

Child-to-Parent Violence and Abuse: why families need to open up when the nation locks down

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Introduction

This article will critically reflect upon how the situation in which children are aggressive, violent and/or controlling towards their parent/s, known as child-to-parent violence and abuse (CPVA), may have been exasperated during the Covid-19 pandemic. The particular focus is upon CPVA and familial problematic communications.

It is understood from the emerging data that family violence has increased during the pandemic (UK Parliament 2021). To date, however, there is limited quantitative analysis regarding CPVA during the pandemic, but it could be assumed that there is a similar increase. There are media reports suggesting that there has been an acute rise in CPVA (Lee 2020; Dias 2020) with reported incidents such as; “violent outbursts, verbal attacks and even cases of sexual abuse have been reported by families” (Dias 2020, p.1).

Drawing upon a UK study regarding family experiences of CPVA during the covid-19 pandemic, conducted by Miles *et al.* (2020), who found that 70% out of 104 parents already experiencing CPVA, reported a rise in violent episodes during the first

lockdown and practitioners reported a 69% increase in referrals. CPVA, therefore, is something that needs further attention, not only now, but as we come out of the pandemic, to enable the provision of targeted support for affected families.

What is child-to-parent violence and abuse?

To give further context, CPVA, as defined by Holt (2016) is 'a pattern of behaviour, instigated by a child or young person, which involves using verbal, financial, physical and/or emotional means to practice power and exert control over a parent' (2016: 1). CPVA impacts the whole family, having long-term negative effects. For example, for parents, relationship breakdown and financial difficulties (Clarke et al. 2017) and they may need to be safeguarded. For the child, behavioural and emotional problems, such as depression and school maladjustment (Ibabe *et al.*, 2014a; b) and they should be recognised as vulnerable. As Miles *et al.* (2020) address the tensions between recognising the parents as experiencing abusive behaviours from their child and the vulnerabilities of the child who is being violent and abusive, makes it harder to respond meaningfully. CPVA is complex and multi-causal, with mental ill health, substance misuse, trauma, family violence and abuse and familial problematic communications all being linked.

What do we mean by problematic communication?

Problematic communication can be understood as parents withholding information from the child, and/or being extremely critical, including a lack of parental warmth and low levels of emotional support, across the family life course (Paulson *et al.*

1990; Pagani *et al.* 2004; Contreras and Cano 2014; Jiménez *et al.* 2019; López-Martínez *et al.* 2019). When this is linked to CPVA, the child perceives a lack of emotional warmth and low emotional support from their parent, leading to the child feeling stressed and frustrated, as well as silenced, resulting in a cycle of problematic communications and abuse (Jiménez *et al.* 2019; López-Martínez *et al.* 2019; Oliver 2019).

Why is problematic communication important to consider during the pandemic?

This cycle of problematic communication and abuse could be exacerbated by lockdown stresses. Examples of which have been reported by WHO (2020) as: deteriorating mental wellbeing, health problems, bereavements, financial worries, unemployment and employment uncertainty and feelings of isolation and fears associated with the impact of this pandemic on individual and societal levels globally. Miles *et al.* (2020) found similar fears and anxieties were linked to aggression. Therefore, it could be supposed that these stressors in conjunction with lowered communication efficacy may have problematic results, and the potential to intensify CPVA, due to children unable to communicate worries and anxieties, and feeling emotionally unsupported by parents who in turn feel unable to talk freely and openly to their children.

Why should families 'open up' during lockdown?

Positive communication within families has been shown to be a protective factor for prosocial behaviours (Ibabe and Bentler 2016; Jiménez *et al.* 2019). Jiménez *et al.* (2019) found that a protective factor against perceived stress by adolescents was open communication. Therefore, children need to feel listened to, so that they can open up discussions and express their feelings, and parents need to feel, not only safe to listen to their child/ren, but also to hear their child's needs, while being listened to in their turn by the family.

This notion, of being able to 'open up' is complex because of the different factors that influence positive communication, such as, the confidence to talk about problems or respond appropriately to others and maintain the quality of relationships. As López-Martínez *et al.* (2019), noted in their research regarding problematic communication and CPVA if a child is experiencing offensive or avoidant communications within the family, then they are likely to internalise these communication processes and consequently their thoughts and feelings become inhibited, leading to anger and frustration and in turn, CPVA.

Opening up, therefore, seems to be key to breaking this cycle of negative communication and CPVA, and therefore it can be assumed that both internal and external family support is required for this to occur. For example, for families where problematic communication is an issue, they would need encouragement to work towards having more open communication with one another, leading to building a better quality of family relationships. In order to facilitate this, support services need to work alongside families, to help them develop positive communications while safeguarding vulnerable children and their parents.

The inconsistent and/or lack of specific professional support for families experiencing CPVA has been addressed in literature over the years (Miles *et al.* (2020). The lockdown restrictions however, led to further barriers in accessing such support and this affected families when they most needed it. This may have negatively impacted upon the opportunity for families to 'open up' and therefore, further exacerbate the already existing difficulties.

What are the key issues for research, policy, and practice?

More recently, there has been a surge in CPVA research, but there have been very few studies focused on communication patterns, especially studies that investigate the perspective of each family member, including learning from the lived experience of children. In fact, Holt and Lewis (2021) note there are gaps in research with detailed accounts of children's experiences.

The pandemic has made it harder to undertake qualitative research, not just for risk assessment and safeguarding purposes, but also because holding in-depth interviews requires developing a rapport, as well as observing paralinguistic expressions, all of which may be difficult to achieve virtually. The implications of this are that family members and especially children's voices, may continue to be further silenced. Gaps will remain in policy and therefore practice because the tensions of how best to effectively respond to families experiencing CPVA will continue, and these will affect the roll out of effective professional training and resources.

Guidance promoting positive communication patterns, both in early help and tailored towards families experiencing CPVA, may go a long way to help families open up to each other and reduce the stress and frustration perceived by children and their parents. Unless the cycle is broken by more effective communication, this will continue and become an intergenerational legacy.

Conclusion:

To conclude; this article proposes the need for further research on the short and long-term impact upon the systemic functioning of families experiencing CPVA. A method that uncovers these interactions and influences on the different systems across the life course, including the impact of problematic communications, would support this. The use of longitudinal biographic research provides a good fit to review the whole family system by interviewing children (including siblings of the violent child), the parents and the wider personal and professional support networks. Such a biographic systems approach may result in a better understanding of the lived experience of those experiencing CPVA and the twists and turns they need to navigate in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When thinking about families in need of tailored support and assistance, we still have to overcome the stigma attached to CPVA that effectively silences many people.

Therefore, the nation needs to open up these conversations as well, in order to shine a light on this form of family violence and abuse.

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