Adolescent-to-parent abuse and frontline service responses: does Munro matter?

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He'd just come in and he'd lost his temper with some kids outside, come in and just took it out on the house. Well, he actually picked me up and threw me across his bedroom as well and he's only 14 … and all they said to me was … the youth panel man turned round to the magistrates and said 'I think Mrs Smith should have a parenting order' and they just agreed straight away. But to me I was disgusted because it's me that got David arrested, hoping that he'd calm down, for when he gets older, sort of thing … I don't want him growing up and ending up in prison.

(Lone mother of three, England)

Parent abuse is a hidden yet prevalent problem which presents a number of challenges to practitioners who work on the frontline in the fields of social care, criminal justice, education and health. Current practice struggles to meet these challenges and, as a consequence, families continue to be at risk. With the recent publication of the Munro Review (2011), this chapter explores the extent to which it might enable better service responses for such vulnerable families. The chapter begins by outlining the defining characteristics of adolescent-to-parent abuse and explores why it presents distinct challenges to frontline practitioners who may nevertheless have considerable experience of working with other forms of family violence. In particular, this chapter discusses the tools that are currently available to practitioners who work in policing, youth justice, social care, education and health when faced with cases of parent abuse, and why such tools are inappropriate as a response. The chapter concludes by assessing how the key themes for change underpinning Munro's recommendations might enable the development of more appropriate statutory responses to parent abuse and highlights areas which require more fundamental consideration.

Adolescent-to-parent abuse: a challenge to frontline services

Parent abuse has not yet achieved the status of 'social problem' which other forms of family abuse have, such as child abuse, intimate partner violence (IPV) and elder abuse. Nevertheless, it shares a number of important features. It is characterised by a persistent pattern of behaviour[1] which uses physical, emotional or economic means to practise power and exert control over a parent, and it may involve shouting and screaming, blackmail, threats, demands and insults, and/or physical violence. Its impact can be profound: research has been relatively consistent in finding feelings of fear, guilt, shame and despair in parents and feelings of helplessness and inadequacy in the child or young person. Relations with other family members are likely to be strained and – as with other forms of family abuse – it has been implicated in damage to physical and mental health. It can also disrupt the employment, educational and financial stability of individuals and families. While the hidden nature of parent abuse inevitably makes measuring its prevalence difficult, research in both the UK and elsewhere estimates that it features in 5–15% of families (see Holt, in press, for review).

Like other forms of family abuse, parent abuse is often characterised by a gendered dynamic: mothers are far more likely to report victimisation and sons are slightly more likely to act as perpetrators. It is also linked to other forms of family abuse, in that it often features in families where there is a history of IPV (Boxer et al, 2009; Kennedy et al, 2010), and it has been found to co-occur in families where there is parent-to-child abuse (Brezina, 1999; Ullman and Strauss, 2003). Siblings are also likely be victims of the perpetrating child (Laurent and Derry, 1999) and there is some evidence that young people perpetrating parent abuse are more likely subsequently to develop abusive behaviours towards dating partners (LaPorte et al, 2011).

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[1] It is important to recognise that parent abuse goes beyond 'one-off' incidents or the everyday experiences of children 'hitting out' at parents, which can happen for all sorts of medical, developmental and situational reasons.

However, despite similarities with other forms of family abuse, there are a number of characteristics that set parent abuse apart and make it a particular challenge to frontline practitioners who work with children and families. First, it takes place within a very specific discursive context where parents, and particularly mothers, are routinely 'blamed' for the alleged wrongdoings of their children. Such discourses of parent blame are culturally reproduced through a range of institutions, but they have taken a very distinct form over the past 15 years through political rhetoric concerning youth crime and the invocation of the notion of a 'parenting deficit' (Goldson and Jamieson, 2002). This has culminated in the implementation of parental responsibility laws, such as those which enable courts to issue parenting orders in cases where young people offend or are deemed at risk of doing so. Cases have been recorded of parenting orders being issued to parents as a result of their victimisation by their son/daughter (see Holt, 2009); the challenge to the statutory services, which must then work with these parents (who, as the opening quote highlights, feel they have been 'punished' for their own victimisation), cannot be underestimated. Second, parent abuse involves an inversion of how we normatively conceptualise power relations between parents and their children. While children are variously constructed as 'innocent', 'at risk' and 'dependent' (James and James, 2004), parents are constructed *in relation to* children, and therefore notions that parents are 'responsible', 'safe' and 'self-determined' permeate and shape the configuration of *all* statutory services which work with them. The existence of parent abuse challenges these conceptions.

In part, it is this unsettling characteristic of parent abuse that makes it so hidden, as parents often feel ashamed and guilty about what is happening, and consequently find it difficult to come forward and seek support. Such silence is mirrored in the policy landscape, and the lack of any statutory practice guidance means that frontline services are unable to respond to parent abuse appropriately or consistently. Given Munro's criticism that current statutory guidance in relation to child protection is *so extensive* that it limits the effectiveness of practitioner responses, the lack of any statutory guidance in relation to family protection is particularly conspicuous. To illustrate the consequences of this policy silence, the following section discusses the ways in which frontline services are currently equipped to deal with

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adolescent-to-parent abuse when cases arise, with specific reference to policing, youth offending services, children and adult social care and education and health services.

Current statutory responses to adolescent-to-parent abuse

Criminal justice responses to parent abuse

Parents may contact the police directly to report a violent incident, or cases may be referred to the police from other services. Often parents report that they contact the police because they want to send a message to their child that their behaviour is unacceptable – perhaps through the police giving their child 'a good talking to'. However, research that has sought parents' accounts of parent abuse, including their experiences of seeking help, suggests that this rarely happens (Edenborough et al, 2008; Holt, 2009, 2011). More frequently, parents report feeling that that parent abuse is not taken seriously by the police (Cottrell, 2001; Edenborough et al, 2008; Holt, 2011; Haw, 2010) and that police intervention is counterproductive in sending a message to the child/young person that they are immune from formal sanctions (Tew and Nixon, 2010). Other parents have reported feeling blamed by the police, resulting in a reluctance to make any further contact (Cottrell and Monk, 2004; Haw, 2010). Fear also produces a barrier to parents seeking police support: parents fear that they themselves may be charged with an offence (a fear which is often exacerbated by their child's threats that they will make a complaint) (Eckstein, 2004). They may also fear being subjected to institutionalised discrimination based on 'race', sexuality or social class (Cottrell, 2001).

Unlike cases of other forms of family violence, individual police forces do not generally utilise a specific 'category code' to monitor incidents of parent abuse, and there is no existing police guidance on how to respond to such incidents. Therefore the tools available to the police are very limited beyond arresting the young person for a criminal offence (if they are over 10 years old). Furthermore, while a range of referral tools are available to the police in cases of child abuse, IPV and elder abuse (such as notification to child protection services in cases of suspected child abuse or referral to a monthly multiagency risk assessment conference (MARAC) in cases of IPV), there is no policy or practice guidance

available when the perpetrator is a minor and the victim is an adult. While there is evidence that MARACs have been used in very serious cases of assault against parents, the options available are extremely limited when it comes to working with a person under 18 years because MARAC's aim is to safeguard the victim and this cannot be done meaningfully when the 'perpetrator' is living in the same home as the 'victim' and is under their care. Because many parents will resist their child being arrested, and many more will resist testifying in court against them, there is often no official 'case', no 'lead contact' and nowhere to refer the parent. The next time a parent contacts police for help, the process will therefore start again, with different personnel offering a different level of service and different advice.

For youth offending services, parent abuse is likely to be brought to the attention of practitioners when they begin working with young people as a result of their involvement in other offences. Again, with no assessment tools available to help identify parent abuse, cases tend to be recognised inadvertently through observation or parent disclosure. The tools to enable youth offending services to respond appropriately to parent abuse are very limited, since the service is set up on the assumption that youth offending takes place *outside* the family home and the root of youth offending is situated *within the family*. Thus many post-sentence interventions for young people, such as fines, community reparation or home curfews, are wholly inappropriate for cases of parent abuse and are likely either to have no impact on family life or, worse still, enable further damage to already strained family relations. Similarly damaging is the use of parenting orders, which force victims to attend parenting programmes to make them 'take responsibility' for the crimes of their child, which may intensify already existing feelings of resentment and shame (Holt, 2009).

However, beyond this rather punitive and parent-blaming youth justice framework, there are signs that local youth offending teams – in collaboration with other agencies – are developing their own intervention programmes specifically designed for work with parent abuse. For example, Break4Change was developed by Brighton and Hove youth offending team in collaboration with the targeted youth support service, RISE (a local domestic violence support service), the family intervention project and the local CAMHS. It is also worth exploring overseas developments, such as the use of restorative justice, which was piloted successfully in Canada and Australia (see Doran, 2007; Daly and Nancarrow, 2009).

However, one challenge to such developments is the more fundamental question of whether a criminal justice response, which might usefully alleviate abuse in the short term (or at least send a strong message as to its unacceptability), is ultimately in the best interests of a child and his/her family in the longer term.

Local authority social services' responses to parent abuse

If criminal justice frameworks struggle to accommodate the problem of parent abuse because they are premised on the notion that parents are *responsible* for youth offending, then social care frameworks face a similar conundrum in that they operate according to the principle that children and young people are *vulnerable* and are therefore in need of safeguarding from potential (adult) perpetrators of abuse and violence – particularly adults who bear caregiving responsibilities. In terms of children's social care, research suggests that practitioners who come across parent abuse struggle to reconcile these professional orientations with the notion that it is *a child* who is perpetrating violence against an *adult victim* (Nixon, in press). Nixon (in press) also found such assumptions evident in social work practitioners' explanations of parent abuse, which particularly drew on notions of a 'parenting deficit'. Indeed, research has found social workers to be unfamiliar with the term 'parent abuse' and reluctant to use the term when talking about children, preferring the terms 'challenging behaviour' or 'poor parenting', for example (Hunter et al, 2010; Nixon, in press). That inappropriate responses can flow from this is powerfully highlighted in a case recounted to Nixon (in press) where a mother who had threatened to leave the family home due to violence from her son was threatened by social services with prosecution for child abandonment.

As stipulated by the 1989 Children Act, there are two levels of threshold that need to be met to instigate an intervention from children's social care: first, a risk of 'significant harm', where there is 'ill treatment or impairment of health or development' (Children Act, 1989: s 47); and second, where a child is 'in need' if they are not achieving or maintaining 'a reasonable standard of health or development' (Children Act, 1989, s 17). At the highest threshold, a care order or a supervision order may be made when a child is 'beyond parental control' (s 31) – a term which one could argue epitomises the parent abuse dynamic. Certainly, in some cases, the child him/herself may be experiencing ongoing abuse and a

child protection response may be appropriate. It may also be appropriate if a child is sexually abusing their parent, although such cases are very rare. However, in most other cases, the perpetrating child is unlikely to pass this threshold. If siblings are also being victimised, they may reach the necessary harm threshold, but sibling abuse is often minimised both within professional discourses (Phillips et al, 2009) and among families themselves (Kettry and Emery, 2006).

If the child meets the lower threshold, a range of family support services should be provided. These might include respite care, financial support, transport assistance and advice and counselling. However, the scant evidence that exists suggests that parents do not receive such services, despite direct and repeated requests for help (Hunter et al, 2010; Holt, 2009, 2011; Nixon, in press; Parentline Plus, 2008). There may also be barriers preventing some parents from seeking support from social care services, the most pertinent being parents' fear that their child (and their siblings) may be taken into care – a fear which has been documented in relation to parents' fears of social care involvement in cases of IPV (Stanley et al, 2009) and suspected child abuse (Cleaver and Freeman, 1995). However, it is important to recognise that, given the found links between parent abuse and earlier abuses in the family, the young people involved in parent abuse may be already known to social services, perhaps pointing the way to how social care services might be involved in a larger public policy agenda to combat the problem of parent abuse.

Of course, social care services also include adult social care, and this may be another avenue where parents might receive support if experiencing parent abuse. Indeed, the policy guidance document *Safeguarding adults* states that 'all citizens should have access to relevant services for addressing issues of abuse and neglect' (ADASS, 2005: 4) and cites article 2 (Right to life), article 3 (Freedom from torture) and article 8 (Right to family life) from the 1998 Human Rights Act in support of this access. However, the policy guidance that follows makes it clear that only adults considered to be 'at risk' are qualified to receive the multiagency response which is set out in the document, defined as adults who 'may be eligible for community care services [and] unable to protect himself or herself' (ADASS, 2005: 4). And while the document recognises that practitioners also have a public duty to those adults *not* covered by the policy guidance (p 5), demands on resources and a lack of

policy guidance for those adults who are *not* normatively constructed as 'at risk' means this is not being realised in practice.

Education and health services' responses to parent abuse

A recent study by Parentline Plus (2010) concerning parents' attempts to seek support for their aggressive children found that schools and GPs were most frequently contacted by parents, with help also sought from educational psychologists, health visitors, psychiatrists and CAMHS. However, the little research that exists suggests that parents received little support from either (Holt, 2011). In terms of frontline responses, any practitioner working with children and young people is likely to be directed by the child protection procedural guidance produced by their local safeguarding children board (LSCB). To take one example, the London Safeguarding Children Board (London SCB, 2010) guidance recognises that 'children of both genders can direct physical, sexual or emotional violence towards their parents, siblings and/or partner' (s 5.20.2). And although the rest of this section is oriented (and worded) towards 'other children' as the potential victims, referral and assessment is recommended when there is an allegation or suspicion of physical and/or emotional abuse or harm towards 'another child *or adult*' (my emphasis) (s 5.20.6). The guidance states that practitioner responses should involve discussion with the organisation's manager and nominated safeguarding children adviser, whereby a common assessment (CAF) may take place (which may include the identification of a 'lead professional' and the delivery of a CAF action plan) before deciding whether to refer the case on to the local authority children's social care department. Similar guidance is recommended in *Safeguarding children affected by gang activity and/or serious youth violence for child practitioners* (London SCB, 2009), which points out that children and young people who perpetrate violence may need to be recognised as 'both a victim and a perpetrator' (p 15). Thus the guidance suggests a two-pronged approach where professionals must assess and support the child/young person's welfare and wellbeing at the same time as responding 'in a criminal justice capacity' (s 6.1.2). However, this document fails to identify violence against parents in the home as a particular issue, where responding 'in a criminal justice capacity' may be more complex.

Each LSCB also provides guidance for practitioners when there is suspected domestic violence in the home, and this may also be relevant to those working with children and young people. For example, *Safeguarding children abused through domestic violence* (London SCB, 2008) suggests that practitioners should assess the risk to both the mother (using CAADA risk identification checklist) and to each child in the family home (using DVRIM) and then decide whether to refer the case to children's social care services for further assessment. Contact may also be made with the mother (if the violence is disclosed by another person), and safety plans can be developed. However, despite such guidance, concerns have been raised in particular about health professionals' responses to domestic violence and a number of strategies are under development concerning how primary care trusts (PCTs) and their partners can better identify and respond to suspected cases of domestic violence (DH, 2010). Furthermore, Munro raised her own concerns regarding the potential sidelining of safeguarding practices in the midst of ongoing health reform. Overall, this provides little assurance that current health sector responses to adolescent-to-parent abuse are adequate.

Meeting the challenges of adolescent-to-parent abuse: does Munro matter?

The Munro Review (2011), and the government response to it, suggests that child protection requires a 'child-centred system' and Munro's 15 recommendations draw on a number of overarching themes which should underpin the future practice of services which come into contact with children, young people and their families. Given the current policy silence surrounding parent abuse, and its devastating effects when left unchecked, this would seem like an ideal opportunity to develop frontline practice in a way that recognises parent abuse and enables a more adequate service response than the one we have at present. The following section draws on a number of overarching themes for change that underpin the Munro Review to discuss their potential in achieving this goal.

Community-based multiagency working
Munro's review emphasises the importance of community-based multiagency services in providing early intervention to children and families most in need. However, as this chapter has discussed, parent abuse presents particular challenges for multiagency working. For a

start, cases are not brought to statutory services' attention through any one pathway: the report by Parentline Plus (2010) found that parents are likely to seek help from more than one of a range of services (including criminal justice, social care, education and health). Therefore we need a common framework to enable different agencies to identify, monitor and respond to parent abuse consistently to ensure that parents are not continually referred on to different agencies without end, as is presently the case. This should also enable us to begin measuring its prevalence and characteristics in particular local contexts, and enable the emergence of practitioner expertise on what kind of responses work best. At the very least, we need to develop a category code so that incidents of 'parent abuse' can be flagged up, enabled by a clear definition and assessment tool which all statutory bodies can work with. Furthermore, given the complexity of parent abuse, it is clear that a number of agencies need to be involved in the response, since the agency most appropriate to deal with the 'perpetrator' may not necessarily be the one most suitable to respond to the 'victim' or other family members. Furthermore, different responses may be required depending on the form and severity of the abuse. However, one particular service does need to provide a single point of contact to follow a case through. If this doesn't happen, cases may be left to drop, leaving parents lost and practitioners not knowing the outcome of a referral and whether it worked or not. This means that the development of professional knowledge – something encouraged by Munro – would be severely hampered.

Early intervention and an 'early help offer'
Munro's emphasis on early intervention provided collaboratively by statutory, voluntary and community organisations includes the suggestion of an 'early help offer' in cases where families' needs 'do not meet the criteria for receiving children's social care services' (Munro, 2011: 78). This seems particularly relevant in cases of parent abuse where, as we have discussed, the family do not meet the criteria of support from social services, nor from any other statutory service. Other voluntary and community organisations, such as victim support, domestic violence organisations and parenting support organisations, frequently receive requests for help for parent abuse but, as is the case in the statutory sector, they are configured in ways that construct the parent and child within normative victim/perpetrator demarcations, which can make responses (such as a women's refuge) inappropriate. It is clear that something beyond existing community/voluntary support will be needed to

support the statutory sector in its response to parent abuse, although the Munro Review –
and the government response to it – says little about the future roles of the voluntary and
community sectors, or how they will be resourced.

A shift from a 'compliance culture' to a 'learning culture'

Munro highlights the limits to what an over-bureaucratic system can achieve and calls for
less centralised prescription and greater decision-making freedom for frontline
practitioners. To inform this decision-making, Munro emphasises the need for national
dissemination of good practice, with training and accreditation where relevant. In relation
to parent abuse, there is some good practice already emerging within youth offending
services, but at present these are developed locally and there is no requirement for
nationally accredited standardised services as for adult intervention programmes. This
means that other practitioners inside and outside the youth justice field cannot easily learn
from them, and youth courts may not necessarily be aware of their existence when faced
with a case concerning parent abuse. Therefore, while Munro emphasises the principal of
local authorities developing practices appropriate to local need, there is a risk that
programmes that have recently emerged to respond to parent abuse – which are still in
their infancy and remain unevaluated – remain hidden from other local authorities which
may benefit from them. A resource for sharing best practice across different sectors, as well
as to map what is available regionally to enable appropriate referrals to be made, is
therefore essential. It is also worth highlighting that while youth offending services appear
to be at the forefront of developing such programmes, they may not be the most
appropriate arena for delivering them. Finally, part of the 'learning culture' advocated by
Munro might also include raising awareness of practitioners' own potential professional
'blindspots', which can produce unhelpful responses (such as youth courts issuing sentences
which further damage the parent, or social workers assuming that 'poor parenting' is a
cause of – rather than a potential *consequence* of – parent abuse).

Emphasis on the child's journey

Given the links between parent abuse and child abuse, IPV and sibling abuse, it is clear that
parent abuse needs to be understood in the wider context of family violence. In many cases,

the perpetrating child or young person will also be, or will have been, a victim of family violence. Therefore Munro's emphasis on a 'whole system' approach to understanding child protection, rather than the current atomism which focuses on isolated problems and individual error, is to be welcomed. However, parents, and particularly mothers, may be experiencing *revictimisation* which is likely to have particularly profound effects on their mental, physical and emotional health, including their confidence to parent effectively. Therefore, while the emphasis on the child's journey in Munro's review is necessary to enable an analysis of the complex trajectories undoubtedly involved in parent abuse, the voice and needs of parents must not be marginalised.

As this chapter has outlined, the Munro Review has the potential to provide a 'watershed moment' in raising awareness of the prevalence and problems produced by adolescent-to-parent abuse, and in enabling the development of agreed strategies on how frontline services might better respond. As Hunter et al (2010) suggest, the construction of a social problem determines how policy frameworks emerge, and it is clear that we are not yet decided on what kind of problem (and whose problem) adolescent-to-parent abuse is. Such questions are clearly more fundamental than those raised by the Munro Review, but now, while the government highlights the need to consider Munro's recommendations 'in the round', perhaps the circle of discussion could be enlarged to provide room for this important debate.

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