



Research Brief Adolescent Family Violence

Introduction

Adolescent family violence is a complex and serious issue that is increasingly recognised in Australia (Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, 2010). The term refers to any act of family violence committed by an adolescent who is generally 12 to 18 years of age (Department of Human Services, 2014). Such violence includes physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economic abuses that occur within families, intimate relationships, extended families, kinship networks and communities (Department of Human Services, 2013). These acts are often committed in an attempt to gain and maintain power and control, with the perpetrators coercing, threatening, intimidating, destroying property and possessions, and/or physically assaulting their parents (Howard, 2015).

Actions are often misunderstood or minimised because of the child's age; parents may struggle to understand how their child can be violent to them, meaning that there is a shame associated with this type of crime. Parents are unable to leave as they might be in another domestic violence situation and the child may still be dependent on their care (McKenna et al., 2010). 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 (McKenna et al., 2010). Two recent major Australian reports on family violence, the COAG Advisory Panel on Reducing Violence against Women and their Children (2016) and *Not now, not ever: putting an end to domestic and family violence in Queensland*, do not refer to adolescent family violence.

Definitional Issues

In the literature, there are inconsistencies around the definition of 'adolescent'. Some agencies such as Victoria Police record adolescents as being from 0 to 17 years old, while others range from 15 to 19 years old (Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016). In service settings, a 'young person' is a person up to the age of 25 years old. In most instances, however, adolescence is defined as between 10 to 18 years of age.

Characteristics of Adolescent Family Violence

While adolescent violence is less gendered than adult family violence, patterns still demonstrate that the majority of victims are women, and the majority of perpetrators are young men (Condry & Miles, 2014; Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016). Australian studies have found that around 65 percent of those aged 17 years or younger who are violent towards their parents are male (McKenna et al., 2010; Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016). It has been reported that young males are more likely to use physical aggression than young females, and mothers are the most likely targets of the violence (McKenna et al., 2010).

The majority of parents reported that these young people were between 8 and 16 years when they began to behave violently in

the home, although some of the parents indicated that their child began behaving violently or abusively before 6 years of age (Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016). Risk factors include witnessing domestic violence themselves, an inflated sense of entitlement, health, behavioural or learning difficulties, unstable family life, substance abuse, socio-economic disadvantage, previous trauma as a result of abuse or bullying, temperament, and negative peer influences (Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016).

Australian Prevalence

Annual Victoria Police data since 2006 shows a consistent nine percent increase in family violence incidents where the alleged perpetrator is under 18 years of age (Department of Human Services, 2013). In 2011-12, police responded to 2,344 family violence incidents where the alleged offender was less than 18 years (Department of Human Services, 2013). A younger sibling was present in 66 percent of incidents (Department of Human Services, 2013). The growth in reported incidents is commensurate with the wider growth of family violence reporting over the last five years (Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016). Severity of the violence depends on age and gender, with the severity of abuse by sons increasing incrementally between the ages of 10 and 17 years, whilst parental abuse by daughters increases between the ages of 10 and 13 years, and declines after that age (Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016).

Effect on Parents and Other Family Members

This behaviour affects the health and wellbeing of families in many ways. Parents report that they experience depression, stress, report feeling shame, sad, powerless, isolated, frustrated and angry, and are often fearful for their own safety or the safety of other family members (Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, 2010; McKenna et al., 2010). Related physical and mental health problems include heart problems, 'being worn out' and tired, exhaustion, not eating properly, high blood pressure, stress, migraines and depression (Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016). Behaviour was a drain on parents' financial resources in 24 percent of cases, including lost income, and destroyed or broken household property (Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016). In 63 percent of cases the parent indicated that their child's violent and abusive behaviour had impacted on their relationship with their partner (Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016).

There are also ongoing effects of the adolescent's behaviour on other family members including grandparents and siblings, who in some cases reportedly begin to mirror the adolescent's behaviour. There are tensions between the adolescent and siblings, as they feel that the adolescent receives special treatment or is an embarrassment to them.

Parents may be reluctant to report their children's violent behaviour to the police for various reasons, including social isolation, feelings of self-blame, shame and denial; lack of acknowledgement from community agencies; treating the abuse as 'typical male behaviour'; fear of retribution from the adolescent; and fear their child may get a criminal record if the violence is reported to police (Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, 2010; Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016).

Help from Professionals

The majority of parents in one Adelaide-based study had sought help from professionals (McKenna et al., 2010). These parents reported many contacts with various professionals in the welfare, medical, judicial and education systems, including both government and non-government support services. However, only 25 per cent of these professional contacts were considered helpful. Common factors in the contact that parents regarded as helpful were: understanding, being nonjudgmental, suggesting useful strategies, listening and timely support. Common factors in the contact that were not helpful include a lack of resources, a lack of understanding, the high cost of counselling fees, long waiting lists, parent blaming and professionals not listening to parents (McKenna et al., 2010).

Findings from RCFV Report A consistent theme raised in submissions before the Commission and in relevant literature is that the family violence, youth services, family services and justice sectors generally have limited understanding of adolescent family violence and are ill-equipped to address it. The Commission (2016) also notes that the Victorian Government is currently trialling Adolescent Family Violence Programs in three locations. Based broadly on the United States Step Up program, the initial evaluation findings are positive.

Need for Further Research

While there has been considerable investment into preventing and responding to adult family violence, there are few Australian programs that address adolescent family violence (Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, 2010). Support is currently provided through the parents, but they are not always able to provide the guidance needed, and will need support themselves. Parents overwhelmingly reported a lack of available support with significant gaps in services provided by both government and nongovernment agencies (McKenna et al., 2010). Parents also

reported little understanding or awareness of this issue in the community (McKenna et al., 2010).

Integrated service responses that meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people are required (Department of Human Services, 2013; Howard, 2015). Such programs would reduce the likelihood that the young person will use family violence in their future relationships, as well as increasing the immediate safety of family members and strengthening family relationships (Department of Human Services, 2014).

References

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