

Young people who use violence in the home

wire



Helping women
make the right
connections

As a mother, carer or relative, you may find that your child is using violence or abuse to intimidate and control you and perhaps other family members as well. It has gone beyond 'acting out' and you feel something's not right.

You may find it difficult to accept that what your child is doing is abusive. Perhaps you feel like it's your fault that your child has 'turned out' this way. Feeling stressed, guilty and ashamed, you may just try and put up with it.

You are not responsible for the abusive behaviour, but you are very important to the solution. By accepting the seriousness of the situation and seeking support, you may find the confidence and skills you need to regain control and heal your relationship with your child. You and your family are entitled to be respected and to live in safety.



Abuse is any act that creates fear and is intended to cause physical, emotional, psychological, financial or property damage to gain power and control over another.

What is abuse?

Adolescence is the stage in between childhood and adulthood—our brains keep developing right up to the age of about 25. During this time it is normal for young people to challenge authority and rules as they prepare to become independent and to run their own lives. So how do you know what is healthy anger and conflict and what is abusive behaviour? You know when something's not right—listen to your own thoughts and feelings.

Examples of abusive behaviour:

Most abusive young people use a combination of verbal and emotional abuse, threats and property damage, as well as physical violence. This behaviour generally gets worse as the young person grows bigger and stronger.

Physical:

- Hitting, punching, shoving, kicking, spitting, throwing things
- Breaking things, punching holes in walls
- Abusive and bullying behaviour to siblings
- Cruelty to pets

Emotional:

- Verbal abuse, swearing, yelling, put-downs
- Playing mind games—trying to make you think you're crazy
- Making threats to run away, call child protection, hurt or kill themselves in order to control you or get their own way

Financial:

- Demanding money or purchases you can't afford
- Stealing money or possessions
- Incurring debts you have to pay

Sexual:

- Viewing or making internet pornography
- Engaging siblings in sexual behaviour
- Excessive or public masturbation

Is it my fault?

Mothers often blame themselves for their children's behaviour. They may even feel their children are punishing them for being a bad mother. This can leave mothers feeling like failures, and feeling they can't manage the situation. This is not helpful. Young people may behave violently for a variety of reasons. Whatever the reason, behaving violently or abusively is not healthy or respectful. Young people must be responsible for their own behaviour and actions.

Who abuses?

Many toddlers show aggression. Although most grow out of this, some slowly escalate as they get bigger and stronger. Although violence can start at any age, it often becomes a major problem between the ages of 12 and 17 years. In 2010/11, Victoria Police was called to 3252 family violence incidents where the offender was under 18; the majority of these incidents (2244) involved 15–17 year olds.

Of all adolescent offenders, two thirds (1895) were male and a third (932) were female. Current statistics suggest that girls are less likely to be physically abusive than boys and are more likely to use emotional abuse.

Risk factors

The following factors may make abusive behaviour more likely, more severe or harder to control. It's important to remember that none of these things 'cause' violence.

Substance misuse—Young people may be more aggressive and show less remorse when they are using drugs and/or alcohol.

Mental illness—Youth mental health services can support you to learn about the mental health issue and how best to both support yourself and ensure your family's safety and wellbeing.

Trauma and loss—War, migration, death, family separation, illness and grief affects how a child develops, copes with stress or conflict, makes decisions or handles emotions. This can lead to abusive and violent behaviour.

Experiencing family violence—

Children who experience family violence may be more ‘at risk’ of using violence themselves, particularly if they are male children. They may begin to see violence as a normal and acceptable way of communicating or resolving conflict. Like adults, they use violence to gain a temporary sense of control and power in an out-of-control situation where they feel powerless and worthless.

Men’s violence toward women teaches children to be disrespectful to their mother and undermines her authority. Children who grow up with these abusive attitudes unchallenged are more likely to abuse and use violence against their mother.

Sexist attitudes—Common attitudes in our society allow males, including young men, to feel they are entitled to control women and the household. Physical strength and dominance are seen as defining qualities of being a man. Such attitudes and peer pressure can encourage macho behaviour in boys.

Attitude of over-entitlement—Parents sometimes put their energy into giving their children whatever they want at the expense of instilling them with a sense of responsibility. Some children see it as their parents’ job to make them happy—at any cost!

Temperament—Sometimes there is just one ‘difficult’ child in a family who has personality traits such as being stubborn, impulsive and combative.

MYTH: *“They’re just letting off steam, they can’t help it”*

REALITY: **Abusive young people can control their behaviour.**

They choose to use violent or abusive behaviour to control and disempower you.

MYTH: *“They’re also victims themselves”*

REALITY: **Abusive young people may have suffered trauma, grief or loss—but this is an explanation, not an excuse.** By helping them learn to handle their feelings better you will be doing them a big favour.

In 2007/8, 74% of parents who sought an intervention order against their child were mothers.

Who is abused?

Family violence and abuse perpetrated by adolescents is a problem that cuts across all types of families from all backgrounds. However, for many reasons, mothers are more likely to be abused. In 2007/8, 74% of parents who sought an intervention order against their child were mothers (Department of Justice 2009, p. 45).

Women are still primarily responsible for parenting and so mothers may be the ones in charge of 'laying down the law' while at the same time feeling more protective of the children. This is particularly the case for women who have left their partners—sole and separated mothers are the most frequent victims of violence and abuse from their children.

There is no evidence single parenting itself leads to abuse by children, unless there has been past family violence. However, sole parents may lack support to respond to their children's violence, be more isolated and find it harder to deal with abuse from their children.

Young people may also abuse younger brothers and sisters, who may consequently suffer developmental problems, and long-term emotional and relationship difficulties where the abuse is serious. It is important that you intervene. **For more information visit the Siblings Abuse Survivors Information and Advocacy Network website www.sasian.org**

If your child is being cruel to pets or animals, take this seriously, as it can be a sign of very serious issues. **For more information see the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) Victoria website at www.rspcavic.org/services/education/children-and-animal-cruelty/** Child Protection will also respond to severe cases of animal cruelty to pets or animals.

MYTH: "They must be mentally ill/on drugs/traumatised..."

REALITY: There is no excuse for violence. Some abusive young people may have a mental health, drug or alcohol issue, but they can still control their behaviour.

Regaining control and healing the relationship

Abuse thrives in silence and isolation. Parental abuse is still a taboo subject, like domestic violence was twenty or thirty years ago. Although it may be difficult and embarrassing, it is very important to let others know what is happening.

Breaking the silence by finding a safe place to talk about what's going on at home, whether it be with trusted family and friends or support services, can be the first step on your journey of regaining control and healing the relationship with your child.

It is usually the mother who recognises this problem and seeks help. Gaining the support and agreement of other adults in your child's life to follow a consistent approach to discipline is very important. This could include your spouse, your ex-partner, and your child's teachers at school – the school's welfare officer may be a helpful contact for this.

It is very common for the abusive child to blame you and refuse to take responsibility for their behaviour and refuse counselling or other supports. Don't be discouraged. By getting help for yourself and working on your own behaviour and responses, the situation at home can improve.

Much as they push the limits, young people need clear rules and consistent consequences to feel safe and secure. Although an abusive child may appear to enjoy their power, they are usually far happier when their parents take control and provide guidance and leadership. By holding them accountable for their actions you are not violating their rights – you are teaching them how to behave appropriately.

It is extremely difficult to remain calm and act appropriately in the heat of the moment – they really know how to 'push your buttons'. You might benefit from learning different ways of relating to your children and dealing with negative emotions and conflict. Getting outside support will help you to reflect on your own responses.

Gathering information and getting support will also help you regain confidence, stay in control, follow through and negotiate what is a long-term process. There is no quick fix, but the sooner you take action, the sooner the situation will improve, and you may avoid having to take more drastic actions later.

MYTH: *“It is because his father was violent”*

REALITY: **Violence is not biologically inherited** – it results from learned attitudes and behaviours.

What can I do to protect myself and my other children?

If your child is using physical violence, you should create a safety plan. This involves thinking about what you are already doing to protect yourself and others, and what works.

Sometimes you may be able to tell when a situation with your child is escalating towards an abusive confrontation. At other times young people seem to just 'go off' without warning. There is a limit to how much you can try to reason with someone while they are in a rage. Sometimes the only way to de-escalate such situations is simply to remove yourself and stop interacting altogether.

Have a plan for how you and your other children will leave the house and where you will go. Make sure your other children know how important it is for them to stick to the plan. Keep your wallet and car keys handy and in the same spot.

Inform yourself about legal options

It is important to learn about your legal rights and the rights of your child so that you are clear about the full range of options available to you, even if you choose not to take legal action.

Physical abuse, threats, having weapons, theft and damage to property are criminal offences. For your safety and the safety of others it may be necessary to consider police involvement. A visit from the police will deal with the immediate emergency and may also help your child realise the severity of their actions. However, it is not the job of the police to provide long-term solutions.

It is possible to take out an intervention order to protect yourself from your child's abusive behaviour. You can do this even while your child is still living at home. While an intervention order may serve as a 'wake up call' for your child, you must be willing and able to enforce the order. If you make threats and don't follow through on them, your child can end up feeling more powerful.

For more information see the Victoria Legal Aid booklet *Safe at Home*.

Asking them to leave—the last resort

Removing the abusive child from the home for a short time until you feel they have changed their behaviour may work. Unfortunately, in some circumstances, the removal of the abusive child from the home on a more permanent basis may be the only solution to ending the abuse and/or violence. If they are not ready or able to strike out on their own, they may be able to access support through government programs.

It is also important to get support for yourself at this time. It is common for mothers to experience a range of mixed and conflicting emotions—relief, grief, guilt, freedom and failure.

MYTH: “It’s because I’m a bad mother”

REALITY: This is more than a parenting problem.

There are many complex reasons why young people are violent at home. You can help protect family members and support them to change, but ultimately they are responsible for their own behaviour and choices.

Types of support

Anonymous support through a phone service like WIRE or Parentline is a good place to start. They offer a safe place to talk things through, explore options and put you in touch with further support.

Individual counselling can offer a supportive space to explore what's happening at home. Different counsellors have different areas of expertise; look for someone who has a family focus in their work. (See *WIRE's Counselling Information sheet*)

Family counselling treats the family as a whole, but may not be appropriate if your child is intimidating.

Support groups offer understanding and learning from others in a similar situation. There is a small but growing number of support groups specifically for parents with abusive children. You can read about mothers' experiences of support groups in Anglicare's booklet *'Adolescent Violence: Women's Stories of Courage and Hope'*. You can also find parenting services and support groups in your local area—visit the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development website www.education.vic.gov.au/ecsmanagement/intervention/services/family.htm#H3N100A5

Family violence services generally specialise in partner violence. However they may be able to offer assistance and support in understanding your situation, especially if there is a history of violence in your family.

Parenting education teaches valuable skills such as setting boundaries and handling conflict. Look for resources geared specifically towards parenting abusive young people, as more generalised advice might not suit your situation. Specialised publications available online such as *Adolescent Violence To Parents—A Resource Booklet For Parents And Carers* (Inner South Community Health Services, 2008) give you practical information and tips on dealing with the problem.

www.ischs.org.au/Portals/0/Documents/Adolescent%20Violence%20to%20Parents.pdf

Support for young people struggling with abusive behaviour is available through peer support groups and programs. Giving young people the opportunity to talk to adult friends, family, sporting coaches or mentors can be very helpful. You can also access specialist services and support if you need to address related issues such as drug and alcohol problems, mental health issues, or a history of family violence.

Other support services you may find useful are community health centres, family services and support agencies, local police Youth Liaison Officers, the Youth Support Service, school welfare officers and your local GP.

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Where do I go for help?

In an emergency call the police at 000.
Otherwise, call Victoria Police Centre 9247 6666 to speak to the Family Violence Liaison Officer at your nearest local police station.
Call WIRE 1300 134 130 to find the contact number for your local child and family services (Child FIRST).

Child Protection Crisis Line 131 278

Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria www.dvrcv.org.au

Family Relationship Advice Line 1800 050 321

inTouch (Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence) 8413 6800
1800 755 988 • www.intouch.asn.au

Kids Helpline 1800 551 800 • www.kidshelp.com.au

Men's Line Australia 1300 789 978 • www.menslineaus.org.au

Nurse-On-Call 1300 606 024

Parentline 13 22 89 • www.education.vic.gov.au/earlychildhood/parentline/

Stepfamilies Australia 9663 6733 • www.stepfamily.org.au

Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service of Victoria 9322 3555 / 1800 015 188

Youth Support Service 1800 339 897 • www.ysas.org.au

For legal assistance

Federation of Community Legal Centres (Victoria) www.communitylaw.org.au

The Law Handbook www.lawhandbook.org.au

Victoria Legal Aid 9269 0120 / 1800 677 402 • www.legalaid.vic.gov.au

Women's Legal Service Victoria

9642 0877 / 1800 133 302 • www.womenslegal.org.au



Call WIRE 1300 134 130

for the cost of a local call (Telephone Interpreter Service available) 13 36 77 (TTY National Relay Service for hearing-impaired women)



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Drop by Women's Information Centre, Melbourne



Email inforequests@wire.org.au



Visit or chat online at www.wire.org.au

