Support for child to parent abuse

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Raising awareness of child to parent abuse to ensure all frontline workers can recognise signs of harmful behaviour

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Introduction

Child to parent abuse (CPA) is where a child or adult-child (aged 16 years or over) uses harmful behaviours against their parents or caregivers beyond a single incident. Because of the lack of national legal guidance, local areas have different definitions and names for the behaviours, which can confuse victims and professionals alike.

Many areas do not have specific CPA services. Of those services that do provide support for CPA victims or for children who are using harmful behaviours, many do not have identifiers that could assist in data collection. Despite these limitations, estimates agree that CPA could be experienced by up to 10% of families in the UK.

CPA is acknowledged in the **Domestic Abuse Act 2021** and its **statutory guidance**, identifying that if the child is 16 years or over, “the abuse falls under the statutory definition of domestic abuse in the 2021 Act”. However, the age when harmful behaviours are used “typically peaks between the ages of 14 and 16” years (Baker and Bonnick, 2021) and can start much younger. This leaves a significant portion of CPA victims and children displaying harmful behaviours without specialised support, and commissioners without funding to provide such support.

The issues of age in domestic abuse legislation are not limited to CPA, and are being considered in relation to teenage relationship abuse (Weir and Barrow-Grint, 2025). This was highlighted by the case of Holly Newton, a teenager who was murdered by her partner. In this case, the reports and death were not considered to be related to domestic abuse because of the age of those involved.

Indicators of abuse

CPA usually emerges gradually, increasing in intensity over a period of months beyond a ‘one-off’ incident.

Parents may:

- feel a sense of disbelief that their child could be doing this
- move from challenging the child’s behaviour to adapting their own everyday behaviours to facilitate the child

While parents have the perceived power, the child exhibits actual power, including:

- economic (damaging property or incurring fines)
- physical (older children who grow taller or stronger than their parents)
- knowledge and resources (especially in families where English is a second language)
- legal power (for example, fear of criminalising the child can prevent reporting)
- social status (fear of being seen as bad parents)

Specific forms of abuse that are likely to occur in a CPA relationship include:

- verbal abuse
- technology-enabled abuse
- abuse towards pets
- damage to property or causing financial harm

CPA also encompasses the same types of abuse that are listed in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021:

- physical or sexual abuse
- violent or threatening behaviour
- controlling or coercive behaviour

- economic abuse
- psychological, emotional or other abuse

Responses to abuse

CPA “does not comfortably sit within any of the main service areas” (Baker and Bonnick, 2021). There is a lack of continuity in the support provided to cases that are additionally complex because of the “dual position of victim/victimiser that many young people and parents (particularly mothers) can occupy within this abuse dynamic”.

Where the child is aged under 18 years, a criminal justice response is not desired by parents who want to avoid affecting their child’s future or having their child taken away. As such, social care, education, health and the voluntary sector are best placed to hold appropriate interventions.

For parents, one of the worst possible requirements would be that they attend parenting classes. This undermines the traumatic impact of CPA and puts the onus on the victim to resolve the conflict.

Support services

Examples of work being done in this space include the following.

- **North and South of Tyne Safeguarding Children Partnership** provides guidance to the workforce on dealing with CPA through a procedure manual, including:
  - factors to consider when assessing risk
  - appropriate ways to support victims and children who are using harmful behaviours
  - support for strategy meetings and safeguarding
  - ideas for safety planning

- **Family Lives** provides national telephone and web-based support for parents of teenagers and specialist parenting practitioners in schools and health centres.
- **Restore Families** – Adolescent to parent violence and conflict (APVC) is a cognitive-behavioural, skills-based approach to CPA within a restorative framework for children in Kent aged between 13

and 17 years. The eight-week programme aims to support young people to:

- recognise abusive and non-abusive behaviours
- identify rationales used to excuse abusive behaviours
- recognise situations that trigger abusive interactions
- learn non-abusive alternative strategies within those situations
- empathise with the victim's situation

- **Respect Young People's Programme (RYPP)** is an intervention programme for families experiencing CPA that runs for three months with a whole-family approach. It encourages everyone to take a role in stopping the abuse and to learn respectful ways of managing conflict, difficulty and intimacy.
- **Break4Change** is a programme that runs three times a year (once per school term) in Rochdale. Two groups run parallel to each other for a two-hour session each week over a 10-week period. One group is for young people aged between 11 and 16 years, while the other is for their parents. Communication between groups is enabled using reciprocated film recordings. The programme has both education and creative aspects. Following completion, there is a three-month follow-up.
- The **Haven Parenting and Wellbeing Centre** is a service in South Gloucestershire that provides support to parents of adopted or fostered children who display harmful behaviours. The service focuses on empathic listening, 'havening' (a psycho-sensory technique) and strategies.
- **Parental Education Growth Support** is a national charity that supports victims of CPA through drop-ins, peer support groups, empowering parents in crisis (EPIC) sessions, one-to-one support and bespoke workshops. Training is also provided to professionals to help them understand and identify CPA.
- The **Adult-Child to Parent Abuse Toolkit** presents good practice for professionals who work with families experiencing adult-child to parent abuse. The tool provides practical guidance on spotting the signs, assessing risk, multi-agency case management, and where professionals and families can access further support. This was produced as a result of a comprehensive research project.

With the exception of the newly produced Adult-Child to Parent Abuse Toolkit, these services all address CPA when the harmful behaviours are being displayed by a child under the age of 16 years. There is a clear gap in support for adult-child to parent abuse that requires the same nuanced approach. Despite falling under the statutory definition of domestic abuse, these cases

may not benefit from the same approach used to address intimate partner abuse.

At this time, there is little to no research into whether children who display harmful behaviours go on to commit domestic abuse offences as adults. This is partly because of lack of reporting by victims and partly because of a lack of consistent recording by agencies. Further research into this could be valuable and could help to develop intervention programmes.

Summary

CPA remains an under-researched facet of domestic abuse. Because of the legal definition that a perpetrator of domestic abuse is aged 16 years or over, domestic abuse interventions are often not suitable for younger children displaying harmful behaviours. However, it is also likely that adult-child to parent abuse perpetrators are not receiving appropriately tailored support, as the power dynamics in a parent-child relationship differ significantly to an intimate partner relationship.

A government consultation took place to seek views on the definition of CPA in 2023. While this feedback is currently under analysis, victims and children who are using harmful behaviours are receiving a varied, inconsistent response.

Raising awareness is vital to ensuring that all frontline workers are able to recognise CPA. However, without the national legal and local supportive structures in place, an estimated 10% of families will continue to receive substandard or inappropriate support.

- This article was peer reviewed by PS Paul Sanderson, Humberside Police

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