

Adolescent Violence to Parents

Jo Howard

Whilst adolescent violence toward parents is an emerging trend internationally, little research has been undertaken in Australia that examines male adolescent violence to their mothers. The Inner South Community Health Service (ISCHS) and Monash University's Child Abuse Research Australia (CARA) recently partnered to undertake research which examined male adolescent abuse and violence to their sole parent mothers. This article by Jo Howard, from the Inner South Community Health Service, summarises the findings from the research component.

The Inner South Community Health Service recently launched its project: *It All Starts At Home*. The project has three components which include: to develop, design, publish and disseminate a resource booklet for parents who experience violence from their adolescents; to deliver two groups for parents who experience violence from their adolescents; and to undertake research about male adolescent violence to their mothers.

The research involved gathering qualitative data from ten women, from a range of cultural backgrounds, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experience of the abuse and violence from their sons. The only requirement to participate in the research was that women were single mothers of adolescent sons who were abusive and/or violent toward them. The women had a total of fourteen male children, between thirteen and nineteen years of age; twelve of these were identified as violent. The women's and children's names in the report are pseudonyms.

The main aim of the research was to enhance the safety and wellbeing of women, through understanding more about the 'causes' and effects of male adolescent violence toward mothers. The research findings are confronting and shocking. They demonstrate complex layers of the experience of abuse and violence, both intra- and inter-generational. The findings indicate that there are numerous and

systemic causes of adolescent violence and that no one causal factor prevails. Whilst there were a number of findings from the research, the three key findings were that the frequency and severity of a son's violence to their mother has serious effects on their mother's health and wellbeing; all sons had experienced their father's or mother's partner's violence to their mother; and that all sons were abusive and violent to their younger siblings (both boys and girls). Violence from partners included physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, psychological and financial violence. The abuse and violence from sons differed in its form and severity, but left lasting and severe effects.

The frequency and severity of violence from the adolescent males to their siblings was highly concerning. Three girls, and two boys who were younger than their male siblings, had experienced their brother's violence and were still unsafe. The effects of this experience were severe and traumatic. Two girls who were older than their brothers experienced verbal abuse from their brothers. Women and siblings of sons who are abusive and violent were psychologically, emotionally and physically unsafe.

Sons had witnessed abuse and/or violence from their fathers or their mother's ex-partners to their mother and some sons' fathers had verbally and physically abused them. Some women in this research had

Adolescent Violence to Parents

separated from their partners when their sons were babies or toddlers, yet their ex-partners still perpetrated abuse against them, through their ongoing contact with their son. Fathers did not support the women to parent their children in a way that was consistent with the mother's values. Fathers were either uninvolved or absent in their parenting or were inconsistent and/or abusive to their child. Many fathers actively undermined the women's parenting by encouraging their sons to disregard and disrespect their mothers. The effects of family violence also undermined women's parenting because women experienced depression, fatigue, stress and other responses to the abuse.

It is well documented that family violence has a cumulative and deleterious effect on early neurological development and attachment behaviours (DHS, 2004). A large and growing body of research in neuroscience, developmental psychology and the social sciences has shown the impact of traumatic events on a child's development. As children attempt to cope, as their brains adapt to the negative environments, their true emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and social potential may be diminished (Perry *et al*, 1995). This can manifest in language and developmental delay, ADHD type behaviours, attachment disorders, cognitive impairment and emotional detachment and/or dysregulation (*ibid*).

The sons in this research had experienced their mothers' ex-partners perpetrating abuse and violence against their mothers. They had been raised by women who were themselves seriously impacted on because of their own experience of abuse. Almost all women in the research reported that their sons had developmental and behavioural difficulties from their early years. This research cannot make any firm conclusions about the link between

experiencing family violence (either directly or through their father's abuse and violence against their mother), perpetrating adolescent violence and having a behavioural or mental health diagnosis but the high incidence of boys with diagnoses warrants further exploration.

Many displayed trauma responses including anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, self-harming, tension and irritability, learning difficulties and difficulty forming relationships. Five sons were diagnosed with ADD, ADHD and/or ODD. One was later diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. One was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. There is no empirical evidence from this research to link the experience of family violence with poor educational outcomes, however the experience of family violence, the high incidence of mental health diagnoses in sons, their poor educational outcomes and their abuse and violence to their mothers seems far from coincidental. The findings of this research support other research that children's experience of family violence is profound and has far reaching effects on their future development and relationships.

The abuse and violence severely affected women's mental, emotional, financial and physical health and wellbeing. Women experienced depression, anxiety, stress, poor health and fatigue. These effects left women living with fear, guilt, shame, embarrassment and social isolation. Women experienced long term health and wellbeing impacts. They felt as though they were walking on eggshells. Women were overwhelmingly devastated that their sons could treat them in this way and that the mother/son relationship was so negative. They felt unsafe in their own homes and powerless to protect their other children. Most were socially isolated and felt their son's behaviour prevented them from having a social life or another relationship.

Adolescent Violence to Parents

Their son's destruction of property and possessions and the impact of the violence on their ability to work meant women's financial situation was significantly compromised.

All women felt grave concerns for their son's future. They worried about their son's employment prospects, because many had dropped out of school and were not actively involved in education, training or work. They worried about their son's abuse of drugs and alcohol. They worried they would become involved in criminal activities. A significant concern was that their son would grow to be an adult who was abusive and violent towards women. Violence to women is unlikely to cease when male adolescents leave home. It is likely they will continue to perpetrate violence toward their intimate women partners, once they are in adult relationships.

Whilst some women articulated the disrespect, abuse and violence from their ex-partners as a key contributor to their son's violence, others considered factors including their families' undermining of their parenting and bullying at school. There is a clear relationship however between boys witnessing abuse and violence toward their mothers and their own perpetrating of abuse and violence toward others, particularly girls and women. Sons' fathers had also frequently experienced violence from their own fathers. The sons' abuse and violence toward their mother reflected their father's or step-father's attitudes and behaviours.

All the women observed that their son used the same or similar words as their father when they verbally abused their mother. They showed a similar lack of respect and contempt toward their mothers, which was reflected in the way they spoke and their behaviour to their mothers. Most women felt their sons had learnt these attitudes and behaviours from their fathers. The

experience of family violence is a risk factor for adolescent males to grow to be men who perpetrate violence against women. Many women interviewed expressed a fear of this eventuating. Responding to adolescent violence to parents is complex because whilst the sons are perpetrators of violence, they may have also experienced significant impacts, including trauma.

Women spoke about the violence in a language that minimised the severity of the violence and its impact. They used this language in relation to their son's violence against others as well as to themselves. They also used minimising language when speaking about their partner's violence. For example one woman spoke about her son 'He's actually just very rough. Very rough, and he thinks he's only playing. Like he'll hit me ... for no reason. I'm not saying it's really violent. I don't necessarily think he's doing it violently but I mean ... do you see what I mean? I never learn, so it does hurt a bit and at the very least it's annoying'.

There are few resources, such as parenting after violence courses, to support women who have left their violent partners and are parenting. Adolescent violence to parents, like family violence to women, is contextualised by secrecy, shame, blame and guilt. It is complex because sons perpetrate the violence against those who have a primary role to care and nurture. Because the women were sole parents they did not have others to back them up. This compounded their isolation and exhaustion. Some women experienced their families as undermining and critical. This makes it difficult for women to seek help and implement strategies to stop the abuse and violence.

Women in this research had gone to enormous lengths to seek help for their sons and to get the abuse and violence to stop. Services were helpful but many did not meet the women's needs. Women

Adolescent Violence to Parents

reported difficulty in getting help for their sons. Services they attempted to engage with were not accessible or flexible. They did not 'reach out' to the women's sons and consequently their sons did not engage with them. Many women reported that services did not respond to the seriousness of the abuse and violence and gave strategies they could not implement.

One woman had contacted six services before she received an adequate response. Many reported that services were not responsive or helpful; in fact some women experienced being misunderstood or blamed. Some felt professionals did not appreciate the complexity and difficulty of the women's situation, nor the women's safety concerns for themselves, their son and the son's siblings. Some women had positive responses from professionals, both for themselves and their son. Four women attended adolescent violence to parents programs. All found these helpful, although one woman found listening to the other participants' stories too distressing.

Some women had attempted to gain professional support for their sons but found it inflexible, inaccessible and unresponsive. For this reason adolescents who have experienced family violence as children or adolescents can easily 'fall through the cracks' and miss out on support that could make a significant difference to preventing their violence to others and increasing their own safety and wellbeing.

One literature review (PADV 2001:73), which examined young people's attitudes to and experiences of domestic violence, showed that 'attitudes that strongly "support" domestic violence are closely associated with notions about supporting male dominance of females (patriarchy)'.

Women in this research were asked to consider the influence of gender in their relationship with their son. Few of the women saw this as significant. However, it could be surmised that gendered ways of being in the relationship between mother and son were stereotypically constructed; for example around the woman as care provider and nurturer and the son as dominant and entitled. The women reported relating to their sons as they had to their ex-partners. They tried to placate them, put their son's needs before their own and others, were wary of offending them and walked on eggshells. Their sons were like their fathers in their expectations and treatment of women. Patricia said: 'He would try and intimidate [female teachers] more than if he had a male teacher. Gender issues [meaning disrespect] towards women ... by the time he was in about grades four and five... He had little respect and didn't see them as equals'. Kate spoke about her thirteen-year-old son's attitudes to women: 'If he sees someone on TV or even girls in the street he might go... "sluts"; he'll say "sluts"'.

Despite the abuse and violence, most mothers felt a connection to their sons. Some women had mixed emotional responses; they could 'hate' their sons at times. Most women spoke of moments of affection, where their sons would cuddle them and they experienced closeness. A few women commented that this closeness was sometimes their son's manipulation designed to get what they wanted or that it could quickly be replaced with 'moodiness'. Like women who experience violence from their partners, they just wanted the violence to stop.

A number of recommendations emerge from this research. Although these recommendations specifically relate to male adolescents who perpetrate violence against their mother, most are relevant to

Adolescent Violence to Parents

adolescent violence to parents, regardless of the gender of adolescents, siblings and parents.

1. Male adolescent violence to mothers must be recognised as a form of family violence that seriously impacts on the safety, health and wellbeing of all family members.

2. Adolescent violence to mothers must be highlighted through awareness raising campaigns that must also publicise supports available to family members, including the adolescents. These campaigns must raise awareness of the incidence, severity and impacts of adolescent violence to women and their children. Support options, including police and criminal justice options, must be available and accessible to women and their children, including the violent adolescents.

3. Further research is needed to explore:

- the frequency, severity and dynamics of male adolescent abuse and violence to mothers;
- the frequency, severity and dynamics of male adolescent abuse and violence to siblings;
- the impact of this violence on mothers and siblings;
- prevention of adolescent violence to mothers and siblings;
- enhancing the safety and wellbeing of mothers, sons and sons' siblings;
- the relationship between adolescent violence to family members and adolescent experience of family violence; and
- best practice response from professionals, including the police.

4. Specialised support must be accessible for women and their children. The Victorian Government (2007) Initiative Every Child Every Chance is a positive step to ensure that children's rights and safety are protected and their development is promoted in culturally,

age and gender appropriate ways. It acknowledges the impact of trauma on children who experience family violence. Early intervention to children who have experienced family violence and timely support to mothers who are escaping family violence is a key to preventing adolescent violence toward mothers and siblings, and adult male violence toward women.

An early intervention approach to support women and children who have experienced family violence must include:

- assessment of the impact of violence on the mother/son relationship and on the family system;
- assessment of the impact on children of living with family violence;
- assessment of the children's relationship with their father (and safety implications of this);
- assessment of the physical, emotional and psychological safety and wellbeing of women and children when adolescent violence is identified;
- assessment of the socio-emotional development of sons and their potential for aggression and violence toward others;
- support to address the impact of the violence on the mother/child relationship and on the family system;
- individual and family counselling for women and non-offending children;
- family counselling which includes the perpetrating adolescent where requested and a family safety assessment must be undertaken;
- the development and accessibility of group programs, including parenting programs to support women who experience adolescent abuse and violence;
- the development of group programs to support children and young people to recover from family violence;
- consideration of how best to engage male adolescents who are abusive and violent toward family members. The service

Adolescent Violence to Parents

response must support adolescents in their recovery from family violence, whilst maintaining the safety and wellbeing of women and siblings; and

- ensuring that programs and resources to support parents who have experienced adolescent violence must be culturally sensitive and recognise family variation and difference.

5. Professional development and training to support professionals to better assess and respond to adolescent violence to parents. Service providers including child protection, family violence services, police and child, adolescent and family services must receive training on adolescent violence to parents and incorporate this into their work with families. An increased awareness and understanding of, and response to adolescent violence and its impact by service providers is urgently required. Professional development and training must support the development and growth of services that support parents who are experiencing, or have experienced adolescent violence.

6. Adolescent violence by sons against mothers should be understood through a gendered lens. Support to family members and the male adolescents should include exploring perceptions about the roles and responsibilities of women and men and the beliefs and attitudes that support violence against women. Support to women who experience family violence must explore men's use of power and control and the impact of their violence and abuse on women's sense of personal agency, health and wellbeing and parenting.

7. Men's behavioural change programs must include a component which supports men, including those that are separated from their partners and have children, to acknowledge the impact of their violence on their family and to support them to address this. Additional resources are required for separate programs for men

who have perpetrated violence against women and have children. These programs should be available for men to attend once they have been assessed to be ready to participate in a parenting program. This assessment must ensure that the safety and wellbeing of women and children is considered. Men should not participate in parenting programs until they have acknowledged and taken responsibility for their violence. Any parenting interventions for men must be accountable to their women partners (and where appropriate their children), and men's progress must also be assessed through information from partners. Services must be pro-active in safely engaging men and must also be aware that men may use this engagement to further manipulate and control women and undermine their parenting and their relationship with their children.

Electronic copies of the research report and the Greek and English versions of the Adolescent Violence to Parents Resource booklet can be obtained through the ISCHS website: www.ischs.org.au

Hard copies can be obtained by emailing jhoward@ischs.org.au

The ISCHS is currently developing copies of the AVTP resource booklet which will be available across the Eastern and North/Western metropolitan regions of Melbourne. They will include relevant contacts for services that can assist and support parents. The booklet is also being translated into three other languages – most likely Arabic, Mandarin and Nuer.

References

- Department of Human Services. (2004) *Towards Collaboration: A resource guide for Child Protection and family violence services*, Victoria
- Partnerships Against Domestic Violence (PADV). (2001) *Young People and Domestic Violence*, Canberra. Commonwealth of Australia
- Perry, P. D., Pollard, R., Blakeley, T., Baker, W., & Vigilante, D. (1995) Childhood trauma, the neurobiology of adaptation and "use-dependent" behaviour of the brain: How "states" become "traits". http://www.childtrauma.org/ctamaterials/states_traits.asp