Exposing the dark side of parenting:

A report of parents’ experiences of child and 
adolescent family violence

SUMMARY and RECOMMENDATIONS

The Regional Alliance Addressing Child and 
Adolescent Violence in the Home, 
South Australia

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SUMMARY

With this type of violence please know it’s different to other domestic violence in that you can’t just leave the violent person because it is your child and still depending on you in so many ways.

He ran up a massive phone bill and he expected us to pay. He smashed the glass sliding door when we confronted him with the bill.

Shame…. I feel [so much] shame that my son did this to me. How can someone I’ve given birth to lash out at me with no provocation? It’s more shaming than domestic violence. It caused the end of the relationship with my husband.

The main findings from this research were:

- Child and adolescent family violence occurs in many different types of households
- Mothers are most likely to be the targets of this violence and abuse
- There is little community understanding of the issues faced by these families
- The victims of this violence are often held responsible and blamed for the behaviour

*Child and adolescent family violence* is sometimes called *child-to-parent violence, child- to-mother violence, adolescent violence to parents or parent abuse*. This can be physical, psychological, verbal or financial with young people engaging in a variety of behaviours designed to dominate, threaten or coerce parents, other family members or pets. Defined as ‘any action in which children or adolescents engage which causes parents/grandparents/caregivers/siblings to feel harmed, frightened or intimidated’, this behaviour is increasingly being recognised by helping professionals in Australia as problematic. Mothers are most likely to be targets of this violence, however all family members can be at risk. While it is generally accepted that there will be occasional conflict between people who live together within a family, including between parents and their children, this conflict becomes abusive when one person uses threats, force or manipulation to gain power over the other. Child and adolescent family violence has a number of similarities to domestic violence but while domestic violence between adults is well documented, child and adolescent family violence remains a relatively hidden and unexplored phenomenon.

Parents and siblings have reportedly been regularly physically attacked and emotionally tormented with household property damaged and, in some cases, pets injured as a result of the behaviour of these children and young people. Parents report that they have frequently tried to get assistance in dealing with this offending behaviour from a variety of support agencies but have found few services helpful. A number of these parents have also reported being held responsible and blamed for the children’s behaviour when seeking assistance.

Anecdotal evidence from family support agencies in both metropolitan Adelaide and South Australian country areas suggests that child and adolescent violence by both boys and girls towards family members, and predominantly towards mothers, is an increasing issue. This trend is reported in literature both from Australia and internationally.

Designed to make a contribution to the sparse body of knowledge about this problem, a public phone-in was held in November, 2008 in Adelaide, South Australia. The Regional Alliance Addressing Children and Adolescent Violence in the Home facilitated the phone-in, seeking information from parents of children and young people behaving violently in the home. The questions asked included the types of behaviour, the impact of that behaviour on the parent and other family members, the type and value of any assistance sought and suggestions for addressing the problem in the future. This report presents the findings from that phone-in.
OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

I could kill you if I wanted to.

Thirty-four parents took part in this research reporting on the frequency and extent of the violence and abuse of their children toward family members. Of these families 44% were single female parent families and 56% were two parent families. The young people were predominately aged between 12 and 17 years and comprised 65% males and 35% females. They were reported to have engaged in a broad range of physical, emotional or psychological, verbal and financial violence and abuse in these families with much of it considered extreme by family members.

The verbal and physical abuse focused on me. He broke my arm and showed no remorse.

In all families the mother was the target of the young person’s violence and abuse. In many cases siblings of the young person were also subjected to violence and abuse, as were other adults in the household.

People would say, ‘He’s just a kid, why can’t you stop him?’ But when he’s got a rake in his hand and is out of control, I can’t stop him.

I tried many places to get help, but didn’t really get any. There is no support. People don’t understand abusive children.

Parents overwhelmingly reported a lack of available support with significant gaps in services provided by both government and non-government agencies. Parents also reported little understanding or awareness of this issue in the community.

…[we are]…walking on ‘eggshells’ 24/7…

This behaviour affects the health and wellbeing of families in many ways. Parents report that they are depressed, stressed, feeling ashamed, sad, powerless, isolated, frustrated and angry, and often fearful for their own safety or the safety of other family members.

He hit me and I had a black eye so I couldn’t go to work. I had a very high profile job and I just could not go to work with a black eye.

Some parents reported financial impacts in a variety of ways including being forced to take time off from work due to the stress of the situation or due to physical injury inflicted by their child.

People blame me.

A number of parents reported that they had been blamed for the behaviour of the young person.

He’s a lovely and well mannered boy outside the home, but when doors are closed it’s completely different.

I’m scared that as he gets older he will hurt someone.

As a result, these parents said that they often felt powerless, fearful and desperate. They expressed concern for what the future might hold for themselves, other family members and for the young person if appropriate support services continue to be sparse and difficult to access.

The behaviours of these young people that were of most concern to the parents were:

- psychological and verbal abuse of parents and siblings
- physical abuse of family members
- self-harming behaviours such as cutting and medication overdoses.
RECOMMENDATIONS

From this research four key recommendations flow.

Recommendation 1: Raising community and agency awareness about child and adolescent family violence
This can be achieved in the following ways: provision of education in a range of forums including addressing staff in a range of human service organisations, conducting public forums, organising media releases to publicise the issues, developing information booklets for distribution to professionals and the broader community, including schools, and developing links with professional groups.

Recommendation 2: Training and development for professionals about appropriate responses
This can be achieved by development of links with professional organisations and peak bodies. Education can begin for students in all professions working with families and dedicated professional development workshops should also be offered. A commitment from agencies to provide relevant professional training in this area is imperative.

Recommendation 3: Provision of effective accessible support for families
An holistic ‘strengths based’ approach to support is advocated. This can be achieved by a professional commitment to work collaboratively with the family to establish realistic and workable solutions based in existing strengths. A tailored individual approach is imperative based on the needs of the families and professionals must be responsive to the requirements of their clients. Above all, this assistance must be provided in an environment where the parent is not blamed for the problem nor held responsible either overtly or covertly.

Recommendation 4: The establishment of a dedicated agency to provide ongoing support to parents, families and young people
Currently there are no agencies or organisations in South Australia dealing with child and adolescent family violence as their core business. A dedicated agency, adequately funded and supported by governments at local, state and federal levels is imperative to adequately address the complex issues of child and adolescent family violence. This is imperative in order to ensure recommendations from this report are implemented.