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# Young People's Accounts of their Violence and Abuse Towards Parents: Causes, Contexts, and Motivations

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## Abstract

**Purpose** The purpose of this study was to explore young people's perspectives on using violence towards their parents – a perspective currently underrepresented in the child-to-parent violence literature, where the accounts of parents and practitioners are prioritized.

**Methods** This paper reports on a thematic analysis of in-depth interview data from 13 young people aged 14 to 18 reporting violent/abusive behavior towards parents. The sample was drawn purposively from a larger mixed methods study involving 221 young people from education and youth justice settings in England, UK.

**Results** Young people's accounts of the drivers/contexts of their harmful behavior highlighted significant experiences of past and ongoing child abuse, domestic abuse, and peer violence. Aggression was described as being both reactive and instrumental, framed as a form of emotional release, a way of hurting or punishing parents (mothers), gaining control over privileges, space and movement, expressing distress, and defending or retaliating in the face of family abuse. The paper presents an ecological, systemic framework for explaining how intersecting factors such as stress, trauma, emotion regulation, parenting, gender, and communication appeared to shape the dynamic in these cases.

**Conclusions** The findings highlight the need for sustained specialist and therapeutic support to improve the emotional wellbeing of mothers and children and address their past/shared experiences of trauma; support young people's emotion regulation capacities; improve parent–child communication; and reduce intra/extra-familial stressors. The systemic and ecological model has potential to inform practice assessments and intervention approaches through focusing holistically on young people's contextualized understandings of violence.

**Keywords** Child-to-parent violence · Adolescent-to-parent abuse · Filial violence · Parent abuse · Family violence · Domestic abuse · Trauma · Adolescence

## Introduction

Children's use of violence towards parents is a complex social problem which has seen increasing interest within the academic, public, and policy arenas over the past 15 years. This is particularly so in Spain, the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Australia, where the majority of published research originates. Terminology and definitions of the phenomenon have varied over time and across geographical locations (see Ibabe, 2020). Here, 'parent abuse'<sup>1</sup> is defined as

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<sup>1</sup> Within this paper 'violence and abuse towards parents' will be represented by the term 'parent abuse', for brevity. However, the authors recognise that not all aggression/violence towards parents constitutes 'abuse'. Alternate terms such as 'child-to-parent violence' or 'child-to-parent aggression' will be used where studies themselves have used such terminology.

‘a pattern of harmful, and in some cases, controlling, behaviour by children or adolescents towards parents or caregivers, where abusive behaviour can be physical, verbal, emotional, psychological, financial, property-based or sexual’ (Baker & Bonnick, 2021). Common to most definitions are the range of physical and non-physical forms abusive behavior can take, forming part of a harmful pattern. Research highlights the array of short- and longer-term harms caused, including physical injuries, poor mental wellbeing, damaged relationships, family separation, criminalization, disrupted education, and financial/material costs. Such harms are most often felt by parents/caregivers, but also other family members, including young people themselves (see Baker & Bonnick, 2021). The phenomenon is highly gendered, disproportionately impacting mothers, who represent more ‘available’ and ‘safer’ targets of abuse (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Holt, 2023). However, fathers can also be affected, particularly by more severe forms of physical violence (Simmons et al., 2018). Evidence on the sex/gender of children/adolescents is inconsistent, with the majority of service-user and criminal justice research indicating son-to-mother abuse as the most common child/parent dyad, but with cross-sectional surveys of community samples suggesting a more equal gender-split (see Simmons et al., 2018). With regards to age, violence can begin in early childhood and extend into adulthood (Holt & Shon, 2018), although the majority of research has tended to focus on adolescence, with a peak age of between 14 and 16 years (Baker & Bonnick, 2021).

Despite young people’s active involvement in the dynamic, their representation in research has been extremely limited, particularly in qualitative studies, which tend to privilege parents’ (particularly mothers’) and practitioners’ experiences and perceptions of the issue (Holt & Retford, 2013; Williams et al., 2017). To date, only a handful of studies include accounts from young people (e.g. Biehal, 2012; Calvete et al., 2014, 2015; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Gabriel et al., 2018), with only two specifically foregrounding their voices (Fitz-Gibbon, 2022; Papamichail & Bates, 2022). Although the voices of parents and practitioners are crucial in highlighting the harms caused to victims, and the constructions of those in supporting roles and the policy frameworks within which they operate (e.g. Holt & Retford, 2013), this leaves significant gaps in understanding how young people themselves perceive and account for their harmful behaviors at home. This is important as young people’s constructions may differ to those of parents and practitioners. Only by understanding young people’s perceptions of their behavior 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).

Studies that have drawn on the qualitative accounts of young people have tended to involve very small samples

(e.g. Biehal, 2012; Calvete et al., 2014; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Gabriel et al., 2018; Papamichail & Bates, 2022), or involve analyses which combine the perspectives of children and parents – masking young people’s specific meaning-making on the issue (e.g. Biehal, 2012; Calvete et al., 2014, 2015; Cottrell & Monk, 2004). Furthermore, most of these studies utilize surveys, which limits the depth and specificity of the qualitative analysis (e.g. Fitz-Gibbon, 2022). Others exclusively draw on the accounts of young people within intervention/service contexts (e.g. Biehal, 2012; Calvete et al., 2014, 2015; Cottrell & Monk, 2004) who may be different to those not in receipt of support (i.e. either in complexity of needs, severity of violence, or visibility). The present study addresses these limitations, drawing on the in-depth interview accounts of young people from both service *and* non-service contexts to explore their views on the causes, contexts, and motivations for violence/abuse towards parents.

Despite their limitations, the aforementioned studies provide useful insights into factors at the family (‘interpersonal’) and individual (‘intrapersonal’) levels that may contribute towards children’s use of violence/abuse at home, the most common being domestic abuse and child maltreatment. Although limited in our understanding of how these victimization experiences may shape the dynamic, studies point to young people’s damaged attachments with parents, feelings of anger, upset, and retribution, violence as a learnt or “modeled” behavior, a form of disclosure, or a defense or protection response. Other explanations emphasize the role of parenting behaviors – specifically, parenting that is either too harsh/rejecting, too permissive, or altogether absent. In many cases, the dynamic is framed as a struggle for power and control (Calvete et al., 2014; Gabriel et al., 2018). Individual factors such as emotional dysregulation or frustration tolerance (Papamichail & Bates, 2022) and substance use (Cottrell & Monk, 2004) have also been suggested. However, these factors are often discussed in isolation from those family factors that may have shaped them. Indeed, in many of the studies, young people’s specific attributions for violence towards parents remain unclear, either due to the utilization of broader definitions such as ‘adolescent family violence’ (AFV) (Fitz-Gibbon, 2022), or due to a lack of analytical depth connecting themes and exploring fully the emotional and relational drivers that may be operating.

## Theoretical Framework

Three main theoretical and philosophical perspectives underpin the research. First, the philosophy that underpins childhood and youth studies with regards the agency of children (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998; James & Prout, 1990), where ‘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' (James & Prout, 1990, p. 8). This study centers young people's voices and meaning-making in the exploration of their violence and abuse at home. Second, nested ecological systems theory or 'the ecology of human development' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which explains child development as a process whereby individual ('ontogenic') characteristics are nested within, and interact with, family ('microsystemic'), community ('exosystemic'), and societal ('macrosystemic') systems and factors. One of the strengths of applying an ecological model in this study is in its consideration of reciprocal interactions (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Simmons et al., 2018), which shed light on how young people, parents, their community, and wider society interact to shape violence/abuse towards parents. Lastly, the study is underpinned by the post-positivist philosophy of critical realism, which stratifies reality into three overlapping domains: the actual, the real, and the empirical (Bhaskar, 1975). The real domain is of particular interest to this study as it includes the underlying structures, powers or mechanisms that cause events within the actual (observable) domain (Clark et al., 2008). This provides a useful framework for conceptualizing social phenomena by uncovering the sometimes invisible but altogether 'real' determinants of human behavior and events. This reflects the aim of the study, which seeks to explore young people's perspectives on the mechanisms or 'real forces' shaping their violence and abuse towards parents within the family system.

## Research Aims

This study aims to explore young people's experiences and perspectives on using violent and abusive behavior towards parents, with the intention of gaining a more holistic understanding of the contexts and drivers involved, whilst also improving the representation of young people within the body of literature.

## Method

### Research Setting and Design

This paper reports on the qualitative component of a larger mixed methods study on adolescent violence/abuse towards parents conducted in an education setting (sixth form college for 16–18-year-olds) and a youth justice setting (a youth offending service, 'YOS') in England, UK (Baker, 2021). Responding to the limitations identified in previous studies (e.g. Calvete et al., 2014), in-depth interviews were used to center young people's voices and shed

light on their inner worlds, perceptions, and lived experiences. In-depth interviews were 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/feelings about violence towards parents.

### Participants and Procedures

The focus of this analysis was 13 young people (7 female, 6 male) aged 14 to 18 from education and youth justice settings, interviewed in relation to their violent/abusive behavior towards parents (see Table 1 for participant details). The sample was purposive, drawn from a larger sample of 221 young people completing a self-report survey on aggressive behavior towards parents. Young people in the education sample were selected if they reported aggression towards parents in the survey *and* agreed at the end of the survey to be interviewed. Young people recruited from the youth justice setting were selected by their key worker. This is a unique sample given the representation of female adolescents, a population much less visible within the literature.

As seen in Table 1, all interviewees reported high levels of adversity. Nine reported abuse by: their father (7), mother (3), and/or stepfather (3); with fathers also often absent (7) and/or abusive to mothers (4). In five cases, interviewees reported parental substance use and in three cases peer violence was described. Four young people were care-experienced. Interviewees' harmful behaviors were in the majority directed towards female caregivers (mothers and/or grandmothers), although three also discussed aggression towards fathers/stepfathers.

To ensure the relevance of the material discussed, interviews were semi-structured, guiding interviewees through their 'most recent', 'first-ever', then 'worst-ever' episodes of violence/abuse towards parents, prompting their recollection of past events and their possible antecedents. This structure is reflective of the 'context specific approach' to interviews developed by feminist domestic abuse researchers Dobash and Dobash (1983), an approach recommended by a specialist practitioner working with young people using violence at home. However, these questions were used as guides only, with participants given significant scope to discuss whatever contexts/experiences/events they felt relevant. Participants were interviewed in person, with interviews lasting between 22 and 97 minutes, and, with consent, were digitally audio recorded. For the education sample, interviews were carried out during the day in students' free periods, in a quiet and private room at the college. For the youth justice sample, interviews took place within a quiet therapeutic space at the YOS office.

**Table 1** Interviewee details

YP Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Sample	Parents/carers	YP violence/abuse towards	Adversities reported
Ruth	Female	18	Education	'Mum' and 'Stepdad'	Mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>YP: abused by father and mother's partner/mental health/substance use</li> <li>Father: absent/mental health/substance use/abused mother</li> </ul>
Penelope	Female	17	Education	'Mum' and 'Stepdad'	Mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>YP: mental health</li> <li>Father: absent/incarcerated</li> <li>Stepfather: mental health</li> </ul>
Ronnie	Female	17	Education	'Mum' and 'Dad'	Mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>YP: abused by father and siblings</li> </ul>
Sarah	Female	17	Education	'Mum' and 'Dad'	Father	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>YP: abused by father</li> </ul>
Ant	Male	16	Education	'Mum' and 'Dad'	Mother and father	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>YP: abused by father/bullied by peers/mental health</li> </ul>
Jodea	Female	17	Youth justice	In care. Sees 'Mum' and 'Dad' (separated)	Mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>YP: abused by father, mother, and mother's partners/mental health/bereavement/in care</li> <li>Father: abused mother/mental health</li> <li>Mother: drug dependent</li> </ul>
Jared	Male	17	Youth justice	'Mum' and 'Mum's boyfriend'	Mother and grandmother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>YP: peer violence/abused by father and uncle/frequent moves</li> <li>Father: absent/abused mother/substance use</li> </ul>
Jason	Male	16	Youth justice	In care. 'Nan', 'Mum', 'Dad' previously	Mother and grandmother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>YP: incarcerated/in care</li> <li>Mother: substance use</li> <li>Father: incarcerated</li> </ul>
Dan	Male	15	Youth justice	'Mum'	Mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>YP: abused by father mostly/more severely, but also mother</li> <li>Father: absent/abused mother</li> </ul>
Pete	Male	15	Youth justice	In care. 'Mum' and 'Stepdad' previously	Stepfather and mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>YP: abused by stepfather/in care</li> </ul>
Jamie	Male	15	Youth justice	'Nan'. Previously in care	Grandmother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>YP: abused by mother and grandmother/in care/criminal exploitation/frequent moves/neonatal withdrawal</li> <li>Mother: drug dependence</li> <li>Father: absent</li> </ul>
Jenn	Female	14	Youth justice	'Mum' and 'Stepdad'	Mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>YP: peer violence/sibling violence/mental health</li> <li>Father: absent</li> </ul>
Jo	Female	14	Youth justice	'Mum'	Mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>YP: ADHD (medicated)</li> </ul>

## Ethical Considerations

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, as laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) (Daley, 2015). The study was approved by the University of Central Lancashire ethics committee, which ensured this balance was achieved, and young participants protected. Age-appropriate information was provided to participants ahead of taking part to ensure their consent was fully informed. Parental consent was also obtained for participants under 16 years. Following the agreed protocol,

any safeguarding concerns that arose were reported to key workers and where necessary safeguarding leads, always with the knowledge of the young person involved. No young people reported any harmful outcomes from their participation, but a number reported benefits: catharsis from discussing their experiences; positive feelings associated with helping others through research; and in one case, pride in managing to articulate their emotions and experiences.

## Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using Clarke and Braun's (2016) six-phase process of thematic analysis. Interviews were

transcribed verbatim, pseudonymized (with some names chosen by interviewees themselves), and uploaded to the analysis software NVivo, where the majority of analyses occurred. A coding framework was developed based on five interviews deemed the richest in terms of their breadth and depth of coverage. To ensure the reliability of coding, two interviews were independently coded by all four authors, and then discussed. This fed into the final version of the coding framework, which reflected an ecological and gendered understanding of violence, and a sociological framing of childhood. An analytic framework reflecting the study's research aim was then developed, with analytic objectives that included describing, exploring, and (where possible) explaining the phenomenon of violence/abuse towards parents. Taking a systemic approach, 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. Quotes

are used herein to ensure that themes and subthemes are grounded in the data and young people's authentic voices.

## Findings

Young people's explanations for and insights into the causes and contexts of violence and abuse towards parents centered around five overarching and interconnected themes: violence, abuse, and trauma; power, control, and agency; communication; stress; and anger and emotion regulation (see Table 2 for themes and subthemes).

### Theme 1: Violence, Abuse, and Trauma

The majority of interviewees reporting harmful behavior towards parents also described past and ongoing victimization experiences involving violence/abuse from or between parents, as well as from peers and other non-family. Nearly half of these young people had experienced multiple forms of victimization. As 'Dan' (male, 15, YOS) stated, "...he [dad] was always hittin' my mum. And when he hit me, I

**Table 2** Themes and subthemes from the thematic analysis

Theme	Subtheme	Description/definition
Violence, abuse, and trauma	Trauma	The contexts/impact of victimization experiences e.g. child abuse, domestic abuse, peer violence
	Resentment and blame	The resentment/blaming of parents (mothers) due to experiences of victimization and trauma
	Violence as an 'adaptive' response	Young people responding to parental violence with violence (i.e. defensive and retaliatory). Also normalizing violence as a response to conflict
Power, control, and agency	Privileges, entitlement, and responsibility	Struggles for power/control revolving around privileges and household responsibilities (chores)
	Strict and authoritarian parenting	Parenting that was overly controlling, strict, harsh, and not age appropriate
	Space, movement, and socializing	Young people desiring freedom of movement and wanting greater emotional and physical space
Communication	Shouting and raised voices	Parents shouting/raising voices escalating conflict and triggering anger
	Aggressive and hurtful language	Parents saying negative things about interviewees or communicating aggressively
	Listening, honesty, and 'emotion talk'	Not listening to each other and a lack of honest, open parent-child communication
	Violence as communication	Young people describing their violence as a way of communicating distress
Stress	Young people's stress	Stress factors affecting interviewees relating to school, friends, and family
	Coping with stress	Young people's lack of positive coping mechanisms to deal with stress/stressful feelings
	Parent and family stress	Stress factors affecting parents relating to mental health, finances, separation, and bereavement
Anger and emotion regulation	-	Interviewees ascribing their behavior to intense feelings of anger, which they struggled to regulate



used to tell me mum and she didn't used to do anything because she was scared of what he'd do to her." Although not always connected explicitly by interviewees, these experiences appeared influential in the genesis of their violence/abuse towards parents, with three key mechanisms acting as drivers: trauma; resentment and blame; and violence as an adaptive response.

## Trauma

Many interviewees gave accounts of violence/abuse inside and outside of the home that could be defined as traumatic. This included direct physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and exposure to domestic abuse – something which at times 'weaponized' them against their mothers.

**Jodea:**... 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 [asthma] inhalers! And I needed my inhaler and he just took it and laughed in me [my] mum's face. So used me as a weapon... to my mum. (female, 17, YOS)

**Ruth:** 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!' (female, 18, College)

'Jenn' (female, 14, YOS) connected the severe peer violence she had experienced to the onset of her violence towards her mother, stating: "I think what it was... it [the attack] just made me violent and aggressive and... I don't know... 'Cos that's what happened to me. People have been violent to me... that's how it's brought me up."

Studies exploring the relationship between childhood experiences of family violence and later perpetration of intimate partner violence have found that, rather than having a direct effect, childhood victimization experiences often operate indirectly via trauma symptoms such as anger, anxiety, stress, dissociation, and substance misuse (Berthelot et al., 2014; Faulkner et al., 2014). For a number of interviewees, victimization experiences appeared to hamper their ability to regulate emotions, with descriptions of enduring heightened levels of emotional arousal and agitation.

**Jenn:** 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 'Orrrrr!'. Know what I mean? I'd probably end up tryin' to throw the phone...

Specifically, Jenn linked the onset of her abusive behavior towards her mother to her own victimization, explaining, "all that's in my head now, after what's happened, is just violence". Further, she identified her emotion dysregulation 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 echoed by Dan who had both witnessed his father abuse his mother and experienced direct abuse from his father, stating, "... when I kick off, I kick off really bad. And it takes about an hour to get me to calm down", again indicating a possible impediment of emotion regulation due to earlier victimization experiences. One possible explanation 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 perceived as *potentially* threatening (i.e. even a verbal challenge) can result in feelings of intense anger, from which violence is more likely to occur (Berthelot et al., 2014, p. 991).

Ruth framed her violence as a way of 'crying out for help' after her experience of sexual abuse by her mother's partner: "I was cryin' out for help but I was doing it in ways that actually were just making people not wanna help me". In this case (as with Jenn), it was the impact of trauma on Ruth's mental health and wellbeing which shaped her abusive behavior, as well as a lack of parental capacity to provide the support she needed – "...they [parents] don't really understand mental health too well. And the only way I could make them understand was just by acting up." (Ruth). This is reflective of the concept of 'expressive violence' (Feshbach, 1964), where behavior is 'primarily an outburst rather than being intended to control others' (Gallagher, 2008, p. 35). Expressive violence sits in contrast to 'instrumental' or 'proactive' violence (Feshbach, 1964; Harries et al., 2024), a category whereby the primary goal is to obtain goods, increased status and ultimately, control.

## Resentment and Blame

Victimization experiences were often accompanied by feelings of anger and resentment, not only towards those responsible (often fathers or mothers' male partners), but more often towards mothers themselves, with violence/abuse acting as a form of punishment for perceived wrongdoing.

**Ruth:** 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'... But I didn't realise I think, how far it was pushing her...'Cos obviously I blame her for everything, even though it wasn't her fault.

When asked why she was only violent towards her mother and not her father, Ruth responded:

**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... 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.

This excerpt highlights acutely the gendered nature of both parenthood and family violence and its shaping of the issue, with mothers representing 'safer' and 'closer' targets of abuse. As expressed succinctly by Jodea – "Me? Being aggressive towards me dad? Are you crazy?!". Similar insights can be seen in recent research by Holt (2023) where mothers experiencing violence from their neurodivergent children construct themselves as 'safe spaces', within and through which their children 'manage' their distress.

### Violence as an Adaptive Response

For some interviewees, violence towards parents was an 'adaptive' defense response to violence *from* parents, "Like, he'll push me and then I'll punch him [stepdad]" (Pete, male, 15, YOS). In such cases, violence had become a minimized, justified, and normalized aspect of everyday life: "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).

**Jodea:** He [dad] has been [violent] 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.

Further, Dan described behaviors which specifically mirrored those of his mother, providing some support for explanations drawing on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977).

**Dan:** 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.

## Theme 2: Power, Control, and Agency

The theme of parental control was evident across all interviews and was described as a site of conflict. 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 in a damaging pattern of violent/abusive behavior towards parents, as a means of regaining power and control over their lives: "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, part of interviewees' frustration came from their sense of entitlement around having such 'privileges' and feeling that parents were being overly strict or unfair by withholding them:

**Dan:** 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 him some. So I was goin' mad because she didn't give me any – she told me she didn't have any.

The refusal or removal of privileges/goods 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 reflect the emotional, and sometimes, physical dependencies young people had on these objects, with greater dependency meaning greater volatility upon removal/refusal.

**Jenn:** 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've calmed down', but obviously she'll want to get it.

**Ruth:** 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 explained that her motivations for using violence to get her mobile phone back were in part, due to the role her phone played in providing social and emotional support and connection: "my phone was like my biggest comfort blanket", but also as a means of equalizing the power imbalance



in the relationship: “tryin’ to establish some sort of hierarchy. And that she wasn’t above me”.

Many interviewees seemed to lack a sense of responsibility towards their parents or the family home, with parental requests around household contributions often met with refusal or violence. In the case of Dan, who described “Small things, like little arguments...like, I’ve not cleaned me room or summit” leading to violence such as “punchin’ the walls an’ that”, a coercive dynamic was also highlighted, with aggressive responses leading to reductions in his mother’s requests to do chores.

### Strict and Authoritarian Parenting

Interlaced through the subthemes were accounts of parenting practices, with interviewees most often ascribing their behavior to 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’.

**Penelope:** I just think that she’s just so strict. When I was 15 I had to ask to go on my iPad, and plan within a week advance to go see someone, when all my friends were going ‘Hey, do you want to come out’ like, that night or that day, and my mum would be like ‘No, you didn’t plan it’. And I’ll be a bit 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.

### Space, Movement, and Socializing

A desire for physical and emotional/relational space and freedom of movement came out strongly in the interviews. This was often connected to interviewees’ increasing desire to spend more time with friends and less time with parents, a widely acknowledged characteristic of ‘Western’ adolescence (Coleman, 2011). As ‘Penelope’ (female, 17, College) described, “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”. For several interviewees who had used violence, parents’ attempts to constrain their movements in and outside of the home often acted as proximal triggers of violent episodes.

**Pete:** Well, like two and a half months ago, 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.

For others, it was the need for emotional/relational space that caused frustration: “And I’ll be annoyed and then she’ll [mum] be there and she’ll ask me questions about it and I get annoyed and take it out on her then” (Jo).

**Jenn:** Like she doesn’t leave me alone when I’m angry... 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... my body will just naturally hit you and I don’t want to. So, leave me alone’ but she doesn’t.

Jo further explained that arguments with her mother became physical when “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” – an account which not only highlights the importance of giving young people emotional and physical space during conflict, but also highlights the centrality of gender to the issue, with mothers’ roles as primary caregivers often making them ‘closer’ and more available targets of abuse. Here, the drivers of spatiality and parental ‘intrusiveness’ are shaped by gender – specifically, the gendered nature of parenting. However, rather than competing or opposing explanations, they are drivers which appear to co-exist and intersect in the genesis of the issue.

In some cases, interviewees had attempted to separate themselves from parents, to decrease the emotional volatility of the relationship. This was done through both formal and informal alternative care arrangements, in an attempt to increase the physical and emotional space available to them.

**Ruth:**...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.

However, for Penelope, such attempts exacerbated, rather than ameliorated problems.

**Penelope:** 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.

### Theme 3: Communication

Communication shaped the parent abuse dynamic 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 interviewees were able to resolve their differences and effectively express their feelings. Family communication patterns therefore acted as proximal triggers of episodes, as well as laying the foundations for future interactions through social learning and the reproduction of communication behaviors. For some, 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 or raising their voices was commonly cited as escalating conflict – “I just don’t like people shoutin’ at me and arguin’ wiv’ me... it just gets me really angry” (Dan) – with interviewees reporting that it triggered feelings of anger, which sometimes resulted in violence: “He’ll [stepdad] start raising his voice. And then, I go out... well sometimes it’ll go a bit further than that. (Pete).

Communication intersected with the previous theme of negotiating power and control, with several interviewees blaming parents for their violent reactions to requests to do chores, claiming it was the way their parents asked them that triggered their tempers: “Like, it’s not the stuff that she [mum] says, most it’s how she says it... Like... [shouting] ‘Go and do your pots!’” (Jenn).

**Penelope:**...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.

### Aggressive and Hurtful Language

For some, it was the meaning behind what parents said which escalated conflict, damaging the parent–child bond and interviewees’ positive self-regard. However, given that parents (mothers) within these accounts were parenting in the face of significant abuse from their children, it is difficult to establish a clear timeline of cause and effect i.e. whether hurtful comments from parents were precursors to or consequences of violence/abuse from interviewees.

**Ruth:** ...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... almost felt like I was 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?’.

For Ruth, her and her mother’s experiences of sexual abuse and domestic abuse hampered their ability to communicate effectively, with Ruth’s aggression and risk-taking around drug use and staying out – framed by Ruth as symbolic attempts to disclose – being compared to those of her abusive father. This resulted in her feeling unloved, and further distancing herself, 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 emphasizes acutely the intersection of gender, violence, and communication in the dynamic.

### Listening, Honesty, and ‘Emotion Talk’

Interviewees described relationships with parents which lacked open and honest discussions about feelings, leaving them feeling unheard and misunderstood. For some, this resulted in frustration and hurt which then acted as a trigger/escalator of conflict. Various reasons were 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 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.

**Ronnie:**... 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. (female, 17, College)

**Jo:** 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.

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

For two female interviewees, violence towards their mothers developed as feelings around their past victimization were either repressed or not understood: “Because in my head hurting Mum was what I needed... because she was hurting me. ‘Cos she wasn’t understanding me” (Ruth). Here, their violence/abuse was a means of punishing their mothers and releasing repressed feelings.

**Jenn:** ‘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 teen-

ager, bein' in school an' that. Yeah but it affected me 'cos I kept it in and obviously I've just... I've just burst.

For Penelope and Ruth, open and honest conversations with parents where they felt understood and heard enabled them to rebuild their relationships and stop their violent and abusive behaviors at home.

**Penelope:** 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.

**Ruth:** ...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!

However, the benefits of communication were only highlighted by older, female interviewees, who over time acknowledged their aggression and tried to address it. For males and younger female interviewees still engaging in violence/abuse at home, there seemed to be 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.

### Violence as Communication

For 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 them the space they felt they needed.

**Ruth:** 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.

### Theme 4: Stress

Interviewees described a range of stress factors reducing the emotional resources available to calmly navigate conflict with parents. Stressors most commonly revolved around

school and friends, but also those victimization experiences previously discussed.

**Penelope:** I think one example would be when I was in year ten [14/15] and we had our mocks [exams] 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.

**Jenn:** 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 [peer violence] happened that many times.

For many interviewees, although not explicitly articulated as drivers for their harmful behavior, multiple contexts of stress were evident: mediating between separated parents; living in local authority care; living with or supporting parents with mental health difficulties, substance use, or financial worries; and seeking the attention of parents who were absent or inconsistent in their lives.

**Ruth:** ... they [parents] won't talk unless I physically make them talk. Everything goes through me. And it has done since I was about 12.

**Jodea:** I went to go and help my mum out 'cos she was rattlin' [suffering withdrawals] and – this was my last offence – and, she wanted to go and get crack [cocaine], to boost her up, and I didn't want her to, so I ended up going to rob her alcohol, just so she could 'ave a drink to bring her up 'cos she was a mess. And, I end up gettin' arrested an' all that...

Some interviewees highlighted a lack of healthy coping resources/mechanisms to navigate and manage their feelings and experiences. In the case of Ruth, she turned to substances as a means of coping – a maladaptive form of coping which escalated, rather than de-escalated, conflict with her mother.

**Ruth:** 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 ... 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[ing]... being like aggy [aggressive] with her an' like, arguing'. But it didn't, it just made things worse... Because as soon

as I'd start coming on a comedown I'd be ten times worse than if I was sober... 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...

Contexts of stress also extended to those affecting parents and 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' (Worrall & May, 1989). Stressors related to partner/child mental health, work, and change/loss relating to births, separations, and bereavement. Again, reflecting the gendered nature of this issue, mothers typically felt the burden of such stressors.

**Penelope:** 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.

### Theme 5: Anger and Emotion Regulation

Difficulties with regulating emotion and managing anger were commonly cited explanations for violence/abuse towards parents. The reasons given for dysregulation were young people's personalities, 'immaturity', trauma, and, in some cases, neurodivergence.

**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... Cos obviously I couldn't control me anger. (male, 17, YOS)

**Ronnie:** Because especially when you're younger you're full of all sorts of emotions and like, you don't know where to put it...

**Jenn:** [Violence is] 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.

**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... like if I'm havin' an argument like, [clicks fingers] I just switch like... I get dead angry pretty fast. (male, 16, YOS)

For some, violence towards objects enabled them to release anger/frustration and 'let off steam'.

**Jason:** 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...

**Jo:** Yeah, I've punched walls... It calms me down.

However, accounts of mothers experiencing abuse highlight that such behaviors can communicate the potential for violence, resulting in daily fear and 'walking on eggshells' (Cottrell, 2001).

## Discussion

This study sought to voice young people's experiences and conceptualizations of violence and abuse towards parents and undertake a more nuanced examination of the potential drivers involved. Historically, qualitative research in this area has focused on the accounts of mothers and practitioners living or working with the issue, with the voices of young people 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 engage more closely with those lived realities. Without understanding *why* young people feel they use violent/harmful behavior at home, we are unable to meet them 'where they are' or understand what can be done to help.

### Building Systemic Explanations

Through in-depth interviews, young people gave rich accounts of the causes, contexts, and motivations for their harmful behaviors at home, with explanations centering around five intersecting themes of: violence, abuse, and trauma; power, control, and agency; communication; stress; and anger and emotion regulation. As per previous studies (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Hong et al., 2012; Simmons et al., 2018), the influencing factors operating within and across these themes can be usefully structured within an ecological framework, highlighting mechanisms at the level of the young person (i.e. at the intrapersonal level or 'ontogeny'), family (at the interpersonal level or 'microsystem'), community (i.e. peers and school, or 'exosystem'), and society (the 'macrosystem') (see Fig. 1). Through examining the systemic interactions *between* these themes and drivers, the study contributes the most in-depth examination of young people's accounts of their violence/abuse towards parents to date. This is vital as it moves us away from simplified mono-theoretical accounts of the phenomenon (Gallagher, 2004) and towards explanations which speak to the complexity of young people's lived experiences.

Interviewees' accounts, although not always explicit in their attributions, pointed to a range of emotional, relational, and behavioral drivers that appeared to be operating and intersecting at all levels of their social ecologies. Histories of trauma in and outside of the home negatively impacted upon emotion regulation and wellbeing, with poor family communication resulting in escalating conflict and damaged

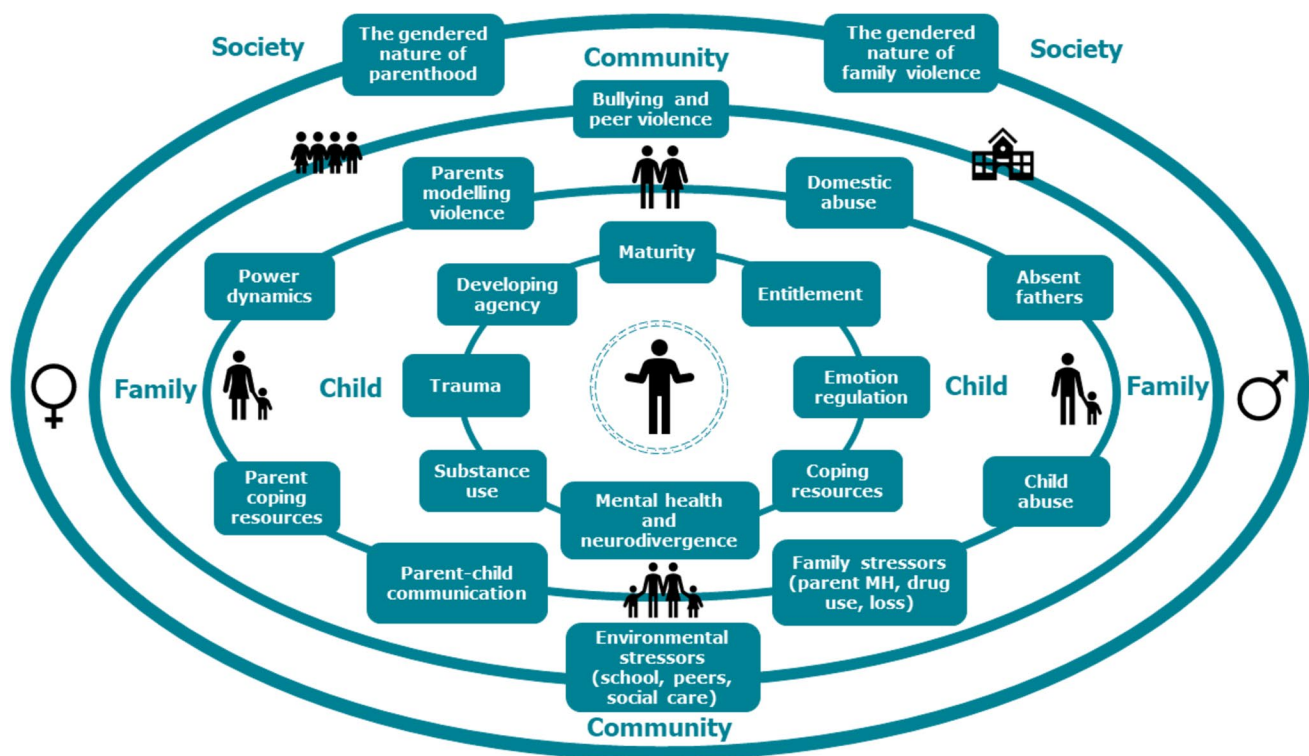


Fig. 1 Influencing factors of violence/abuse towards parents mapped within an ecological model

parent–child bonds. Compounded by child and family stressors, negotiations common to parent–adolescent relationships around privileges, freedoms, and responsibilities, instead resulted in displaced, expressive, and instrumental violence/abuse, mostly towards mothers. Defensive and retaliatory violence was also described, as a response to violence *from* parents. Gender intersected with and shaped a number of drivers at the interpersonal level, most obviously through the gendered nature of parenting and the gendered nature of family violence. Such insights highlight the benefits of taking systemic and ecological approaches to assessment and intervention with families experiencing this issue, drawing on the perspectives of both young people and parents when mapping out the individual, familial, and social drivers that may be operating.

### Histories of Trauma

The vast majority of interviewees were victims of child abuse, peer violence, and/or domestic abuse (see Table 1). As ‘polyvictims’ (Finkelhor et al., 2007), a number had experienced multiple forms of victimization, a factor identified as producing the greatest risk for violence towards parents (Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano, 2023). In nearly all cases, interviewees explicitly implicated these experiences as having contributed to their use of violence/abuse at home.

This finding supports those previous studies highlighting family violence as a significant risk factor for (typically) physical violence towards parents (for a review, see Simmons et al., 2018).

However, this study also responds to the critique by Simmons and colleagues (2018) that although there has been much research into the relationship between past/ongoing family abuse and violence towards parents, few studies have explored the *mechanisms* involved. Through its analysis of processes, this study identified several mechanisms connecting the violence/abuse young people had experienced inside and outside of the home to the violence/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 – the latter mechanisms reinforcing the findings of previous studies with young people (Biehal, 2012; Calvete et al., 2014; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Fitz-Gibbon, 2022; Gabriel et al., 2018; Papamichail & Bates, 2022).

Not all parent abuse involved young people with histories of victimization; for those without such experiences, their histories of developmental difficulties and mental health problems seemed to play a prominent role – factors also identified by Simmons and colleagues (2018). Given the prominence of emotion dysregulation in the accounts of interviewees both with and without victimization



experiences, it could be a key mechanism the two groups have in common, and thus an important target for intervention. Approaches such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) have been identified as effective at reducing emotional dysregulation and enhancing emotion regulation (ER) in both adults and adolescents, with ER Individual Therapy for Adolescents (ERITA) providing an approach tailored to adolescent needs (Saccaro et al., 2024). Such interventions could also be particularly useful for young people with developmental difference, such as those with autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), where dysregulated emotional states can lead to patterns of violence towards parents (Holt, 2023). This is particularly pertinent given the findings of a recent study which identified emotional intelligence (of which regulation is an aspect) as mediating the relationship between adverse childhood experiences ('ACEs') and violence towards parents (Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano, 2023). However, given that interviewees described incidences where parents' approaches to communication and conflict blocked their attempts at regulation (e.g. by shouting, or constraining space/movement), taking a holistic approach and addressing such parenting dynamics also seems an important area of intervention.

## Power and Parenting

Negotiations of power and control were often central to young people's accounts of their violence/abuse, with parents' approaches to parenting – sometimes shaped by harsh and aggressive communication styles – framed as drivers/triggers of parent–child conflict, its escalation, and young people's emotion dysregulation. A number of interviewees described parenting that was overly controlling, strict, harsh, and not age appropriate, with violent episodes often involving a divergence of opinion around the appropriateness of going out, seeing friends, and using technology uninhibited by parental constraint. A handful of parent abuse studies suggest that parenting practices that are more appropriate for younger children can serve to make older children feel infantilized, resulting in feelings of humiliation and resentment (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Ibabe & Bentler, 2016). This seemed to be the case for some interviewees 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 violence/abuse was a way of wrestling back power and control from parents who were perceived as being overly controlling. These findings support those of previous child-to-parent violence (CPV) studies (e.g. Harries et al., 2024), who, through parent-report surveys, identified that violence/abuse from

children was more likely to occur in the presence of parenting which was 'intrusive' and 'power-assertive'. Such concepts also connect to the notion of 'boundary dissolution' (Kerig, 2005), where parent–child enmeshment, role-reversal, parental intrusiveness, and '*spousification*' (involving children in marital conflict) can lead to a disruption of the parent–child power hierarchy.

Lastly, a previously unexplored area prominent in young people's accounts concerned spatiality. Constraints on space and movement, particularly during times of heightened emotion/dysregulation, was highlighted as an escalator of conflict, a trigger of violence, and something young people felt entitled to control. Such insight indicates the potential benefits of giving young people 'space' during conflict episodes (see Omer, 2016), and taking a developmentally sensitive approach to parenting which respects young people's developing agency – an approach recognized within structural family therapy (L. Jiménez et al., 2019a, b). However, the task of 'positive parenting' has been identified as one demanding considerable resource and commitment from parents (Hidalgo et al., 2022), something which may be particularly challenging given the accounts of interviewees with regards to high parental stress and low parental wellbeing.

## Stress and Coping

Utilizing stress and coping theories, young people's violence/abuse towards parents is conceptualized in this study as a harmful coping response to past and present stress, something yet to be fully explored in the literature. 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 (in the case of young people, tolerance for parental control, and for parents, tolerance for challenge). This was reflected in the accounts of interviewees who described the heightened emotional states of themselves and parents immediately preceding violent episodes, sometimes (but not always) due to stressors operating in the background. Such findings are reflective of the research of Nock and Kazdin (2002), who found that abusive adolescents referred for outpatient therapy were less adaptable to stressful situations, and Murphy-Edwards (2012), who proposed children's domestic property violence as a form of maladaptive stress release. This highlights the importance of programmes which aim to bolster young people's internal and external 'coping resources' (Hammer & Marting, 1988) such as emotion regulation and formal/informal supports.

## Gender and Violence

The gendered nature of parenthood and family violence 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 mothers' role as primary caregiver, making them the only available targets of abuse – from both sons and daughters. In fact, the presence of 'daughter-to-mother abuse' challenges the dominant mother-victim/son-victimizer narrative that emphasizes same-sex behavioral modeling (e.g. Boxer et al., 2009; Cottrell & Monk, 2004) and reinforces the need for a more nuanced analysis of gender (Holt, 2013) that does not 'unfairly stigmatize teenage boys' as 'potentially violent men' (Baker, 2012, p. 273). Second, mothers were both explicitly and implicitly blamed for the violence of fathers and partners, potentially due to the expectation that, as primary caregivers, they should have protected their children from harm – a finding previously reported 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 abandonment. As noted by Haw (2010), young people abusive to mothers often appear to have complex relationships with fathers. However, although mothers were described as victims of domestic 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 (Radford & Hester, 2006), alongside children's normalization of their mothers as 'victims' (Holt, 2013). 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 moves to address that failure. As Holt (2013) argues, the gendering of parenthood and blame are important in shaping parent abuse; an assertion supported by a number of the young people in this study.

Reflecting on policy and practice, the findings on family violence, gender, and communication emphasize the importance of support which 1) enables mothers and their children to address complex trauma – ideally through individual therapeutic support and/or specialist domestic abuse support, and 2) provides a safe space for developing healthier forms of communication – such as through

systemic family therapy, or other forms of specialist, joint intervention. However, given that only adolescent girls in this study highlighted the benefits of child-to-parent 'talk' and the prior evidence on boys' 'resistance' to talking therapies (Sharp, 2014), it may be that more gradual approaches which engage with 'action' as well as 'talk' may prove more effective in helping adolescent boys in 'seeing the value of words in negotiating their world' (Sharp, 2014, p. 287). Indeed, insights from this study highlight the centrality of parent–child communication, not only as an escalator/de-escalator of conflict, but as laying the foundations for open and honest relationships with parents that make young people feel heard and understood. Such findings support studies that emphasize quality parent–child communication and secure parent–child bonds/attachment as protective factors against abuse from children (e.g. Ibabe & Bentler, 2016; T. I. Jiménez et al., 2019a, b). However, young people's capacities to regulate their emotions appeared to directly influence their capacities to communicate calmly and effectively with parents. This suggests that programmes with components focusing on improving young people's anger management and emotional literacy, may, in turn, support their ability to communicate with parents in healthier ways (Ibabe et al., 2018).

## Intentionality

The concept of 'intentionality' is contested in the parent abuse field (Bonnick, 2019; Thorley & Coates, 2017), with research arguing both for and against understandings of violence/abuse as 'reactive/impulsive' (e.g. Nock & Kazdin, 2002) or 'proactive/instrumental' (e.g. Calvete et al., 2013). In their systematic review of 'youth-to-parent aggression' (YPA), Ibabe (2020) identified four main typologies of YPA, these being: 'Offensive' – proactive/instrumental aggression in the absence of parental aggression; 'Defensive' – responses to/pre-emptive 'violent resistance' against parental aggression; 'Affective' – impulsive, spontaneous, and expressive violence connected primarily to emotion dysregulation in the absence of parental aggression; and 'Situational' – bidirectional violence which is infrequent, less severe, and occurring within the context of escalating parent–child conflict episodes. Although such conceptualizations could potentially have utility within assessment and intervention planning, the findings from this study – as with Thorley and Coates (2017) and (Harries et al., 2024) – indicate a blurring of such typological boundaries and the simultaneous presence of both proactive and reactive aggression. Here, interviewees described both reactive outbursts caused by distress or a lack of space during conflict, and more instrumental violence intended to deter parents from making requests or demands, or to punish them for perceived harms.

Rather than ‘intentional’, young people’s harmful behavior can more usefully be articulated as ‘functional’, enabling them to: ‘let off steam’ (catharsis); defend themselves; punish; communicate distress; and gain power and control over privileges, space, and movement. Such framing is in line with child behavior and disabilities literature (e.g. Neidert et al., 2013) which argue that ‘all behavior is communication’ – an ethos which aims to avoid the vilification of children/adolescents using harmful or challenging behaviors at home or at school. This does not mean that such actions are to be excused or justified, but only through understanding the ‘functions’ of those behaviors, can practitioners offer young people healthier alternatives.

### Voice of the Child

This study aimed to explore young people’s experiences and perspectives on using violent and abusive behavior towards parents, whilst also improving the representation of young people within the body of literature. Through the use of in-depth interviews, the study centered young people’s voices and positioned them as active social agents who have the right to be heard (James & Prout, 1990). Over the past 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 violence/abuse towards parents 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 et al., 2009), a pattern confirmed through the findings of this study.

Analyses of young people’s accounts highlight both congruence and incongruence with parent conceptualizations of the issue, with one of the strongest areas of similarity being the influential role of children’s victimization experiences. Mothers have consistently reported that experiences of domestic abuse, child abuse, peer violence, and sexual assault can result in children who resent and blame them, view them as ‘weak’, and who struggle emotionally (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Haw, 2010; Holt, 2009). In these studies, the majority of victimization is framed as ‘male-perpetrated family violence’ (Tambasco, 2024), with connected drivers relating to absent or emotionally neglectful fathers (Calvete et al., 2014; Haw, 2010). The accounts of young people here help to validate these insights through firsthand ‘affective knowledge’ – particularly important given that parents can only present observations or hypotheses as to what children

may be thinking or feeling. Adding a layer of depth to these insights, young people’s accounts made visible the internal and relational processes operating within and across these areas, for example, the intersection between shared trauma, resentment, dysregulation, and poor parent–child communication.

Despite a shared emphasis on the influence of male-instigated violence, young people were less likely to attribute their behaviors to macrosystemic factors such as the socialization of male power or masculine archetypes. This sits in contrast to mothers’ accounts describing the imitation of abusive fathers and normalization of their violent and sexist practices (e.g. misogyny) towards women (Cottrell & Monk, 2004). It may be that moving forwards, a more explicit interview focus on social and cultural processes could support young people to consider the potential role that societal influences may play in the genesis of the issue.

Unlike parent accounts, young people were less likely to utilize psychological explanations for their behaviors such as a ‘Jekyll-and-Hyde’ personality or problematic temperament (Calvete et al., 2014; Holt, 2011), although were just as likely to emphasize the impact of regulatory difficulties (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Holt, 2011). This is not necessarily surprising given that the former conveys notions of the ‘bad child’, and the latter, an issue for support. Substance use was also mostly absent in young people’s accounts, whereas numerous parent accounts describe violence/abuse triggered through arguments over drug money, parental requests to cease drug use, and depressed/sensitive mood due to ‘come downs’ (withdrawals) (Calvete et al., 2014; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Haw, 2010). Instead, young people’s reports described *parental* substance use and its negative impacts, including instability and familial stress. It could be that such differences highlight the differing perspectives of those involved, or, that these represent families with differing experiences, issues, and drivers operating.

Lastly, interviewees provided unique insights into how stressors work to reduce parent and child capacity for negotiation, and the processes through which harsh and constraining parenting limits the ability to self-regulate. For example, the limiting of agency and autonomy and the constraining of space and movement were considered acute triggers of violent conflict – with spatiality previously conceptualized as an important site of social control in childhood (James et al., 1998). However, whereas young people spoke mostly of parenting characterized as overly harsh, controlling, and not age appropriate, parental accounts tend to emphasize passive or inconsistent parenting (Calvete et al., 2014; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Haw, 2010; Holt, 2009). Where parents do report high levels of sanctions and control, these are often framed as being in *response* to the abuse they are experiencing, rather than

a driver of it (Holt, 2011). Such differences are important to highlight as specialist support often engages with both parents and children in addressing the issue, and thus needs to engage with the perspectives and framing of each. Although parents may *perceive* their actions as non-threatening, they may not be *received* by children as such. Part of the challenge for practitioners therefore may be in establishing parent–child congruence on the framing of the issue and of relational dynamics more broadly.

## Limitations and Future Research

The study findings represent the perspectives and experiences of a small number of young people involved in violence/abuse towards parents, meaning they cannot be assumed to represent *all* 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 (intersectional) 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. Lastly, the study was limited in its ability to explore how social identities and locations relating to class, ethnicity, race, nationality, and disability may shape the development/presentation of, and service response to, families experiencing this issue. This is important given that socioeconomic disadvantage and developmental difference represent potential additional stressors within the family system (Cottrell & Monk, 2004), with ethnicity and culture potentially shaping the structures and expectations within the parent–child relationship (Calvete et al., 2014). Various intersecting forms of structural oppression (e.g. racism, ableism) can disempower individuals from accessing the help they need (Chantler et al., 2022) and CPV services need to be well-informed as to the ways in which they can design their services to better meet the needs of those who may face additional barriers. Future research should therefore take an intersectional and critical approach to examining such factors and influences to ensure greater nuance in

understanding and greater representation of Minoritized voices and experiences.

## Conclusion

This study sought to uncover young people’s experiences and conceptualizations of using violent and abusive behaviors towards parents, with the aim of generating more nuanced insights into the mechanisms and contexts which may produce and maintain such behaviors. In-depth interviews with young people generated rich insights into the causes, contexts, and motivations behind violence, with interactions between victimization experiences, negotiations of power and control, family communication, contexts of stress, and emotion regulation explored within a systemic and ecological framework. Insights from young people highlight the importance of support which can help both children/adolescents and their parents (particularly mothers) to heal after traumatic experiences such as domestic abuse, communicate more effectively, and articulate and manage emotions, with support needing to be sensitive to the role that gender plays in shaping the dynamic.

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**Data Availability** Supporting data is not available.

## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** Full ethical approval was granted for the study by the University of Central Lancashire (PSYSOC Ethics Committee; URN: PSYSOC 200). Research approval was also granted by NOMS (National Offender Management Service), who reviewed the research to ensure its appropriateness for youth offending service participation. Informed consent was given by all participants for participation and publication, with the parent/s of participants under 16 providing additional parental consent.

**Competing Interests** None declared.



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