retford, 2013; Hunter et al., 2010), with limited guidance for practitioners or local authority leaders who are supporting or commissioning services for families. This has resulted in 'ad hoc' responses to the issue from a variety of agencies and practitioners (Holt & Retford, 2013), confirmed by the accounts of young people in this study who had received a range of non-specialist service responses from a variety of agencies. Although in recent years parent abuse has been identified within the national VAWG strategy, greater coverage is needed to convey its gendered nature, its overlap with other forms of gender-based violence and harm, as well as its human and economic costs.

## **A centrally organised, multi-agency response**

Interventions to address adolescent-to-parent abuse are currently delivered within the context of youth offending services, victim support, domestic abuse services, early help and edge of care services, CAMHS, and by specialist third sector organisations. This is understandable given that young people's violence and abuse at home is often only one of many challenges young people and their families are facing. This was confirmed through the accounts of interviewees in this study who highlighted a range of issues relating to victimisation by family and peers, difficulties with mental health and substance misuse, educational challenges, and wider youth offending. For this reason, the study's findings reinforce the recommendation made in the national VAWG strategy for 'effective multi-agency responses' to the issue (HM Government, 2016, p. 37). However, although adolescent-to-parent abuse may not be the remit of any one particular service, the Department for Education would be well-placed to act as the lead government department for the issue, providing much needed guidance to local authority children's services and schools – the latter of which could potentially undertake some of the prevention and early intervention work. This would provide greater consistency in provision, oversight and accountability, as well as increasing the issue's visibility within the policy arena. This is particularly suitable given this study's findings that young people's victimisation experiences and poor well-being often underpin the dynamic.

## **A key worker/lead professional model**

Given the range of agencies that may be involved, the multiple stressors in the lives of families, and the difficulties inherent in navigating what are notoriously complex public systems (DSDL, 2018), a key worker or lead professional model would mean that, at the local level, services can be well-coordinated and a trusting, effective working partnership with families established. Key worker models have been identified as providing families with 'continuity and therapeutic, as well as practical, support' (Dixon et al., 2015, p. 44), ensuring that families can access the services they need without 'falling through the cracks' (Moreton, Robinson, Howe, Corley, & Roberts, 2018). This is also particularly relevant given that some interviewees reported transformational relationships with trusted key workers.

## **When and how to intervene?**

### *A needs-led approach*

Young people using violence and abuse at home in this study did so for a number of different reasons, many of which reflected a greater need for support. However, support was often not forthcoming or only arrived 'late on', indicating the need for preventative or early help services that can intervene early to 'prevent the rapid peak of violence' (Calvete et al., 2019, p. 107) and reduce the harm caused to young people and their families experiencing this form of abuse.

The 'Common Assessment Framework' (CAF) – or 'Early Help Assessment' (EHA) – is a standardised, ecological approach to assessing children's needs that focuses on the strengths and risks at the level of the child, family and wider environment. It is widely used by practitioners and services coming into contact with children and their families across a variety of agencies and aims to identify vulnerabilities as early as possible, ensure a coordinated service response and puts the child and family at the centre of prevention and intervention efforts. The CAF is underpinned by a 'continuum of needs' – a tiered framework that categorises children's needs into four levels:

- Level 1 – needs that can be met by universal services
- Level 2 – additional support needs that require an early support response
- Level 3 – complex support needs that require a targeted early support response
- Level 4 – intensive needs that require a statutory response

This continuum is useful in conceptualising the various service responses that may be suitable for addressing adolescent-to-parent abuse in families, as needs will not only be different across families – requiring various levels of intervention – but will also change over time, meaning support can be 'stepped up' or 'stepped down' accordingly.

### *Universal services and early support*

Thinking about how we might prevent or address parent abuse 'early on' is an approach in keeping with current thinking on child welfare in the UK (Department of Health, 2017; HM Government, 2018; Scottish Government, 2014; Welsh Government, 2014), which, since the mid-1990s has moved away from reactive child protection towards earlier intervention (Parton, 2014). This is important for addressing adolescent-to-parent abuse given that services such as CAMHS are often reserved only for those with acute need and even then, are not necessarily well-equipped to deal with the specific dynamics of the issue. Further, prevention has been identified as a 'core element of a co-ordinated and strategic response to end violence against women' (Hester & Lilley, 2014, p. 5), pertinent given this study's findings on the gendered nature of parent abuse.

Given the recent change in UK government policy which makes relationship education compulsory within schools (DfE, 2019c), there is potential for universal, school-based provision that could support young people to have healthier relationships with parents – reflecting the wider definition of domestic abuse which encompasses all family members. Prevention work could include tackling harmful gender norms, bolstering conflict resolution and communication skills, and supporting young people – particularly those with emotion regulation difficulties – to more effectively recognise and manage their emotions.

Including the parent-child relationship within such prevention work could also act as an opportunity for teachers – if properly trained to identify the associated risks – to identify those young people and parents for whom relationships are deteriorating and where targeted support could help. The findings from this study point to indicators such as injuries from self-harm or destroying property at home, missed days of school, substance misuse and trouble with peer groups, difficulties with emotion regulation, and frequent conflicts with parents. Where risks are identified, school counsellors or embedded specialist practitioners could provide support to young people (Stanley et al., 2015) and parenting courses could be offered to parents. Making such courses more widely available to parents at a universal level could also help to reduce the stigma around attendance. Lastly, for those young people identified as 'at risk' of parent abuse, a 'team around the school' (TAS) approach could enable a multi-agency

response to the issue based on a thorough, ecologically-informed assessment of needs.

Given that a number of interviewees in this study had experienced interparental domestic violence and abuse, there is also potential for prevention work to be more widely embedded within domestic abuse services. Reflecting the findings of this study, the work could focus on addressing trauma, resentment and blame, normative constructions of gender, and family stressors. Work could also bolster coping resources, including the ability to manage emotions, supports for mothers parenting alone, and positive communication between mothers and their children – in line with interventions such as ‘Talking to my mum’ (Humphreys et al., 2006) and the NSPCC’s ‘Domestic Abuse, Recovering Together’ (DART) programme – which allow mothers and their children to rebuild their relationship after domestic abuse. This could hopefully disrupt the pathways leading from domestic abuse to later adolescent-to-mother abuse.

### *Specialist support*

For a number of young people in this study, their violence and abuse at home extended beyond the limits of early support – particularly in those cases involving acute mental health difficulties, or past or current experiences of victimisation from parents, parents’ partners, or those outside of the home. It is likely that in these circumstances, specialist, multi-agency, trauma-informed, whole-family support – potentially leveraged via a local authority ‘Team Around the Family’ (TAF) approach (NYSCP, 2019) – would be the most appropriate method of supporting parents and children experiencing this issue. Indeed, adoptive parents supported via a multiagency TAF approach have reported high levels of satisfaction, particularly where the service reflected a nuanced understanding of the adoptive relationship (Selwyn & Meakings, 2016). However, services provided via a TAF structure would need to be adapted adequately to ensure that the nuances of parent abuse were fully understood – for example, how age, gender and power intersect, the dual victim/victimiser role inhabited by mothers and children, and the role that abusive fathers or stepfathers may be playing in shaping the dynamic. Practitioner training in delivering specialist parent abuse provision or having a specialist APVA practitioner embedded within a TAF could support this process. Further, given the reports of mother blaming within social work contexts (e.g. Selwyn &

Meakings, 2016), this culture would need to be addressed first before becoming a suitable context for intervention.

Approaches should also be developmentally sensitive, recognising this study's findings on young people's changing needs around autonomy, privacy and control over spatiality. For younger adolescents or children, support needs to be tailored to their individual capacities, meaning the simplification of materials and tools, and the use of visual aids and creative methods. Lastly, intervention should also be sensitive to the gender of young people, with goal-oriented, activity-based or male mentoring programmes potentially representing a more suitable approach for adolescent boys than discussion-based therapeutic processes (e.g. Pabion, 2014). Male mentoring is also particularly relevant here given the absence of positive male role models in male interviewees' lives.

Given the findings on the importance of physical and emotional space, intervention at this level could also include the use of formal or informal respite, as a means of preventing relationship breakdown and the need for longer-term care arrangements. For more serious cases – or those coming through a youth justice route – a specialist APVA MARAC process could ensure more intensive multi-agency input and frequent oversight to ensure the safety of those in the family – including young people themselves who may be at risk of self-harm or suicide. The YOS taking part in this study had similarly formed a 'Young Person's Domestic Abuse Meeting' or 'YP-DAM' – a multi-agency forum to discuss cases of adolescent-to-parent abuse and ensure the most appropriate forms of support were being leveraged. For those cases of parent abuse coming via a youth justice route, a YP-DAM could act as a means of diverting young people away from criminalisation and towards more appropriate service contexts; for example, where parent abuse is taking place against a backdrop of domestic or child abuse. For those cases involving wider violence or offending, it could ensure that a needs-led approach was taken, brokering trauma, substance misuse and mental health support where needed – factors that may be contributing to the parent abuse dynamic and potentially undermining efforts to promote positive change.

### *Developing intervention readiness*

Finally, young people's narratives of blame, their normalisation of violence and abuse, and their resistance to intervention indicates the importance of establishing an initial preparatory period where young people's beliefs can be challenged and thinking reframed to include others' perspectives. Unless some of these underlying beliefs can be altered, 'it may be difficult for them to stop their violence since owning the violence may be the first step in treating and stopping it' (Stamp & Sabourin, 1995, p. 286). However, such a preparatory period would also need to explore young people's motivations to engage, as young people having internal rather than solely external motivations for change has been linked to greater intervention success (Howarth et al., 2019). For example, the Good Lives Model (originally intended for use with sexual offenders) emphasises the importance of a strengths-based, goal-oriented approach to behaviour change, where 'practice foci are on the core ideas of agency, psychological well-being, and the opportunity to live a different type of life' (Chu, Ward, & Willis, 2014, p. 6).

### *Identification and assessment*

Effective intervention for parent abuse should take an ecological approach, addressing difficulties not only at the level of the child but also at the level of the family, peer group, school and community (Biehal, 2012). Initial assessments of families coming into services should thus be structured according to young people's social ecologies, an approach sympathetic to Firmin's Contextual Safeguarding (Firmin, 2020), which focuses on the various ecological systems – particularly those outside of the family context – where young people may be at risk of harm. This is particularly pertinent given the harmful peer interactions implicated by some interviewees as shaping the parent abuse dynamic. Further, understanding which type of service young people and their families will need, as well as when to step up to and step down from a service, requires an assessment that is sensitive to the specific dynamics, contexts and risks for adolescent-to-parent abuse. Due to the dual victimiser/victimiser role many mothers and children may be inhabiting, it is essential that any assessment includes the perspectives of *all* family members, including other children in the home who may also be affected. This is particularly important given that siblings often go unheard in the literature, despite being negatively affected.

The development and presentation of adolescent-to-parent abuse is highly varied, meaning there is no one 'typical' presentation for practitioners to look out for. Although individual episodes of acute physical violence may be the only 'incidents' of parent abuse brought to the attention of services (particularly the police), these should always be seen as potentially masking more extensive patterns of minor violence or non-physical forms of abuse, as well as other overlapping forms of family violence and abuse. The presence of behaviours such as the destruction of property in the home, difficulties at school, suicide attempts or self-harm, substance misuse, self-referral to social services, and call-outs by police are all potential indicators that such a dynamic may be operating. Indeed, although any reports of child abuse made by children and adolescents should always be treated seriously and investigated fully, there needs to be better awareness among children's services of the parent abuse tactic of making false accusations of child abuse. This is particularly difficult due to the overlap in these two forms of family abuse, but points towards assessments that take into account the *pattern* of behaviours, the *harms* they cause, the *contexts* they are framed by, and changes in relational dynamics *over time*.

It is also important that during routine questioning about domestic abuse, questions are broadened to include violence, abuse and coercive forms of control from *any* family members (not just partners), *including* adolescents and younger children. This may help to signal to mothers experiencing this issue that it is recognised and not stigmatised. However, where these questions are asked, it is important that the appropriate referral pathways or signposting is in place to enable an appropriate response to any disclosures.

Lastly, neurodivergence can be a risk for the development of parent abuse in adolescence (for a review, see Simmons et al., 2018). This is not to say that all neurodivergent children will go on to become abusive to parents, but that the emotion dysregulation that is characteristic of conditions such as ADHD and autism makes it a more likely outcome than for children who are neurotypical. Parents should be supported in understanding how to parent a child or adolescent who is struggling to regulate their emotions, and young people supported to better manage the frustrations and control inherent in daily negotiations around privileges, responsibilities, space and movement. Further, as several of the female interviewees in the study had experienced acute episodes of mental health difficulties, as well as ongoing issues with self-harm,

practitioners (including teachers) should be aware that such problems may be indicative of wider patterns of externalised harmful behaviour and where possible, ask young people about their relationships with their parents and wider family.

### *A modular approach*

Due to the high variability among the contexts, factors and processes that may be operating, interventions with a modular design may provide a means of delivering evidence-based components whilst also allowing for adaptation to suit the individual needs of young people and their families (Chorpita, Daleiden, & Weisz, 2005). For example, although substance misuse and trauma may be present in one case, poor communication, high levels of entitlement and damaging gender norms may be operating in another. A modular design would allow specific components to be delivered for specific issues which, although linked to one another, could be delivered as independent units (Chorpita et al., 2005). Similar approaches used in addressing child maltreatment – such as the *Hope for Children and Families (HfCF) Intervention Resources* – have demonstrated encouraging results (Bentovim et al., 2020). Capturing young people’s perspectives and experiences would be key to this however, as the ways in which parents and practitioners may construct the ‘problem’ of parent abuse may be very different to the ways in which young people do. Meeting young people ‘where they are’ is an important part of delivering services that are relevant and speak to young people’s lived experiences.

### **Practitioner awareness and training**

As cases will undoubtedly come to light via a range of service routes, training on adolescent-to-parent abuse should be embedded within local domestic abuse and child safeguarding training to ensure that those in education, domestic abuse, youth services, health and mental health, police and youth offending are all aware of this specific form of family violence and the local referral routes for accessing specialist programmes of support. This is particularly important given that none of the interviewees discussed receiving specialist support to address the issue. Further, the voices of young people should be represented within such training to ensure that both parents’ and young people’s experiences and perspectives are understood by those helping to address it.

## **Moving towards a shared definition and measurement**

Currently, there is no nationally agreed definition of adolescent-to-parent abuse, which is problematic as it creates confusion and inconsistencies in understanding, recording, measurement, and ultimately, in the support offered to families (Holt, 2013; Holt & Retford, 2013). The findings of this study point towards the need for a multidimensional definition of parent abuse that emphasises pattern, 'intention' and harm; one that acknowledges the physical and non-physical forms abuse can take, as well as the range of 'functions' abuse can have, such as gaining power and control but also communicating distress. Currently, although the UK definition of domestic abuse encompasses cases of parent abuse involving adolescents aged 16 and over, the accounts in this study indicate the need for a definition that is reflective of the wider and younger age range. As in Spain (Pereira et al., 2017), any agreed definition should also be clear about what parent abuse is not: for example, defensive violence in response to parental violence. Lastly, a shared definition should also clarify its gendered nature – i.e. that mothers are primarily the victims of both sons' and daughters' abuse.

Any agreed definition would also need to be reflected within a recommended screening/measurement tool – developed using research reflecting the experiences of both parents and young people – so that services can identify and record this form of abuse, leading to a more informed picture of prevalence and incidence. It would also enable services to monitor the outcomes of any specialist services developed to address the issue, vital in furthering our understanding of 'what works' when addressing adolescent-to-parent abuse in the UK context. However, as the findings in Chapter Five show, any measure would need some form of contextual data in order to establish the extent to which adolescent aggression represents parent 'abuse' or, for example, resistance to other forms of family abuse.

Lastly, any measure and definition should reflect the range of abusive behaviours indicated by young people in this study, such as domestic property violence, and specific relational abuses, such as making false accusations of child abuse and threatening to self-harm as a means of gaining power and control. They should also consider the range of 'normal' behaviours that typify the parent-adolescent relationship

to avoid inflating prevalence rates and conflating harmless teenage resistance with damaging parent 'abuse'.

## Study limitations

Looking back over the course of this study, several limitations warrant reflection. The small sample size, use of non-randomised sampling, and narrow sample pool (i.e. A-level sociology students from one college in south-east England) limited the generalisability of the survey analysis. It also limited the statistical power available to carry out any subgroup analysis relating to parent and adolescent gender, adolescent age or ethnicity, or the forms the aggressive behaviour took. Having a sample heavily skewed towards female participants was particularly problematic in this respect. Due to the difficulties in recruiting a young offender institution (YOI) to the study, the youth justice sample was also much smaller than intended and was generated using purposive sampling. This meant that the survey data from the youth justice and further education samples could not be compared for similarities and differences. Such difficulties have likely contributed to the historical lack of parent abuse research with young people in school and youth justice settings. Reflecting on this PhD research points to the need for an initial period of relationship-building with potential sites, setting aside time to identify appropriate and motivating incentives – e.g. skills training or useful evaluative components – and thinking through how schools and YOIs can properly manage the risk of taking part in sensitive research, including managing relationships with parents. Through so doing, future studies may be able to obtain larger samples generated using robust sampling methods, which would help to further explore the prevalence and presentation of parent abuse in mainstream education and offender populations in the UK.

The survey coverage was also limited, with the absence of information on parent harm – particularly emotional harm – limiting our understanding of whether patterns of aggression represented harmful patterns of abuse. This is also one of the main limitations of a parent abuse study drawing *solely* on the perspectives of young people. Future studies should design a parent abuse survey that taps into the *intentions* behind behaviours – e.g. 'I used physical aggression to get what I wanted', 'I used physical aggression because my parent hurt me first' – as well as the *harms* caused – e.g. 'I have seen my parent upset because of something I said to them', 'My parent has told

me I hurt their feelings', etc. Furthermore, any future surveys should represent those behaviours that are *characteristic* of the parent abuse dynamic, such as those relating to property damage – e.g. 'I have damaged a wall, door or other part of the home on purpose' – and those relating to the specific parent-child relationship – e.g. 'I tried to get my parent into trouble by saying things that were not true'. These could then begin to address some of the limitations of surveys currently being used.

Finally, the interview sample was also relatively small, limiting the exploration of how age, gender and ethnicity may have shaped the dynamic. It was also heavily skewed towards daughters' experiences of using violence towards mothers, providing less insight into son-to-mother or son-to-father abuse. Future studies could also explore the use of alternative methods – such as walking interviews or "go-alongs" (King & Woodroffe, 2017) – to encourage male participants to discuss their feelings and to be more open about using violence towards mothers. Building in greater time for initial relationship and rapport-building could also be useful here, alongside more participatory methods such as having advisory groups comprised of young people and parents with lived experience, something that could empower young people and parents within the research process whilst also generating methods and outputs that fully speak to their realities and experiences.

## **Personal reflections**

Carrying out this research put me in the very privileged position of being granted access to young people's inner worlds; their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of their personal life experiences. Listening to some of the young people's lived experiences was extremely moving, making me reflect upon my own privileged childhood. However, this experience also created a number of tensions. Rather than being solely a tension for policymakers and practitioners, young people's dual positions of victim and victimiser was, as a researcher, also difficult to hold. As a study reflecting the theoretical position of childhood and youth studies, placing young people's voices and experiences centre stage was one of its main aims – especially given the absence of young people's voices in the literature. However, as a study also reflecting feminist perspectives on gender, power, family and violence, I was acutely aware of the lack of mothers' voices in the research. Would they construct events in the same way? And was I, by giving a platform to young people's narratives – which at times did the work

of blaming mothers – somehow complicit in them? The study attempted to address this tension in part, by encouraging reframing and perspective-taking within interviews and analysing young people's accounts for the 'work' that they did.

A further tension within the youth offending service was the issue of voluntary participation. Young people attending the service were doing so under court orders – they had to be there, whether they wanted to or not. This meant that although participants were informed of their right to refuse participation upon entering the interview room, they were still legally obliged to remain in the YOS offices. Further, when questioning staff as to whether they had emphasised that the research was voluntary, I was told that in most cases they had not. This may have been due to the pressure they felt to recruit for the study, following a number of unsuccessful attempts. It highlights one of the ethical dilemmas inherent in carrying out research within a youth justice context – that quite often, if given the opportunity, young people would choose to be elsewhere. This could also have fed into the power dynamics of the interview: as an adult interviewer, I would probably have been perceived to have greater power than they had as minors in a court-ordered setting. Lastly, during these interviews, I was acutely aware that I would have been one of many adults across many of the systems these young people were moving through, asking questions without giving much away of myself. This potentially indicates the need for research that is more participatory and collaborative in nature, that allows time to get to know the participants, whilst giving young people greater power over what they choose to do and say. Although this would be less practical within the context of a youth offending service, research involving longer-term engagement with young offenders resulting in greater 'rapport and reciprocity' (James, 2013) highlights the rich insight that can be generated using creative, skills/activity-based methods (Clark & Laing, 2012).

## **Future research**

The aforementioned tension concerning the lack of mothers' voices suggests the need for research that includes mother/child dyads and/or mother/father/child triads. Previous research exploring men and women's 'shared' experiences of domestic abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 2004) has proved useful in revealing how gender and power can differentially shape experiences of victimhood, and similar methods could be used to explore mothers', fathers' and young people's 'shared' experiences of parent abuse.

Importantly, research should reflect a diversity of family backgrounds, ethnicities, identities and structures. This could uncover useful insights into how gender, ethnicity, power, age and parenthood may shape the perception and experience of young people's use of violence and abuse at home, as well as providing the opportunity for both parent and child voices to be heard. As siblings are even less well represented in the literature, sibling accounts could also be drawn upon.

Through my interviews with young people and conversations with practitioners delivering parent abuse programmes, it became apparent that parent abuse often started to develop at a much earlier age than the age range covered by the study. Future studies could employ a longitudinal mixed methods design to fully explore the development and maintenance of parent abuse over time. If combined with parent accounts and survey data, this could help to track the dynamic interplay of parent and child/adolescent thoughts, feelings and behaviours as well as some of the environmental changes that may feed into these processes. If extended into a young person's adulthood, it could also help to improve our understanding of how gender and developmental issues may impact on the persistence of abuse into adult life – an area where research is currently lacking.

In this study, I made the decision not to use the term 'parent abuse' with young people. However, it may be useful to explore what this term means to young people and how these constructions may differ to their ideas of other forms of family abuse.

Finally, this study did not examine how young people's ethnicity may have fed into their experiences. Future studies – ideally with larger samples – should carry out intersectional analyses exploring the intersections of sex and gender, age, race and ethnicity, socio-economic background, and physical and neurocognitive diversity. Only by so doing can a multiplicity of childhoods be explored and adequately represented.

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# Appendices

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## Appendix 1 – Headteacher letter



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19<sup>th</sup> September 2015

### **Re: School participation in PhD research on family relationships and conflict**

Dear [headteacher],

I am a PhD student living in the Barnet area, carrying out a research project as part of my PhD qualification with the University of Central Lancashire. My research is looking at young people's experiences of family relationships, conflict that may take place in the home, and ways that young people understand and resolve conflict. I am hoping that you may be interested in involving [x school] in this research, and if you read on, I can tell you about some of the potential benefits of the study for your school.

The research will be exploring in depth, the nature of conflict in pupils' homes and how they may resolve that conflict. The results could provide useful insight into how to improve the school's identification and support of students affected by family conflict. This could also help the school in meeting its Ofsted goal of addressing the needs of vulnerable pupils. Furthermore, insight into pupils' conflict resolution processes could be of use in developing the school's approaches to anti-bullying.

The study could also assist the school in fulfilling its safeguarding requirements; first, through generating useful insight into the identification of pupils at risk of harm, and second, by enabling participants affected by the issues to access the support they need. Participants will also be provided with information on organisations to contact and support they can access themselves if so required.

Finally, involvement in PhD research would demonstrate the school's commitment to and belief in higher education, to understanding the local community, and in its understanding of the importance of participating in research that helps to address social problems.

With regards to the practicalities of the study – the research would ideally involve a sample of 200 students aged 15-18 years across years 11, 12 and 13 completing a short 15-minute survey, with a smaller sample of 20 students participating in one follow-up interview of around 1-hour in length.

The survey and interview will include questions on how students feel they get on with people at home, what happens when arguments occur, how it makes them feel, and how

they resolve or deal with such arguments. Any information provided would be kept strictly confidential, except in the event of disclosure of significant harm to the young person or others, where information will be shared with the appropriate professionals. A selection of questions has been provided for you on the attached "Study Questions Sheet".

The intended timescale for the study would be for surveys to take place at the beginning of the 2016 autumn term, with follow-up interviews taking place as soon as possible thereafter.

Students would need to provide informed consent to take part, with parents given the opportunity to opt their child/ren out of the study if they so wish. Full details of the study and what it involves for participants would be provided, and participants could pull out of the study at any stage.

In terms of school resources, the study would require a room for students to sit and complete the surveys – depending on your preference for how many students complete the surveys in one go – this could either be a classroom or assembly hall. The interviews would require a quiet, small-sized room. The requirement for staff would be down to school regulations. In terms of the interviews, I would need to have one member of staff aware of the interview taking place, and nearby in the event that assistance is required. I would also need to be able to contact the member of staff responsible for safeguarding, in the event of any child protection concerns.

As an independent researcher (and one that lives locally) I can be highly flexible with the research schedule, tailoring the timetable to suit the needs of your staff and pupils. In terms of my suitability for carrying out the study, I have previous experience of carrying out school-based research and data collection in secondary schools, children's homes and children's treatment facilities. More broadly I have extensive experience and training in designing, implementing and consulting on research. The study has been fully approved by the ethics committee at the University of Central Lancashire who have viewed all of my materials, all of which will have been pilot tested by the point of data collection.

I hope you are interested in involving your school in this research. If you have any questions or would like to discuss this further, please contact me using the details provided below. Otherwise, I will follow-up with you by phone in October.

Many thanks for taking the time to read this letter and I hope to hear from you soon.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Victoria Baker', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Victoria Baker  
PhD student  
University of Central Lancashire  
Telephone: [xxx]  
Email: [xxx]

## Appendix 2 – YOI Governor letter



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### **Re: NOMS approved research into family conflict & adolescent-to-parent violence**

Dear Governor [x],

I am writing about an opportunity for your institution to be involved in important new research on family conflict and adolescent-to-parent violence.

I am a professional researcher living in the London area, carrying out research as part of my PhD qualification with the University of Central Lancashire. The research is looking at young people's experiences of family conflict, their instigation of violence within the home, and ways that young people understand and resolve conflict. I am hoping that [x] Young Offender Institution will take part in this research. If you read on, I can tell you about some of the potential benefits of participation.

#### How will the study be of benefit to [x]?

The study will be exploring in depth, the nature of family conflict and adolescent-instigated violence in young people's homes and also their approaches to conflict resolution. I plan to survey and interview young people in schools and young people in YOIs to explore if there are differences in their approaches to conflict at home. The results could provide useful insight into how to improve [x]'s identification and support of detainees affected by family conflict, which in turn, could also reduce the likelihood of their reoffending. Furthermore, insight into detainees' conflict resolution processes could be of use in developing your approaches to behaviour management and rehabilitation efforts.

Each Young Offender Institution that participates in the study will receive an individualised report upon project completion, detailing information on the nature and occurrence of adolescent-instigated violence in the home, whether violence was defensive in nature, and the approaches to conflict resolution and self-regulation detainees may utilise at home when managing conflict. Such information could assist in providing greater context for the support and treatment of detainees in [x], whilst also helping to identify those young people at risk of harm upon release. Finally, involvement in this research would demonstrate the institution's commitment to furthering society's understanding of how to reduce reoffending and pathways into violence.

For the young people participating, the research process could provide them with the opportunity to discuss issues relating to family conflict, whilst also providing an opportunity for self-reflection in terms of the motivations behind their conflict, violence, and use of conflict resolution tactics. Participants indicating they experience problematic conflict at home will be provided with information on where they can access help – particularly important for when they are re-entering the home environment upon release.

I will also be offering institutions a session for their staff exploring the current intervention approaches for families experiencing parent-directed violence.

### What will the study involve?

With regards to the practicalities of the study – the research would ideally involve a sample of 200 detainees aged between 15-18 years (this will likely need to come from a number of YOIs) completing a short 15-minute survey, with a smaller sample of 20 detainees participating in one follow-up interview of around 1-hour in length.

The survey and interview will include questions on whether young people ever instigate violence at home (specifically against their parents), the context for violence occurring and the nature of conflict when it arises, how it makes them feel, and how they may resolve or manage conflict at home. Any information provided would be kept strictly confidential, except in the event of disclosure of significant harm to the young person or others, where information will be shared with appropriate professionals.

The intended timescale for the study would be for surveys to take place at the beginning of January 2017, with follow-up interviews taking place as soon as possible thereafter. However, the timescale is flexible and can be adjusted according to the needs of your institution.

Potential participants would need to provide informed consent to take part, with parents/carers given the opportunity to opt their child/ren out of the study if they so wish. The parents of children under the age of 16 would need to provide active “opt-in” consent. Full details of the study and what it involves for participants will be provided, and participants can pull out of the study at any stage.

In terms of the resources required, ideally the study will have a room for participants to sit and complete the surveys – depending on your preference for how many complete the surveys in one go – this could either be a classroom or assembly hall (or equivalent). However, if this is not feasible, the surveys can be completed by young people themselves in their rooms. The interviews will require a quiet, small-sized room. The requirement for staff would be determined by institution regulations. In terms of the interviews, there will need to be one member of staff aware of the interview taking place, and nearby in the event that assistance is required. The details of staff members responsible for safeguarding would also need to be provided, in the event of any child protection concerns.

As an independent researcher (and one that lives locally) I can be highly flexible with the research schedule, tailoring the timetable to suit the needs of your staff and young people. In terms of my suitability for carrying out the study, I have previous experience of carrying out school-based research and data collection in secondary schools, children’s homes and children’s treatment facilities. More broadly I have extensive experience and training in designing, implementing and consulting on research. The study has been fully approved by both the ethics committee at the University of Central Lancashire and also the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) who have

viewed all of my materials, all of which will have been pilot tested by the point of data collection.

I hope you are interested in involving your institution in this research opportunity. If you have any questions, please contact me using the details provided below. Otherwise, I will follow up with you by phone in September.

Many thanks for taking the time to read this letter and I hope to hear from you soon.

Yours sincerely

Victoria Baker  
PhD student, University of Central Lancashire  
Telephone: [x]  
Email: [x]

### **Appendix 3 – Email to YOS and attached research proposal**

Good afternoon [x],

I'm a third sector researcher currently carrying out my doctoral research into adolescent-to-parent violence and abuse at the Connect Centre for International Research on Violence and Harm (University of Central Lancashire) and am currently recruiting to the study Youth Offending Teams who may be supporting young people who have experience of this issue.

I was hoping [x] Youth Offending Service might be interested in being involved in the research, which aims to understand young people's experiences of APVA so that services can better address the issue.

Attached is some more information about the study for you to look over. If you are interested, I'd be more than happy to either come down to speak with you or to have a call to go over things in more detail.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Many thanks

Kind regards

Victoria Baker  
PhD student  
University of Central Lancashire

## Research proposal

### Understanding parent-directed violence, aggression and abuse

#### **Research Aim**

To better understand the experiences of young people instigating parent-directed violence, aggression and abuse.

#### **How can you help?**

By helping to engage young people you work with aged 13-18, who may have experience of parent-directed violence, to take part in one 90-minute interview with a researcher.

#### **How is it going to help you?**

Youth Offending Teams that take part will be provided with a summary of findings (anonymised) relating to their supported young people. As interviews will involve an exploration of the ways in which support has and has not been helpful, the findings may help to refine your support offer and contribute to continued reflection and learning.

#### **How is it going to help young people?**

Young people who have already taken part in interviews have found the process to be useful in exploring their experiences and reflecting on them in a safe space. Young people taking part will also be given a £20 Love to Shop gift voucher to thank them for their time.

#### **What will taking part involve?**

For Youth Offending Teams, taking part will involve recruiting to the study up to a maximum of 10 young people aged 15 to 18 years in receipt of their service. Ideally, interviews will be carried out in a quiet room on YOT premises, or where this is not possible, a neutral space identified collaboratively by the researcher and young person. YOTs will initially need to speak with the young person first to establish consent, then provide the researcher with the contact details of potential participants, once they have provisionally agreed to take part. They will also need to provide the researcher with the contact details of their safeguarding lead, who will be contacted if any safeguarding issues arise.

For young people, taking part will involve meeting with a trained researcher for a 90-minute 1-2-1 interview. The interview will involve completing an initial survey about aggression and violence towards parents/caregivers and then having a confidential discussion about their experiences.

#### **So, what next?**

If you are interested in becoming involved in the research and have young people who would be eligible to participate, please contact Victoria Baker (PhD student and professional researcher) using the details below. Also, if you read on, there is a detailed breakdown of the study on the next page.

Victoria Baker

Email: [\[x\]](#)

## Research Brief

### ***Background***

The abuse of parents by adolescents is becoming more widely accepted as a social problem that needs addressing. Despite research suggesting that this problem is neither rare nor fleeting, there is still a dearth of research in the area, with studies often generating conflicting results and conclusions. Further, despite the significant detrimental effect it can have on both parents and their children, there is a distinct lack of services to provide support.

Of what research does exist, little is focused on the experiences of young people themselves, focusing instead on clinical assessments, parent accounts or administrative data such as crime reports. This leaves a big gap in understanding why children and adolescents think they abuse their parents, how they understand it, what motivates them, and how it makes them feel.

This piece of research seeks to explore the experiences of young people themselves, whose voices often go unheard in the literature and in discussions around how best to address the issue. Such research may help to refine not only conceptualisations of parent abuse but also our understanding of the underlying processes and mechanisms. In turn, this knowledge can be used to inform service design and to shape effective support and treatment services for families affected by the problem.

### ***Research Questions***

In order to understand the issue of adolescent-to-parent abuse within the UK, the following questions will be used to guide the research.

1. How common is adolescent-to-parent abuse in a sample of UK adolescents?
2. What is the nature of adolescent-to-parent abuse – what form does it take?
3. How do adolescents understand, explain, and experience adolescent-to-parent abuse?
4. What is the emotional effect of adolescent-to-parent abuse on adolescents themselves – how does it make them feel?

Questions 1 and 2 will involve the exploration of prevalence, severity, frequency, patterns, and instigator and victim characteristics of APA. Questions 3 and 4 will take this further, exploring the experiences of adolescent-to-parent abuse through the eyes of the adolescent themselves, their understanding of it and how or why they think it might happen.

All research questions will be addressed using data collected from adolescents themselves.

### **Sample**

Data will be collected from adolescents aged between 15 and 18 years, in UK schools, colleges, young offender institutions (YOIs), Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) and support services. Data has already been collected from over 200 college students, with a further 10 to come from young people residing in young offender institutions, 10 from youth offending teams, and 10 from young people receiving support services.

Through utilising school, youth justice and service populations, the research may be able to identify unmet need in the non-service populations, whilst generating understanding of the complex and most likely differing circumstances and needs of those CYPs accommodated within Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), and those in receipt of youth offending team support. It will also enable an exploration of the support experiences of those young people receiving services.

### **Method**

This research will utilise a mixed methods approach to address the four research questions guiding the work. Questions 1 and 2 will be answered through using an adapted version of Straus's Conflict Tactics Scale (a self-report survey), and Questions 3 and 4 through depth interviews.

Interviews are loosely structured using a topic guide but are participant-led, meaning they are flexible to explore areas not previously considered during the design phase. The topic guide is structured around three sections, beginning with an exploration of participants' relationships at home, moving on to what happens when conflict takes place (the first, worst and most recent episodes), and then ending on how conflict is resolved at home. Each interview will last around 60 minutes.

Both the survey and interview will be carried out in one 90-minute, 1-2-1 session with the young person.

### **Consent**

Active, informed consent will need to be obtained from all young people participating in the research. For participants aged 15 years, parents should be given the opportunity to opt their children out of the study (passive consent).

The study has been fully approved by the University of Central Lancashire ethics board and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).

## **Appendix 4 – Email to parent abuse services and attached research proposal**

Good afternoon [x],

I'm a third sector researcher currently carrying out my doctoral research into adolescent-to-parent abuse at the Connect Centre for International Research on Violence and Harm (University of Central Lancashire) and am currently recruiting to the study services who are supporting families experiencing this issue.

I was hoping [x service] might be interested in being involved in the research, which aims to raise the profile of APA within the academic community and specifically is intended to understand young people's experiences of APA.

Attached is some more information about the study for you to look over. If you are interested, I'd be more than happy to either come down to speak with you or to have a call to go over things in more detail.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Many thanks

Kind regards

Victoria Baker

PhD student  
University of Central Lancashire

## Research proposal

### Understanding parent-directed violence, aggression and abuse

#### **Research Aim**

To better understand the experiences of young people instigating parent-directed violence, aggression and abuse.

#### **How can you help?**

By helping to engage young people aged 13-18 in receipt of your service, to take part in one 90-minute interview with a researcher.

#### **How is it going to help you?**

Organisations that take part will be provided with a summary of findings (anonymised) relating to their supported young people. As interviews will involve an exploration of the ways in which support has and has not been helpful, the findings may help organisations to refine their support offer and contribute to continued reflection and learning. Further, the research can be referred to and used (where appropriate) within funding applications.

#### **How is it going to help young people?**

Young people who have already taken part in interviews have found the process to be useful in exploring their experiences and reflecting on them in a safe space. Young people taking part will also be given a £20 Love to Shop gift voucher to thank them for their time.

#### **What will taking part involve?**

For organisations, taking part will involve recruiting to the study up to a maximum of 10 young people aged 13 to 18 years in receipt of their service. Ideally, interviews will be carried out in a quiet room on the premises, or where this is not possible, a neutral space identified collaboratively by the researcher and young person. Organisations will need to provide the researcher with the contact details of potential participants, once they have provisionally agreed to take part. They will also need to provide the researcher with the contact details of their safeguarding lead, who will be contacted if any safeguarding issues arise.

For young people, taking part will involve meeting with a trained researcher for a 90-minute 1-2-1 interview. The interview will involve completing an initial survey and then having a confidential discussion about their experiences.

#### **So, what next?**

If you are interested in becoming involved in the research and have young people who would be eligible to participate, please contact Victoria Baker (PhD student and professional researcher) using the details below. Also, if you read on, there is a detailed breakdown of the study on the next page.

Victoria Baker

## Research Brief

### ***Background***

The abuse of parents by adolescents is becoming more widely accepted as a social problem that needs addressing. Despite research suggesting that this problem is neither rare nor fleeting, there is still a dearth of research in the area, with studies often generating conflicting results and conclusions. Further, despite the significant detrimental effect it can have on both parents and their children, there is a distinct lack of services to provide support.

Of what research does exist, little is focused on the experiences of young people themselves, focusing instead on clinical assessments, parent accounts or administrative data such as crime reports. This leaves a big gap in understanding why children and adolescents think they abuse their parents, how they understand it, what motivates them, and how it makes them feel.

This piece of research seeks to explore the experiences of young people themselves, whose voices often go unheard in the literature and in discussions around how best to address the issue. Such research may help to refine not only conceptualisations of parent abuse but also our understanding of the underlying processes and mechanisms. In turn, this knowledge can be used to inform service design and to shape effective support and treatment services for families affected by the problem.

### ***Research Questions***

In order to understand the issue of adolescent-to-parent abuse within the UK, the following questions will be used to guide the research.

5. How common is adolescent-to-parent abuse in the UK?
6. What is the nature of adolescent-to-parent abuse – what form does it take?
7. How do young people understand, explain, and experience adolescent-to-parent abuse?
8. What is the emotional effect of adolescent-to-parent abuse on young people themselves – how does it make them feel?

Questions 1 and 2 will involve the exploration of prevalence, severity, frequency, patterns, and instigator and victim characteristics of APA. Questions 3 and 4 will take this further, exploring the experiences of adolescent-to-parent abuse through the eyes of the young people themselves, their understanding of it and how or why they think it might happen.

All research questions will be addressed using data collected from adolescents themselves.

### ***Sample***

Data will be collected from young people aged between 13 and 18 years, in UK schools, colleges, youth offending services and support services. Data has already been collected

from over 200 college students and a number of young people working with Youth Offending Services, with a further 20 to come from young people receiving support services.

Through utilising school, youth justice and service populations, the research may be able to identify unmet need in the non-service populations, whilst generating understanding of the complex and most likely differing circumstances and needs of those CYPs accommodated within Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) and those already in receipt of targeted support services. It will also enable an exploration of the support experiences of those young people receiving services.

### ***Method***

This research will utilise a mixed methods approach to address the four research questions guiding the work. Questions 1 and 2 will be answered through using an adapted version of Straus's Conflict Tactics Scale (a self-report survey), and Questions 3 and 4 through depth interviews.

Interviews are loosely structured using a topic guide but are participant-led, meaning they are flexible to explore areas not previously considered during the design phase. The topic guide is structured around three sections, beginning with an exploration of participants' relationships at home, moving on to what happens when conflict takes place (the first, worst and most recent episodes), and then ending on how conflict is resolved at home. Each interview will last around 60 minutes.

For the service sample, both the survey and interview will be carried out in one 90-minute, 1-2-1 session with the young person.

### ***Consent***

Active, informed consent will need to be obtained from all young people participating in the research. For participants under 16, parents will need to give written consent for them to take part.

The study has been fully approved by the University of Central Lancashire ethics board.

## Appendix 5 – CTS2 items retained, removed and added

(Note: words in parentheses are adaptations)

Items	Scale/Subscale
<b>Original items retained</b>	
I showed my (caregiver) I cared even though we disagreed	Negotiation/Emotional
I explained my side of a disagreement to my (caregiver)	Negotiation/Cognitive
I insulted or swore at my (caregiver)	Psychological aggression/Minor
I threw something at my (caregiver) that could hurt	Physical assault/Minor
I twisted my (caregiver's) arm or hair	Physical assault/Minor
I had a sprain, bruise, or small cut because of a fight with my (caregiver)	Injury/Minor
I showed respect for my (caregiver's) feelings about an issue	Negotiation/Emotional
I pushed or shoved my (caregiver)	Physical assault/Minor
I used a knife or gun on my (caregiver)	Physical assault/Severe
My (caregiver) passed out from being hit on the head by me in a fight	Injury/Severe
I called my (caregiver) fat or ugly	Psychological aggression/Severe
I punched or hit my (caregiver) with something that could hurt	Physical assault/Severe
I destroyed something belonging to my (caregiver)	Psychological aggression/Severe
My (caregiver) went to a doctor because of a fight with me	Injury/Severe
I choked my (caregiver)	Physical assault/Severe
I shouted or yelled at my (caregiver)	Psychological aggression/Minor
I slammed my (caregiver) against a wall (or a piece of furniture)	Physical assault/Severe
I told my (caregiver) I was sure we could work out a problem	Negotiation/Emotional
My (caregiver) needed to see a doctor because of a fight with me, but didn't	Injury/Severe
I beat up my (caregiver)	Physical assault/Severe
I grabbed my (caregiver)	Physical assault/Minor
I (stormed) out of the room or house or (garden) during a disagreement	Psychological aggression/Minor
I slapped my (caregiver)	Physical assault/Minor

My (caregiver) had a broken bone from a fight with me	Injury/Severe
I suggested a compromise to a disagreement	Negotiation/Cognitive
I burned or scalded my (caregiver) on purpose	Physical assault/Severe
I said something to (upset) my (caregiver on purpose)	Psychological aggression/Minor
I threatened to hit or throw something at my (caregiver)	Psychological aggression/Severe
My (caregiver) felt physical pain that still hurt the next day because of a fight with me	Injury/Minor
I kicked my (caregiver)	Physical assault/Severe
I agreed to try a solution to a disagreement my (caregiver) suggested	Negotiation/Cognitive
<b>Original items removed</b>	
I made my partner have sex without a condom	Sexual coercion/Minor
I used force (like hitting, holding down, or using a weapon) to make my partner have oral or anal sex	Sexual coercion/Severe
I used force (like hitting, holding down, or using a weapon) to make my partner have sex	Sexual coercion/Severe
I insisted on sex when my partner did not want to (but did not use physical force)	Sexual coercion/Minor
I used threats to make my partner have oral or anal sex	Sexual coercion/Severe
I insisted my partner have oral or anal sex (but did not use physical force)	Sexual coercion/Minor
I used threats to make my partner have sex	Sexual coercion/Severe
I accused my partner of being a lousy lover (replaced with a new item)	Psychological aggression/Severe
<b>New items added</b>	
I took money from my caregiver without asking	Financial abuse
I threatened to hurt my caregiver if they didn't give me money	Financial abuse
I threatened to hurt myself if my caregiver didn't do something I told them to do	Psychological abuse/Severe
I told my caregiver they were a bad parent to hurt their feelings	Psychological abuse/Severe

## Appendix 6 – Adapted CTS2 self-report survey



### Family Relationship and Conflict Survey

Thanks for agreeing to take part in this study on family relationships and conflict, your experiences are really important to us.

We all know that no matter how well families get along, there are times when they disagree, get annoyed, want different things from each other, or just have arguments or fights because they are in a bad mood, tired, or for some other reason. Families also have many different ways of trying to settle their disagreements. This survey is a list of things that might happen when you have disagreements with those adults who look after you (for the purposes of this survey, we will refer to these adults as your “caregivers”).

Please indicate how often you did each of these things in the past year (if at all) and to whom by placing their initials in the appropriate box. If you did not do one of these things in the past year, but it happened before that, place the initials in the box with \* at the top on the far right.

On the next page is a table, where we would like you to list the caregivers you live with and the initials you want to give them – for example “M” for Mum, “SD” for Step-Dad, “GD” for Granddad – that sort of thing.

Just above where the questionnaire starts there are some examples to indicate the range of answers you might give.

How often did this happen? – Answer options and what they mean

Never = This has not happened in the past year

Once = This has happened, but only one time

Sometimes = This has happened a few times

Frequently = This happens a lot (monthly or weekly)

Before you get started...

Before you get started on the questionnaire, we'd like you to write down a bit about who looks after you at home. Please list everyone that looks after you at home and whether or not you live with them. This will help us to understand what you write in the questionnaire.

Name	Initial you want to use	How often do you live with them?
<i>E.g. Mum</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>During the week</i>
<i>E.g. Dad</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>At the weekend</i>
<i>E.g. Step-Mum</i>	<i>SM</i>	<i>At the weekend</i>
<i>E.g. Gran</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>I don't live with her</i>

Fill in your own below

.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....

Study ID: ..... Age: ..... Gender (please circle): Male/Female/Prefer not to say

Please write your age and gender in the spaces provided above. These will only be used for research purposes. All of your answers will be kept strictly confidential, except in the event you indicate you or others are at significant risk of harm. Only the research staff will view the answers you provide, and none of your teachers, parents, or school staff will have access to your answers at any stage of the research. Once the research is complete, your questionnaire will be destroyed. You will not be identified by name in the final report.

This is just a short questionnaire – it should not take long to complete. There are five different answers to choose from (including the box with \* in it described earlier). There are no right or wrong answers, just try to be as honest as possible. If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, just leave the question and move on to the next.

Example Answers



Family Relationship and Conflict Survey						
Question Number	Question	Response (enter the initials into the appropriate box)				
		Never	Once	Sometimes	Frequently	*
Example	<i>I showed my caregiver I cared even though we disagreed</i>	G, SM		D	M	
Example	<i>I threw something at my caregiver that could hurt</i>	G, SM	D	M		
Example	<i>I pushed or shoved my caregiver</i>	G	SM	SM, D		
Example	<i>I took money from my caregiver without asking</i>	SM		M, D		G

Family Relationship and Conflict Survey						
Question Number	Question	Response (enter the initials into the appropriate box)				
		Never	Once	Sometimes	Frequently	*
1	I showed my caregiver I cared even though we disagreed					
2	I explained my side of a disagreement to my caregiver					
3	I insulted or swore at my caregiver					
4	I threw something at my caregiver that could hurt					
5	I twisted my caregiver's arm or hair					
6	I had a sprain, bruise, or small cut because of a fight with my caregiver					
7	I showed respect for my caregiver's feelings about an issue					
8	I pushed or shoved my caregiver					
9	I used a knife or gun on my caregiver					
10	My caregiver passed out from being hit on the head by me in a fight					
11	I called my caregiver fat or ugly					
12	I punched or hit my caregiver with something that could hurt					
13	I destroyed something belonging to my caregiver					
14	My caregiver went to a doctor because of a fight with me					
15	I choked my caregiver					

Question Number	Question	Response (please tick just one)				
		Never	Once	Sometimes	Frequently	*
16	I shouted or yelled at my caregiver					
17	I slammed my caregiver against a wall or a piece of furniture					
18	I told my caregiver I was sure we could work out a problem					
19	My caregiver needed to see a doctor because of a fight with me, but didn't					
20	I beat up my caregiver					
21	I grabbed my caregiver					
22	I stormed out of the room or house or garden during a disagreement					
23	I slapped my caregiver					
24	My caregiver had a broken bone from a fight with me					
25	I suggested a compromise to a disagreement					
26	I burned or scalded my caregiver on purpose					
27	I told my caregiver they were a bad parent to hurt their feelings					
28	I said something to upset my caregiver on purpose					
29	I threatened to hit or throw something at my caregiver					
30	My caregiver felt physical pain that still hurt the next day because of a fight with me					

Question Number	Question	Response (please tick just one)				
		Never	Once	Sometimes	Frequently	*
31	I kicked my caregiver					
32	I agreed to try a solution to a disagreement my caregiver suggested					
33	I took money from my caregiver without asking					
34	I threatened to hurt my caregiver if they didn't give me money					
35	I threatened to hurt myself if my caregiver didn't do something I told them to do					

Did you do any of the above because your caregiver was violent or aggressive to you first? YES / NO (please circle)

If you have circled "YES", would you like to speak to anyone about this? YES / NO (please circle)

If there is anything else you would like to add, please write it here:

*Would you be willing to take part in a follow-up interview? YES / NO (please circle)*

***You have reached the end. Thank you for your time, it's really helpful!***

You are free to withdraw yourself from the study at any stage.

In the event you do wish to withdraw, all the information you have provided will be destroyed, and no reference to it made in the final report.

## Appendix 7 – Interview topic guide

### Family conflict and parent-directed aggression

#### Interview topic guide

The aim of this interview is to explore, in depth, the experiences, understandings, feelings, and behaviours of adolescents who may or may not be experiencing conflict and instigating parent-directed violence at home. Although this topic guide outlines the key themes and subthemes to explore within the interview, the discussion will be participant-led and responsive, meaning that other areas may also be discussed if the participant feels they are relevant to them and the interviewer deems them relevant to the topic as a whole.

The following breakdown of themes and subthemes is not exhaustive and furthermore, neither are the prompts or probes to be used. Probes of “what”, “where”, “how” and “why” etc will be used, where needed, to generate depth and to ensure themes are explored as fully as possible.

*Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the interviewer will be mindful of participants’ reactions to questions, ensuring that participants are not caused undue levels of distress.*

#### Areas to explore

This interview will explore:

- Relationships at home
- What happens when conflict and violence takes place at home
- How it makes them and others feel
- Why they think conflict and violence takes place
- What conflict resolution skills young people have
- What could help reduce conflict and violence at home

#### **Introduction (ALL)**

*(Aim: To introduce the research and set the context for the proceeding discussion)*

- Introduce self and UCLAN
- Introduce the study: what it is about and why it is being carried out
- Why they have been selected to take part
- Talk through key points:
  - Length of interview, any time constraints they may have
  - The structure of the interview (like a discussion, but with specific topics)
  - It is about their experiences, so no right or wrong answers, honesty
  - Participation is voluntary, can withdraw at any time
  - The interview will be recorded for accuracy
- Confidentiality, data handling, and reporting
- Questions
- Final consent check

**\*\*START RECORDING\*\***

- Confirm you have gone over the above and they are happy to proceed

**Background and rapport (ALL)**

*(Aim: To introduce the respondent and ease them into the interview)*

- Age
  - How long at the school/in area
  - What things do they enjoy doing
- 

**1. Relationships at home (ALL)**

*(Aim: To understand the context of conflict and violence at home)*

- Who do they live with (and age of siblings)
    - Are arrangements consistent
    - How they feel about structure of home
  - How do they get on with people at home
    - Explore positives and negatives
  - How do parents get on with each other
    - Explore positives and negatives
    - If negatives, do they become involved
  - How do parents get on with siblings
    - Explore positives and negatives
    - If negatives, do they become involved
  - Their role within the home
    - Feeling important, feeling heard
- 

**2. Conflict at home (ALL)**

*(Aim: to understand the nature, experiences and reasons for conflict and violence at home)*

- Has conflict **ever** taken place at home
  - What does conflict typically involve?
  - Has it **ever** involved **violence?**

**\*\*** if willing to talk about their violence, ask them to talk through the next three in relation to violent episodes, if not, just say in relation to non-violent conflict more broadly**\*\***

- The **most recent** experience of conflict with parents
  - When was it
  - What was it about
  - What happened – i.e. shouting, violence, mean words
  - If violence – what violence
  - If violence – what triggered it
  - Verbal abuse? Threats?
  - If verbal abuse or threats, what triggered?

- If no violence – how was that avoided
- Why were they violent or aggressive? Motivation?
- How did the conflict/violence make you feel
- How do you think the argument made your parent/s feel
- How regular are these types of argument
- How did the argument end
- The **first experience** of conflict with parents
  - See above
- The **worst experience** of conflict with parents
  - See above
- Has there ever been a time or times when you managed to **avoid** using violence or aggression with your parent/s?
  - If yes - what do you think made the difference

### 3. **Resolving conflict (ALL)**

*(Aim: to understand how young people resolve conflict peacefully at home)*

- A time conflict has been resolved
  - What was conflict about
  - What prevented it from escalating
  - How often does resolution occur
- Keeping calm when conflict arises
  - How often do you get angry
  - Triggers
  - Techniques for self-regulation
  - Techniques by others to calm you

### 4. **Service support (ALL)**

*(Aim: to understand what service supports have and have not worked)*

- What help have you had from services to try and address the difficulties at home?
  - Who was the help from
  - What did it involve
  - How did receiving support make you feel
- How helpful was the support? (particularly from the YOS)
  - If helpful, why
  - If not, why
  - What could be better
  - What do you think made or would make the biggest difference?

\*\* if not willing to admit to the issues, ask them what support they are receiving from the Youth Offending Service and why they are receiving it\*\*

\*\* if yet to receive support, ask them what they think would be helpful\*\*

---

**Wrap-up (ALL)**

*(Aim: to ease participants from in-depth discussion to lighter topics)*

- What could help families experiencing conflict
- Is there anything they would like to add or ask
- Thank you
- Restate confidentiality and rights as participant
- What will happen next

STOP RECORDING

\*\* Thank you and debrief sheet? \*\*

- What are you doing now/weekend/friends (light subjects)

## **Appendix 8 – Follow-up recruitment email for potential student interviewees**

Hi [x],

I just wanted to say thank you for taking part in my PhD survey on family relationships and conflict in October, I really appreciate it. You put at the end of your survey that you would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview to talk a bit more about some of the things discussed in the survey. Would you still be happy to do that?

I'm actually coming into college next Wednesday (18th) and was hoping you might be free to speak with me then? It would take around an hour in total and I'll provide biscuits!

Like the survey, the interview is totally voluntary - don't feel you have to take part just because you said you wouldn't mind on the survey - you're free to change your mind! Having said that, it would be a really great opportunity for me to understand a bit more about your experiences and to make sure the research accurately reflects that.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thanks

Vicky

Victoria Baker  
PhD student and researcher  
University of Central Lancashire

## Appendix 9 – Final qualitative analysis codebook

Main code	Subcode Level 1	Subcode Level 2	Subcode Level 3
<b>Adolescence</b>			
Adolescence	Growing up too soon		
Adolescence	Going through phases (developmental view)		
Adolescence	Agency and independence		
Adolescence	Freedoms		
Adolescence	Freedoms	Privileges	
Adolescence	Freedoms	Movement	
Adolescence	Wants, demands and entitlement		
Adolescence	Responsibilities		
Adolescence	Responsibilities	Chores	
Adolescence	Responsibilities	Paid work	
Adolescence	Dependence and lacking control		
Adolescence	Perception of right and wrong behaviour		
Adolescence	Getting in trouble/breaking rules/defiance/pushing boundaries		
Adolescence	Going out/staying out		
Adolescence	Risk-taking behaviour		
Adolescence	Risk-taking behaviour	Drug misuse	
Adolescence	Risk-taking behaviour	Alcohol misuse	

Adolescence	Identity	
Adolescence	Identity	Others' perceptions of
Adolescence	Identity	Self-regard
Adolescence	Confidence	
Adolescence	Expectations and pressure on themselves	
Adolescence	Others' expectations/pressure	
Adolescence	Peers	
Adolescence	Peers	Positive peer Influence/experience
Adolescence	Peers	Negative peer influence/experience
Adolescence	Romantic relationships	
Adolescence	The changing nature of adolescence	
Adolescence	Parental understanding of adolescence	
Adolescence	Norms and expectations of childhood/being an adolescent	
<b>Maturity</b>		
Maturity	Self-reflection	
Maturity	Self-control	
Maturity	Self-sufficient	
Maturity	Making positive changes	
Maturity	Understanding impact of behaviour	
Maturity	Taking responsibility for change	
Maturity	Accepting you are wrong	
Maturity	Listening	

Maturity	Understanding different perspectives	
Maturity	Saying sorry	
Maturity	Asking for help	
Maturity	Being ready to compromise	
Maturity	Acceptance and forgiveness	
Maturity	Being philosophical	
Maturity	Being the bigger person/olive branch	
Maturity	An understanding of issues (such as abuse)	
Maturity	Immaturity	
Maturity	Immaturity	Not understanding impact of behaviour
Maturity	Immaturity	Always being right
Maturity	Immaturity	Lacking emotional intelligence/self-reflection
Maturity	Immaturity	Selfishness
Maturity	Immaturity	Lacking ability to perspective-take
Maturity	Immaturity	Lacking empathy
Maturity	Immaturity	Lack of insight into the problem
Maturity	Immaturity	Refusing help/not open to help
<b>Change</b>		
Change	Change is coming	
Change	Potential for change	
Change	Positive change	
Change	Negative change	

Change	Nothing ever changes/will ever change/no way forward		
<b>Family</b>			
Family	Family relationships		
Family	Family relationships	Negative relationships	
Family	Family relationships	Positive relationships	
Family	Family relationships	Communication	
Family	Family relationships	Communication	Lack of communication/avoidance
Family	Family relationships	Communication	Silence
Family	Family relationships	Communication	Crying out for help
Family	Family relationships	Communication	Repression
Family	Family relationships	Communication	Humour
Family	Family relationships	Communication	Communication skills
Family	Family relationships	Communication	Dominating conversation/lack of listening
Family	Family relationships	Communication	Passive aggression
Family	Family relationships	Blame	
Family	Family relationships	Blame	Blaming others
Family	Family relationships	Blame	Blaming themselves
Family	Family relationships	Blame	Blaming the wrong parent
Family	Family relationships	Blame	Being blamed
Family	Family relationships	Parental relationship	
Family	Family relationships	Parental relationship	Parental separation
Family	Family relationships	Parental relationship	Parental conflict
Family	Family relationships	Parental relationship	Torn between parents/being a pawn

Family	Family relationships	Parent-child bond	
Family	Family relationships	Parent-child bond	Distancing/putting up walls
Family	Family relationships	Parent-child bond	Closeness/connectedness
Family	Family relationships	Parent-child bond	Fearing parents
Family	Family relationships	Respect (or lack of)	
Family	Family relationships	Love, affection and showing care	
Family	Family relationships	Trust	
Family	Family relationships	Honesty	
Family	Family relationships	Secrets	
Family	Family relationships	Empathy	
Family	Family relationships	Harmony	
Family	Family relationships	Power, hierarchy and control	
Family	Family relationships	Power, hierarchy and control	Reversal of power dynamic
Family	Family relationships	Quality time together	
Family	A sense of family		
Family	Supporting family		
Family	Complexity		
Family	Valuing family		
Family	Taking family for granted		
Family	Second chances		
Family	Vulnerability		
Family	Family values and norms		
Family	Children		
Family	Children	Child roles	

Family	Children	Child roles	Daughters
Family	Children	Child roles	Sons
Family	Children	Child roles	Sisters
Family	Children	Child roles	Brothers
Family	Children	Child roles	Only child
Family	Children	Child roles	Subversion or atypical
Family	Children	Child roles	Children as protectors
Family	Children	Child roles	Children as carers
Family	Parents		
Family	Parents	Mothers	
Family	Parents	Fathers	
Family	Parents	Fathers	Being a father figure (or not)
Family	Parents	Step-parents	
Family	Parents	Absent parents	
Family	Parents	Single parents	
Family	Parents	Parenting	
Family	Parents	Parenting	Encouraging violence and leading by example
Family	Parents	Parenting	Support and understanding
Family	Parents	Parenting	Patience
Family	Parents	Parenting	Problematizing the child
Family	Parents	Parenting	Intimidating
Family	Parents	Parenting	Boundaries and consequences (or lack of)

Family	Parents	Parenting	Passive parenting
Family	Parents	Parenting	Punishing
Family	Parents	Parenting	Being firm and clear
Family	Parents	Parenting	Safeguarding
Family	Parents	Parenting	Being reliable
Family	Parents	Parenting	Parents as jealous
Family	Parents	Parenting	Parents in denial
Family	Parents	Parenting	Parents as busy/lacking capacity
Family	Parents	Parenting	Difference between mum and dad
Family	Parents	Parenting	Fair and reasonable
Family	Parents	Parenting	Unfair and disproportionate
Family	Parents	Parenting	Being mean/childish/selfish
Family	Parents	Parent roles	
Family	Parents	Parent roles	Parents as guides/role models
Family	Parents	Parent roles	Parents as employees
Family	Parents	Parent roles	More friend than parent
Family	Parents	Parent roles	Parents as providers
Family	Parents	Parent roles	Parents as friends (positive)
Family	Parents	Parent roles	Parents as enemies/oppressors/punishers
Family	Parents	Parent roles	Parents as confidants
Family	Parents	Parent roles	Parents as protectors/defenders

Family	Parents	Parent roles	Primary caregiver
Family	Parents	Parent roles	Parents as peacekeepers
Family	Parents	Parents as fallible	
Family	Parents	Parents as capable (i.e. skills outside of parenting)	
Family	Parents	Parents as people with feelings	
Family	Parents	Children's expectations of parents (or lack of)	
Family	Parents	Parents as makers/creators/nurturers	
Family	Siblings		
Family	Extended family		
Family	Home		
Family	Home	Leaving home/living away from home/living in care	
Family	Home	Living across different homes	
Family	Home	Poor home environments	
Family	Structure		
Family	Structure	Intact families	
Family	Structure	Split/divided families	
<b>Conflict</b>			
Conflict	Conflict resolution		
Conflict	Conflict resolution	Calm communication	
Conflict	Conflict resolution	Agreeing to disagree	
Conflict	Conflict resolution	Acts of kindness/olive branch	

Conflict	Conflict resolution	Understanding each other in conflict
Conflict	Conflict resolution	Listening
Conflict	Conflict resolution	Solution-focused
Conflict	Conflict resolution	Walking away
Conflict	De-escalation	
Conflict	Triggers/causes of conflict	
Conflict	Escalation	
Conflict	Escalation	Shouting
Conflict	Escalation	Swearing
Conflict	Escalation	Body language
Conflict	Escalation	Invading space
Conflict	Escalation	Butting in/getting involved
Conflict	Avoiding conflict	
Conflict	Winners and losers	
Conflict	Taking sides	
Conflict	Norms around conflict	
<b>Violence</b>		
Violence	Child-to-parent	
Violence	Parent-to-child	
Violence	Parent-to-parent	
Violence	Peer violence (including bullying)	
Violence	Verbal	
Violence	Physical	

Violence	Emotional		
Violence	Psychological		
Violence	Psychological	Control and manipulation	
Violence	Psychological	Projection and deflection	
Violence	Financial and material		
Violence	Sexual		
Violence	Defensive or retaliation		
Violence	Presentation and nature of		
Violence	Presentation and nature of	Devil and angel, Jekyll and Hyde	
Violence	Presentation and nature of	Walking on eggshells	
Violence	Presentation and nature of	A difficult problem	
Violence	Presentation and nature of	No options and no escape	
Violence	Presentation and nature of	A pattern of behaviour	
Violence	Presentation and nature of	A hidden problem	
Violence	Intentionality		
Violence	Victimisation		
Violence	Victimisation	Fear	
Violence	Development (Child development, age, history)		
Violence	Causes		
Violence	Causes	Intrapersonal factors	
Violence	Causes	Intrapersonal factors	Entitlement
Violence	Causes	Intrapersonal factors	Losing control/emotion regulation
Violence	Causes	Intrapersonal factors	Enjoyment in violence/wanting to hurt/up for a fight
Violence	Causes	Intrapersonal factors	Perceiving no consequences
Violence	Causes	Intrapersonal factors	Trauma
Violence	Causes	Intrapersonal factors	Resentment over past events (punishment)
Violence	Causes	Intrapersonal factors	Personality and inherited traits

Violence	Causes	Intrapersonal factors	Inability to verbalise and express emotion
Violence	Causes	Interpersonal factors	
Violence	Causes	Interpersonal factors	Learned behaviour
Violence	Causes	Interpersonal factors	Parenting as cause
Violence	Causes	Interpersonal factors	Child abuse
Violence	Causes	Family factors	
Violence	Causes	Family factors	Witnessing domestic abuse
Violence	Causes	Family factors	Intergenerational violence and abuse
Violence	Causes	Societal factors	
Violence	Causes	Variability	
Violence	Parent responses to APVA		
Violence	Parent responses to APVA	Giving in/Giving up	
Violence	Parent responses to APVA	Fighting back (physically)	
Violence	Parent responses to APVA	Seeking help (police, doctors etc)	
Violence	Parent responses to APVA	Being mean back	
Violence	Parent responses to APVA	Keeping up appearances	
Violence	Parent responses to APVA	Parent denial	
Violence	Protecting		
Violence	Protecting	Standing up to and challenging aggressors	
Violence	Protecting	Protecting themselves	
Violence	Protecting	Protecting others	
Violence	Impact		
Violence	Impact	Physical consequences	
Violence	Impact	Emotional consequences	

Violence	Impact	Emotional consequences	Guilt
Violence	Impact	Emotional consequences	Shame
Violence	Impact	Relationship consequences	
Violence	Impact	Financial consequences	
Violence	Impact	On themselves	
Violence	Impact	On others	
Violence	Protective factors/solutions		
Violence	Norms/acceptability/boundaries		
Violence	Norms/acceptability/boundaries	Accidental/violence in jest/playfighting	
Violence	Norms/acceptability/boundaries	Age/size/vulnerability	
Violence	Talking about violence (Language)		
Violence	Talking about violence (Language)	Defence Mechanisms	
Violence	Talking about violence (Language)	defence Mechanisms	Child denial
Violence	Talking about violence (Language)	defence Mechanisms	Justifying
Violence	Talking about violence (Language)	defence Mechanisms	Amnesia
Violence	Talking about violence (Language)	defence Mechanisms	Avoidance (of talking about)
Violence	Talking about violence (Language)	defence Mechanisms	Detachment
Violence	Talking about violence (Language)	defence Mechanisms	Victim playing
Violence	Talking about violence (Language)	defence Mechanisms	Minimisation
Violence	Talking about violence (Language)	defence Mechanisms	Being defensive
Violence	No physical violence in relationships		
<b>Criminality</b>			

Criminality	Child offending
Criminality	Parent offending
Criminality	Victim of crime
<b>Education</b>	
Education	Struggling in education
Education	Thriving in education
<b>Faith and religion</b>	
Faith and religion	Positive aspects of religion
Faith and religion	Negative aspects of religion
<b>Space</b>	
Space	Personal space
Space	Privacy
Space	Escapism
<b>Technology</b>	
Technology	Mobile phones
Technology	Computer games
Technology	Television
<b>The future</b>	
The future	Uncertainty
The future	Career planning
The future	Things can be better (hope)
The future	Positivity
The future	Negativity

The future	Children as future parents	
		<b>Feelings</b>
Feelings	Feelings of the child	
Feelings	Feelings of the parent	
Feelings	Negative feelings	
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling like a burden
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling ashamed
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling not normal
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling unresolved
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling unsupported
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling victimised
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling like it's your fault
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling left out/odd one out/isolated/unimportant/excluded
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling abandoned/on your own/fear of
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling attacked/got at/getting shit
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling unloved/unliked
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling rejected
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling threatened
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling on edge
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling you are always doing something wrong/not good enough
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling let down
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling it's unfair/unfairly treated

Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling confused
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling under pressure
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling judged
Feelings	Negative feelings	A lack of trust
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling pissed off/annoyed/angry
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling unsettled
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling upset
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling guilty
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling not taken seriously/dismissed
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling jaded
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling betrayed
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling frustrated
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling sad
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling exhausted/tired/burnt out
Feelings	Negative feelings	Feeling intruded upon
Feelings	Positive feelings	
Feelings	Positive feelings	Feeling excited
Feelings	Positive feelings	Feeling supported
Feelings	Positive feelings	Feeling appreciated
Feelings	Positive feelings	Feeling understood
Feelings	Positive feelings	Feeling you're not alone
Feelings	Positive feelings	Feeling justified

Feelings	Feeling indifferent	
Feelings	Feeling numb	
Feelings	Feeling remorseful	
Feelings	Talking about feelings	
Feelings	Managing feelings	
Feelings	Managing feelings	Calming down and letting off steam
<b>Gender</b>		
Gender	Gender of children	
Gender	Gender of parents	
Gender	Masculinity	
Gender	Misogyny	
Gender	Gender roles	
Gender	Patriarchy	
Gender	Matriarchy	
<b>Sexuality</b>		
<b>Health and well-being</b>		
Health and well-being	Parent wellbeing	
Health and well-being	Child wellbeing	
Health and well-being	Mental health problems	
Health and well-being	Mental health problems	Self-esteem
Health and well-being	Mental health problems	Suicide
Health and well-being	Mental health problems	Self-harm

Health and well-being	Addiction		
Health and well-being	Physical health problems		
Health and well-being	Being inactive		
Health and well-being	Being active		
Health and well-being	Hobbies and leisure		
Health and well-being	Stress		
Health and well-being	Stress	Child stressors	
Health and well-being	Stress	Parent stressors	
Health and well-being	Stress	Family stressors	
Health and well-being	Stress	Coping with stress	
Health and well-being	Stress	Coping with stress	Harmful coping
Health and well-being	Healing/forgiveness/moving on		
Health and well-being	Self-care		
Health and well-being	Self-care	Chilling out and taking a breath	
<b>Needs</b>			
Needs	Parent needs		
Needs	Child needs		
Needs	The need to express		
Needs	The need to feel heard		
Needs	The need for attention		
Needs	Needing acceptance		
Needs	Needing reassurance		
Needs	Needing forgiveness		

Needs	The need for enjoyment		
Needs	The need to feel in control		
Needs	Needing boundaries/consequences		
Needs	The need for answers		
Needs	Emotional needs		
Needs	Material needs		
Needs	Needs met		
Needs	Needs not met		
<b>Services and support</b>			
Services and support	Formal		
Services and support	Formal	Taken into care	
Services and support	Formal	Respite	
Services and support	Formal	Family therapy	
Services and support	Formal	1-2-1 therapy	
Services and support	Formal	School pastoral support	
Services and support	Formal	Mediation	
Services and support	Formal	Confidant	
Services and support	Formal	Safe space	
Services and support	Formal	Punitive methods	
Services and support	Formal	Teaching skills	
Services and support	Formal	Teaching skills	Conflict resolution skills
Services and support	Formal	Providing challenge	
Services and support	Formal	Development opportunities	

Services and support	Formal	Being available and responsive
Services and support	Formal	Building good rapport and trust
Services and support	Formal	Creative methods
Services and support	Formal	Sustained support
Services and support	Formal	Parent involvement
Services and support	Formal	Police
Services and support	Formal	Doctors
Services and support	Formal	CAMHS
Services and support	Formal	Pupil Referral Unit
Services and support	Formal	YOS
Services and support	Informal	
Services and support	Informal	Extended family
Services and support	Informal	Peer support
Services and support	Useful/positive experiences	
Services and support	Not useful/negative experiences	
Services and support	Access	
Services and support	Help-seeking	
Services and support	Addressing problems at an early age	
Services and support	Not wanting or ready to engage with support	
<b>Interview details</b>		
Interview details	Interviewee demeanour	
Interview details	Interviewee demeanour	Open

Interview details	Interviewee demeanour	Reflective
Interview details	Interviewee demeanour	Fast-talking
Interview details	Interviewee demeanour	Nervous laughing
Interview details	Interviewee demeanour	Excitable
Interview details	Interviewee demeanour	Upbeat
Interview details	Interviewee demeanour	Polite
Interview details	Interviewee demeanour	Apologetic
Interview details	Interviewee demeanour	Crying/teary
Interview details	Interviewee demeanour	Playful/cheeky/humorous
Interview details	Interviewee demeanour	Bravado/front
Interview details	Interviewee demeanour	One-word responses/lacking openness/lacking engagement
Interview details	Feedback	
Interview details	Feedback	Positive
Interview details	Feedback	Negative
Interview details	The use of challenge and hard questions	
<b>Golden Quotes</b>		

## Appendix 10 – Data summary and integration sheet variables

Interviewee details	Interview insights	Survey insights	Overall insights
Participant ID	Violent to parents?	Violent to parents?	Is this an APVA case on balance?
Pseudonym	Other aggressive behaviours?	Does survey indicate APVA?	Is it an APVA case according to the survey? (i.e. has it met one of the thresholds?)
Sample (College or YOS)	Currently aggressive?	Does the survey reflect the interview?	
Gender	Self-defence?	Notes on comparison	
Age	Father at home?		
Ethnicity	Mother at home?		
Lives with	Victim of abuse?		
	Witnessed DVA?		
	Insight into what APVA looks like?		
	Insight into experience of APVA? (thoughts, feelings, motivations?)		
	Insight into possible causes of APVA?		
	Insight into the impact on parents and/or self?		
	Insight into possible solutions for APVA?		
	Main themes of interview		
	What was the interview mostly about?		
	Reflections		

## Appendix 11 – Participant debrief sheet

### Study Debrief Sheet

#### ***Understanding family relationships and conflict: the experiences, thoughts and feelings of young people.***

Thank you for taking part in our study on family relationships and conflict. The information you have provided us with will be helpful in understanding some of the challenges faced by young people and their families and also some of the ways in which these challenges are resolved.

We hope that the results of the study can be used to develop services that could help families and young people struggling with their relationships at home. Remember, all of the information you have provided us with will be kept strictly confidential and no names will be used in the final report.

If you would like any help or support with any of the issues discussed within this study, please refer to the contacts sheet provided.

In the event that you have any questions regarding the study or wish to speak to someone about withdrawing, please contact myself using the details below.

Thank you very much for your time.

Victoria Baker

PhD research student  
University of Central Lancashire  
Email: [x]  
Mobile: [x]

## **Contacts sheet**

### **Respect**

Respect is a domestic violence organisation that works with young people who use violence and abuse in close relationships.

Call: 0808 802 4040 (free from landlines and most mobiles)

Email: [info@respectphonenumber.org.uk](mailto:info@respectphonenumber.org.uk)

Website: [www.respectphonenumber.org.uk](http://www.respectphonenumber.org.uk)

### **ChildLine**

ChildLine is a private and confidential service for children and young people. You can speak to a ChildLine counsellor about anything for free either over the phone or via an online chat service.

Call: 0800 1111

Email or chat online via the ChildLine website: <http://www.childline.org.uk>

### **The Hideout**

An online space run by Women's Aid where children and young people can go to understand domestic abuse.

Website: <http://www.thehideout.org.uk>

Call the helpline: 0808 2000 247

### **Family Lives**

Advice and support for families experiencing a range of issues.

Call the helpline: 0808 800 2222

Website: <http://www.familylives.org.uk>

## Appendix 12 – YOS parent and consent letter for <16s



University of Central Lancashire  
Fylde Road  
Preston PR1 2HE  
United Kingdom  
Telephone **01772 201201**  
[www.uclan.ac.uk](http://www.uclan.ac.uk)

### Re: Family relationships and conflict project

Dear Parent/Guardian

I am a student carrying out a research project as part of my PhD qualification with the University of Central Lancashire. My research is looking at young people's experiences of family relationships, conflict that may take place in the home, and ways that young people understand and resolve conflict. I am hoping that your son or daughter may be able to help me by participating in this study.

The study will involve your son/daughter meeting with myself and completing a questionnaire, followed by an interview to give them the opportunity to go into a bit more detail. The meeting would take place in a quiet space, at a time convenient to you and your son/daughter, lasting for a maximum of 90 minutes. The meeting would be on a one-to-one basis, as we find this helps young people to feel comfortable in talking honestly about their feelings. The questionnaire and interview will include questions on how well they get on with people at home, what happens when arguments occur, how it makes them feel, and how they resolve or deal with such arguments. Any information provided will be kept strictly confidential, except in the event of disclosure of significant harm to the young person or others, where information will be shared with the appropriate professionals. A selection of questions has been provided for you on the sheet called "Study Questions Sheet" overleaf.

I will be tape recording the interviews to ensure that what young people have said is captured accurately in the final report. However, the interviews will be confidential and the only people who will listen to them will be myself, my research supervisors and my examiner, who will be checking my work. No one will be named in the report.

The research has been approved by ethics committee at the University of Central Lancashire.

If your son or daughter is under the age of 16 and happy to take part, you will need to provide parental consent for them to do so. Attached is the study information sheet given to potential participants, if you could read through this

and then complete the consent form below, ticking the box next to 'Yes' if you are happy for them to take part, or next to 'No' if you aren't. Please then hand the form to either the support worker who handed it to you or myself. If your son or daughter is aged 16 or above they can consent for themselves, although you may still want to read over the study sheet. If you would like to know more about the project, I would be very happy to chat with you. If you wish to do this, please feel free to contact either the support worker who first told you about the study or me at the email or telephone number below.

Many thanks for taking the time to read this letter.

Yours sincerely



Victoria Baker  
PhD student  
University of Central Lancashire  
Telephone: [x]  
Email: [x]

.....  
...

**Re: Family relationships and conflict project**

My child (print name) .....has agreed to take part in your project "Understanding family relationships and conflict: the experiences, thoughts and feelings of young people."

Are you happy for them to take part in the study?

YES

NO

Signed.....Parent/Guardian

Date.....

Please print your name.....

**Please return this form to either the support worker  
or to the researcher**

## Appendix 13 – Example questions for parents and YPs

### Study Questions Sheet

Below are a selection of questions contained within the Family Relationships and Conflict Survey and the interview. If you have any questions regarding any of these, please feel free to contact the project researcher.

#### ***Family Relationships and Conflict Survey (also known as the Conflict Tactics Scale)***

1. I showed my parent I cared even though we disagreed
2. I insulted or swore at my parent
3. I punched or hit my parent with something that could hurt
4. I threatened to hit or throw something at my parent
5. I choked my parent
6. I agreed to try a solution to a disagreement my parent suggested
7. I took money from my parent without asking
8. I slammed my parent against a wall or a piece of furniture
9. I told my mum/dad they were a bad parent to hurt their feelings
10. I showed respect for my parent's feelings about an issue

#### ***Family Relationships and Conflict Interview***

1. Do you get on with your mum and dad?
2. Would you say you are close to your brothers and/or sisters?
3. Are there any arguments in the house?
4. If someone in your home annoys or upsets you, how do you deal with it?
5. If you argue with anyone at home, it is always just verbal arguments or does it sometimes involve pushing, slapping or other more physical arguing?
6. How often do you shout at your parents?
7. If you get physical with your parents during arguments, how often does this happen?
8. When you are feeling angry or upset at home, what things make you feel better? (e.g. playing games, making up, going for a walk etc)

## Appendix 14 – Study information sheet for YOS participants



University of Central Lancashire  
Fylde Road  
Preston PR1 2HE  
United Kingdom

Telephone **01772 201201**

[www.uclan.ac.uk](http://www.uclan.ac.uk)

### **Study Information Sheet**

We would like to invite you to take part in our research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important that you read this information sheet, so you understand what the study is about and what taking part will involve.

Please read this information sheet through carefully. The researcher will help you with anything you are unsure of or do not understand. You can ask the researcher any questions at any stage – please do not be afraid to ask.

#### ***The research project:***

Understanding family relationships and conflict: the experiences, thoughts and feelings of young people.

#### ***So, what is this study about?***

This study is about young people just like you, your experiences at home, your relationships with different family members, and how you deal with conflict. We want to understand why you think family arguments take place, what happens during them, and how they make you feel.

The aim of the research is to gain a better understanding of how to help young people and their families who are experiencing a lot of conflict at home.

Understanding your point of view is a really important part of this. But don't worry, all of this will be done confidentially, which means neither your parents, teachers or friends will get to see or hear what you tell us.

#### ***Why have I been invited?***

You have been invited because you are a young person aged 13 to 18 living in the UK and because you are in contact with an organisation who are providing you with some support.

#### ***Do I have to take part?***

No, taking part in this study is completely voluntary – if you do not want to take part, you do not have to, and you can stop and withdraw at any time.

***What will it involve?***

If you'd like to take part in the study, it will involve meeting with a researcher once to complete a short questionnaire and then have an interview afterwards. The meeting will be just you and the researcher, so no one else will hear what you say and you can skip any questions you don't feel comfortable answering or do not understand. It should take a maximum of an hour and a half, and at the end, we'll give you a shopping voucher to say thank you for your time.

Your interview will be recorded using an audiotape, to make sure nothing is missed out.

***Do my parents need to be told if I take part?***

Yes they do need to be told, but if you do decide to take part, your parents will not see or hear the answers you give. If you are under 16 years of age, they will need to give their permission for you to take part. But don't worry, we'll make sure we pass them all the information they need to decide whether or not they are happy with you doing this.

***What sort of questions will I be asked?***

Please see the "Study Questions Sheet" for a selection of the questionnaire and interview questions.

***Who will see my answers?***

If you do decide to take part, all of your answers and information will be kept confidential. This means that only the researcher and research supervisors will see or hear what you tell us, not your parents or anyone else. The only exception to this is if you tell us something which makes us believe that either you or someone else's health and wellbeing are at risk due to severe violence or crime. If this were to happen, we would talk with you first, and then your information would be shared only with the appropriate professionals.

***How will the information I give be used?***

What you tell us will be collected together with the other questionnaires and interviews we have from other young people like yourself and used in a university PhD thesis – a bit like a long essay. Although interview quotes will be used, all names will be removed from the final report.

***What if I don't want to carry on with the study?***

If you decide you no longer want to take part in the study, you can stop at any time and have your answers removed.

***What will happen after the study – will I get to see the results?***

Once we have the results of the study we can give you a summary if you'd like one. This would be a summary of all the results, not specifically your own. This will give you the chance to tell us any thoughts you may have. All of your comments will be taken into consideration when writing up the final report. A longer summary of the study results will also be made available to you to read through the organisation who are currently supporting you.

***Who can I contact if I have any questions?***

If you have any questions or concerns you can contact the lead researcher Victoria Baker by email at [\[x\]](#) or by phone on [x]. If you have any complaints, you can contact the University of Central Lancashire using the contact details above.

***Ok, so I've decided I want to take part – what do I do now?***

If you would like to take part in the study, please complete the consent form provided, indicating “yes” where it asks whether you would like to participate. Once you have completed the form, pass it to the researcher.

***I don't want to take part – what do I do now?***

If after reading this you decide you do not want to take part in the study, please complete the consent form provided, indicating “no” where it asks whether you would like to participate. Once you have completed the form, pass it to the researcher.

Thank you very much for your time.



Victoria Baker

PhD research student  
University of Central Lancashire  
Email: [\[x\]](#)  
Mobile: [x]

## Appendix 15 – Study information sheet for FE student participants



University of Central Lancashire  
Fylde Road  
Preston PR1 2HE  
United Kingdom

Telephone **01772 201201**

[www.uclan.ac.uk](http://www.uclan.ac.uk)

### **Study Information Sheet**

We would like to invite you to take part in our research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important that you read this information sheet, so you understand what the study is about and what taking part will involve.

Please read this information sheet through carefully. The researcher will help you with anything you are unsure of or do not understand. You can ask the researcher any questions at any stage – please do not be afraid to ask.

#### ***The research project:***

Understanding family relationships and conflict: the experiences, thoughts and feelings of young people.

#### ***So, what is this study about?***

This study is about young people just like you, your experiences at home, your relationships with different family members, and how you deal with conflict. We want to understand why you think family arguments take place, what happens during them, and how they make you feel.

The aim of the research is to gain a better understanding of how to help young people and their families who are experiencing a lot of conflict at home. Understanding your point of view is a really important part of this. But don't worry, all of this will be done confidentially, which means neither your parents, teachers or friends will get to see or hear what you tell us.

#### ***Why have I been invited?***

You have been invited because you are a young person aged 15 to 18 living in the UK.

#### ***Do I have to take part?***

No, taking part in this study is completely voluntary – if you do not want to take part, you do not have to, and you can withdraw at any time.

***What will it involve?***

There are two parts to this study – it may be that you take part in just one, or you may take part in both.

The first part of the study will involve you filling out a questionnaire. It shouldn't take long to fill out and has a quiz on the back once you reach the end. You can leave out any questions you don't feel comfortable answering or do not understand.

The second part of the study will be an interview, up to an hour in length, and will go into a bit more depth about the questions you were asked in the questionnaire. You can stop the interview at any time or just skip questions you do not feel comfortable answering. Your interview will be recorded using an audiotape, to make sure nothing is missed out.

***Do my parents need to be told if I take part?***

No they do not need to be told, as you are 16 years old or over and can consent for yourself. Feel free to show them the information sheet though and tell them they can get in touch with the lead researcher if they have any questions or concerns. If you do decide to take part, your mum and dad will not see or hear the answers you give.

***Who will see my answers?***

If you do decide to take part, all of your answers and information will be kept confidential. This means that only the researcher will see your names, and only the research supervisors will see your anonymised information – not your teachers, parents, or college friends. The only exception to this is if you reveal information that indicates that either you or someone else's health and wellbeing are at risk due to severe violence or crime. If this were to happen, it would be discussed with you first, and then your information would be shared only with the appropriate professionals.

***How will the information I give be used?***

Your information will be analysed alongside other students' and young people's and the results presented in a doctoral thesis. Although interview quotes will be used, all names will be removed from the final report.

***What if I don't want to carry on with the study?***

If you decide you no longer want to take part in the study, you can stop at any time and have your answers removed from the analyses and final report.

***What will happen after the study – will I get to see the results?***

Once we have the results of the study we can give you a summary if you'd like one. This would be a summary of all the results, not specifically your own. This will give you the chance to tell us any thoughts you may have. All of your comments will be taken into consideration when writing up the final report. A longer summary of the study results will also be made available to you to read through your college or institution.

***Who can I contact if I have any questions?***

If you have any questions or concerns you can contact the lead researcher Victoria Baker by email at [\[x\]](#) or by phone on [\[x\]](#). If you have any complaints, you can contact the University of Central Lancashire using the contact details above.

***Ok, so I've decided I want to take part – what do I do now?***

If you would like to take part in the study, please complete the consent form provided by ticking each of the five boxes and filling in your name and signature underneath.

Thank you very much for your time.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Victoria Baker', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Victoria Baker  
PhD research student, University of Central Lancashire  
Email: [\[x\]](#), Mobile: [\[x\]](#)

## Appendix 16 – YP consent form for survey component



### Participant Consent Form – Survey Stage

**Project Title:**

Understanding family relationships and conflict: the experiences, thoughts and feelings of young people.

**Participant ID Number:** .....

**Date:** ...11/10/2016...

1. I have read and understood the "Study Information Sheet" provided to me and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that taking part is entirely voluntary and that I am free to change my mind and withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, articles or presentations by the research team.
4. I understand that my name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentations.
5. I agree to take part in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Your name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Your Signature

*Victoria Baker*

*11/10/2016*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher Signature

**When completed, please return to the envelope provided. Your consent form will be stored securely in the file of the research team at: Harrington Building, School of Social Work, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, Lancashire.**

## Appendix 17 – YP consent form for interview component



### Participant Consent Form – Interview Stage

**Project Title:**

Understanding family relationships and conflict: the experiences, thoughts and feelings of young people.

**Participant ID Number:**.....

**Participant Location:**.....

**Date:**.....

1. I have read and understood the "Study Information Sheet" provided to me and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that taking part is entirely voluntary and that I am free to change my mind and withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I agree that (anonymous) quotes from my interview may be used in the write up of the study and may be published.
4. I agree to take part in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Your name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Your Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher Signature

**When completed, please return in the envelope provided (if applicable). One copy will be given to the participant and the original to be kept in the file of the research team at: Harrington Building, School of Social Work, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, Lancashire.**

## Appendix 18 – Details of cases meeting the parent abuse thresholds (n = 21)

(**caregiver** = aggression has met the parent abuse threshold)

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Family structure	Forms of aggression	Parent victim	Aggression from parents?
001	Male	18	BAME	Two-parent intact	Minor and severe psychological (frequent)	<b>Mother and Father</b>	No
003	Female	16	White	Two-parent intact	Minor physical (once) Minor and severe psychological (frequent)	<b>Mother and Father</b>	No
004	Female	-	BAME	Single mother	Minor physical (frequent) Severe physical (once) Minor psychological (frequent) Severe psychological (sometimes)	<b>Mother</b>	No
017	Male	16	-	Two-parent intact	Minor and severe physical (once) Minor psychological (sometimes) Severe psychological (once) Minor physical (sometimes) Severe physical (once) Minor and severe psychological (sometimes)	<b>Father</b>	No
039	Female	16	White	Step-parent family	Minor physical (sometimes) Minor and severe psychological (frequent) Minor psychological (frequent)	<b>Mother</b> Stepfather	Yes

					Severe psychological (once)		
109	Female	17	BAME	Two-parent intact	Minor physical (once) Minor and severe psychological (frequent)	<b>Mother and Father</b>	No
					Severe physical (frequent) Minor psychological (frequent)	<b>Mother</b>	
124	Female	16	-	Step-parent family	Minor and severe physical (once) Minor and severe psychological (frequent)	<b>Father</b>	Yes
					Minor physical (sometimes) Severe physical (once) Minor psychological (frequent)	<b>Stepmother</b>	
126	Female	16	BAME	Two-parent intact	Minor psychological (sometimes) Severe psychological (frequently)	<b>Mother</b>	No
					Minor and severe psychological (frequently)	<b>Father</b>	
					Minor psychological (frequent) Severe psychological (sometimes)	Mother	
141	Male	16	-	Step-parent family	Minor physical (sometimes) Minor psychological (frequent) Severe psychological (sometimes)	<b>Father</b>	No
					Minor psychological (frequent) Severe psychological (sometimes)	Stepmother	

					Minor psychological (frequent) Severe psychological (sometimes)	Stepfather	
143	Female	17	White	Two-parent intact	Minor psychological (frequent) Severe psychological (once)	Mother	No
					Minor and severe psychological (frequent)	<b>Father</b>	
145	Female	16	-	Step-parent family	Severe physical (once) Minor and severe psychological (frequent)	<b>Mother</b>	Yes
					Minor and severe psychological (frequent)	<b>Father</b>	
					Minor and severe psychological (sometimes)	Stepmother	
154	Female	17	White	Step-parent family	Minor and severe physical (once) Minor and severe psychological (frequent)	<b>Mother</b>	Yes
					Minor physical (frequent) Severe physical (sometimes) Minor and severe psychological (frequent)	<b>Stepfather</b>	
156	Female	16	White	Stepparent family	Minor psychological (frequent) Minor physical (sometimes) Severe physical (once) Minor psychological (frequent) Severe psychological (sometimes)	Mother and Stepfather  <b>Father</b>	Yes

					Minor physical (once)		
					Minor psychological (frequent)	Stepmother	
					Severe psychological (sometimes)		
182	Female	18	BAME	Two-parent intact	Severe physical (once)		
					Minor and severe psychological (frequent)	<b>Mother</b>	No
					Minor and severe psychological (frequent)	<b>Father</b>	
192	Female	17	BAME	Step-parent family	Minor physical (frequent)		
					Minor psychological (sometimes)	<b>Mother</b>	-
					Severe psychological (once)		
					Minor physical (frequent)	<b>Stepfather</b>	
195	Female	16	-	Step-parent family	Minor physical (once)		
					Minor and severe psychological (frequent)	<b>Mother</b>	
					Minor psychological (frequent)	Father	No
					Severe psychological (once)		
					Minor psychological (frequent)	Stepmother	
					Severe psychological (sometimes)		
213	Female	17	White	Step-parent family	Minor psychological (frequent)	Mother	
					Minor physical (sometimes)		No
					Minor psychological (frequent)	<b>Stepfather</b>	

216	Male	-	White	Two-parent intact	Minor physical (once)	Mother	No
					Minor psychological (frequent)		
					Severe psychological (once)		
					Minor psychological (sometimes)		
					Severe psychological (frequent)	<b>Father</b>	
					Minor and severe physical (sometimes)		
220	Female	-	White	Single mother	Minor psychological (frequent)	<b>Mother</b>	Yes
					Severe psychological (once)		
					Minor physical (sometimes)	<b>Mother</b>	
					Severe physical (once)		
					Minor and severe psychological (frequent)		
					Minor physical (once)		
222	Female	16	-	Step-parent family	Minor psychological (sometimes)	Father	Yes
					Minor physical (sometimes)		
					Minor psychological (frequent)	<b>Stepfather</b>	
					Severe psychological (sometimes)		
232	Male	-	White	Two-parent intact	Minor physical (once)	Mother	No
					Minor psychological (frequent)		
					Severe psychological (sometimes)		

Minor physical (once)

Severe physical (sometimes)

Minor and severe psychological (frequent)

**Father**