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## ADOLESCENT AGGRESSION

# Adolescent Violence towards Parents

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*Although adolescent-to-parent violence is often overlooked by family violence researchers and practitioners, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests it is widespread. Knowledge about this type of violence is limited and few established interventions exist. This article describes an intervention—called the Step-Up program—for youth who assault their parents in King County, Washington, and identifies risk factors for youth offenders and characteristics of victimized parents and families. Three sources of data are used to describe adolescent offenders and their families: statistics from the King County Prosecutor's Office, data from interviews with these youth and their parents, and clinical observations of the Step-Up staff who have worked closely with youth and parents for 10 years.*

*KEYWORDS adolescent-to-parent violence, child abuse, domestic violence, family violence, intimate partner violence, parent abuse, violent youth*

Considerable public attention and professional research have been devoted to what most people consider family violence: intimate partner violence and child abuse. Although these two areas of concern continue to occupy public attention, adolescent-to-parent violence or parent abuse is beginning to receive a closer look from researchers and public agencies.

Family violence researchers first identified adolescent-to-parent violence in 1979 and occasional research was published during the following 15 years. However, two developments might have precipitated more interest

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in adolescent-to-parent violence in the last decade. First, after 15 years of research on children who are exposed to domestic violence, there is a growing consensus that such exposure is a link to intergenerational transmission of violence; that is, exposure to violence in the family of origin increases the likelihood of involvement in a violent relationship later in life (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Rossman, Hughes, & Rosenberg, 1999). Most researchers assume dating violence is the primary link between exposure to domestic violence as a child and perpetrating intimate partner violence as an adult. Adolescent-to-parent violence might be another pathway to adult intimate partner violence that few researchers have recognized (Cornell & Gelles, 1982).

The second development is the recognition of adolescent-to-parent violence by mental health professionals, health care agencies, and law enforcement (Price, 1996). Government health agencies in Canada and South Australia have published information for the general public (Cottrell, 2001; Parent Link, 2010), and the U.S. Department of Justice's concern is evident in a 2008 report (Snyder & McCurley, 2008). The lack of established programs or proven practices was a practical concern until King County, Washington decided to initiate such a program 12 years ago and has maintained its support since then.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The incidence of adolescent-to-parent violence is difficult to identify due to differences in the methodologies used by researchers. Most studies identify violence simply as physical assault or battery against a parent, in spite of the broad range of violent behaviors that might be involved. The majority of studies include youth as young as 10 and as old as 24—in other words, beyond the adolescent years. Finally, a variety of research methods have been used, including questionnaires, file reviews, case studies, structured interviews, and reports of clinical experiences.

Existing studies identify the prevalence of youth violence against parents within the range of 5% to 24%, although most estimates fall between 7% and 13% (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Browne & Hamilton, 1998; Bobic, 2004; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Kratcoski, 1985; Paulson, Coombs, & Landsverk, 1990; Peek, Fischer, & Kidwell, 1985). Most studies show adolescent boys are responsible for most of the violence against parents (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Neidig, 1995; Laurent & Derry, 1999; Paulson et al., 1990). A more recent study (Cottrell, 2001) indicates boys and girls participate in all forms of abuse. Mothers are most often the victims of violence by adolescents (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Charles, 1986; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell & Monk, 2004;

Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Laurent & Derry, 1999; Livingston, 1986; Paulson et al., 1990).

It is difficult to determine how the incidence of adolescent-to-parent violence varies among different ethnic and cultural groups. Some researchers indicate White families experience more violence than African American families (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Charles, 1986), whereas other researchers indicate no differences (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Paulson et al., 1990). Social class has little apparent impact on whether youth are aggressive towards their parents (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Paulson et al., 1990; Peek et al., 1985).

Other studies describe a variety of characteristics of teen perpetrators, including the following: mental illnesses, such as personality disorders and schizophrenia (Charles, 1986; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Kethineni, 2004; Wells, 1987), alcohol and drug use (Charles, 1986; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Kethineni, 2004; Price, 1996), and exposure to a peer who uses violence at home (Agnew & Huguley, 1989). What role these characteristics play in the use of violence is unclear.

Some family dynamics have also been identified. Adolescents who use violence against their parents have often been physically or sexually abused or have been exposed to intimate partner violence (Brezina, 1999; Browne & Hamilton, 1998; Carlson, 1990; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell, 2001; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Gelles & Cornell, 1985; Livingston, 1986; Peek et al., 1985; Wells, 1987). Teen perpetrators have been identified by researchers as having weak emotional bonds with their parents. They might also have been the recipients of "overly permissive" parenting (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Charles, 1986; Cottrell, 2001; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Harbin & Madden, 1979; Micucci, 1996; Wilson, 1996). Harbin and Maddin believe these adolescents exhibit "patterns of parentification" in their families; that is, the parents put the adolescents in charge of family matters. However, the absence of longitudinal survey data led Gelles (1979) to conclude that researchers may "attribute causal status to variables which may have occurred or arisen after the violent or abusive act" (pp. 171–172), and he sees a "need to nail down cause and effect relations by tracing families over time" (p. 27).

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice is another source of information on adolescent-to-parent violence. The 2008 report (Snyder & McCurley, 2008) collected data from law enforcement agencies in 29 states and was based on assaults that occurred in 2004. It concludes that 9% of all domestic assault offenders were juveniles and 24% of juveniles who committed an assault were in a domestic relationship (i.e., the victim and offender are in a family or romantic relationship) with their victims. Fifty-one percent of these offenders victimized

a parent and 24% victimized a sibling. Only 3% of juvenile domestic assaults are intimate partners.

Research also makes a clear distinction between adolescents who abuse their parents and adolescent parricide. Adolescents who kill their parents often feel they have no means to escape from an extremely violent family environment except to murder. They are acting out of desperation and hopelessness. Severe mental illness and dangerously antisocial behavior are also associated with adolescent parricide (Heide, 1992; Post, 1982).

## STEP-UP INTERVENTION

In 1996, 63% of the 502 juvenile domestic violence charges filed by the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office were against juveniles who assaulted their mother or father. In 1997, the King County Department of Judicial Administration applied for and received funding from the Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee to develop and implement a pilot program for adolescents who assault parents. Until the funding of this project, there was no specialized intervention for such adolescents in King County or anywhere else in the United States. Presently, the Step-Up program is funded by King County government.

The goals of the Step-Up project were to (a) implement changes in the juvenile justice system's response to juvenile offenders to increase family safety and juvenile accountability, and (b) provide intervention services to juvenile offenders and support for victimized families.

To initiate change in the juvenile justice system, a board of professionals, including police officers, defense attorneys, mental health therapists, juvenile probation officers, judges, and prosecutors was convened. The board identified road blocks within the existing system, proposed changes, and initiated reforms in their departments to allow for a more effective response. Two examples of reforms included mandatory 24-hour detention for each youth arrested for domestic violence and increased police training on how to respond to a domestic violence call when an adolescent is using violence against his or her parents.

An intervention program was developed to address domestic violence committed by youth offenders and to provide support and education for victimized parents. Over the course of the first four years of the program, a treatment model was developed that is based on adult domestic violence treatment but is adapted to the needs and circumstances of a parent–child relationship. A variety of cognitive behavioral group exercises were developed and field tested with parents and youth. The end result is a 20-session skills-based curriculum including a youth group, a parent group, and a parent–youth group.

Over the course of 20 weekly group sessions, youth learn skills to prevent violent and abusive behavior. Respectful communication, conflict resolution, anger management, and behavioral and emotional awareness techniques are practiced in the group with peer and parent feedback. The program emphasizes accountability for behavior and recognition of the effects of abusive behavior on self and others. Weekly reports by youth about their use of violence or abuse, as well as their positive behaviors, are a key component of the treatment model. Youth set a behavioral goal each week, measure their progress in meeting the goal, and report their progress to group members every week. This exercise allows youth and parents to measure progress from week to week, discuss choices the youth have made throughout the week, and demonstrate how the youth are using the new skills they are learning. Parents comment on their son's or daughter's behavior and are encouraged to recognize new behaviors their teens have used during the previous week.

Due to the positive results of a 2005 evaluation (Organizational Research Services [ORS], 2005), Step-Up has been identified as a "promising program" by King County Juvenile Court. In one of its conclusions, ORS (2005) reported, "Our analysis of short-term teen and parent outcomes demonstrated significant improvements in attitudes, skills, and behaviors over the course of the intervention" (p. 4).

Most youth in Step-Up are referred through a juvenile court diversion program for first-time misdemeanants. Youth are also referred from juvenile court probation, at-risk youth programs, and therapists in the community.

## METHOD

Three sources of information offer a complex picture of adolescent-to-parent violence in King County, Washington: (a) data collected and compiled in a yearly report by the Juvenile Prosecutor's office on perpetrators and victims, (b) Step-Up staff's interviews with youth and parents, and (c) observations of youth and parents during group sessions.

Results might be more meaningful if one considers some community variables. King County, Washington is the 12th largest U.S. county with a population of 1.8 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). The median household income of $63,489 is above the national average, and 10% of the population lives below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). According to the 2006 Census estimates, King County is primarily White (76%) with African American (6%) and Hispanic or Latino population (7%) as the next largest groups. Other groups represented in King County include Asian (13%), Native American (1%), and Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders (1%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

Between 2001 and 2004, the King County Prosecutor's Office Juvenile Division (Sellick-Lane, 2004) filed 1,339 incidents of adolescent-to-parent violence. In these cases, the prosecutor found sufficient evidence that a domestic violence crime was committed and sought to press charges against the youth. During this same time period, the prosecutor had other cases that met the standard of a domestic violence crime, but because they involved a first or second misdemeanor, they were sent to a juvenile court diversion program instead of being filed in court. The data in Table 1 are only from the youth who had charges filed against them.

Table 1 summarizes the data collected by the Prosecutor's Office from 2001 to 2004. Three types of criminal charges make up 95% of these domestic violence incidents: assault, harassment, and malicious mischief. These charges include a range of misdemeanors and felonies.

Of the 1,339 adolescent offenders in the data survey in Table 1, 65% (874) were male and 35% (465) were female. Mothers made up 72% (957) of the victims, and 28% (382) were fathers. These figures include step- and foster mothers and fathers. Both sons and daughters used violence against their mothers at higher rates than they did against their fathers.

Step-Up conducts structured face-to-face interviews with adolescents and parents who are referred to the program. In almost all cases, the youth are living with their parents, and the interviews are completed before they attend group sessions. Adolescents and parents are interviewed separately by different staff members. The interview includes questions about the extent and severity of violence committed by the adolescent, history of violence and abuse in the family, including previous violence used by adults in the family, identified mental health issues, drug and alcohol problems, and parenting practices. After the interviews are completed, the staff discusses their respective interviews with each other to get a full picture of the family.

**TABLE 1** Juvenile Domestic Violence Incidents of Adolescent-to-Parent Violence in King County Juvenile Court, 2001–2004

| Demographics variables | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Total juvenile domestic violence Incidents of Adolescent to Parent Violence | 1,339 | 100% |
| Offender | | |
| Male | 874 | 65% |
| Female | 465 | 35% |
| Victims | | |
| Mother | 957 | 72% |
| Father | 382 | 28% |
| Relationship of offender to victim | | |
| Son vs. mother | 587 | 44% |
| Son vs. father | 287 | 21% |
| Daughter vs. mother | 370 | 28% |
| Daughter vs. father | 95 | 7% |

Because this is one of the first contacts with new clients, the interview allows the staff to assess the level of violence the adolescent is using to determine whether other services are needed and to decide if the youth and parent are appropriate for the program. If the parent is concerned about further violence from his or her son or daughter, the interviewer discusses the options that are available.

Youth who are initiating violence against family members and who have used a pattern of violence against family members are appropriate for Step-Up counseling. Violence used by the youth is described in police reports and by parents and youth during the Step-Up interview. Violent behaviors range from pushing, punching, slapping, hitting, and kicking to threats with knives, threats to kill, and property destruction. Youth who are currently being abused in their home and are responding to their parents' violence or violence from another family member are not appropriate for Step-Up. In addition, youth who commit a single act of violence out of context from their normally violence-free lives are also not appropriate for Step-Up counseling. These youth are referred to other services.

Table 2 summarizes data collected from these interviews between 2001 and 2004. Although not all the interviewed clients participated in

**TABLE 2** Step-Up Family Data, 2001–2004

| Demographic variables | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Total *N* | 268 | |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 187 | 70% |
| Female | 81 | 30% |
| Ethnicity/race | | |
| Caucasian | 203 | 76% |
| African American | 26 | 10% |
| Asian | 15 | 6% |
| Native American | 4 | 1% |
| Hispanic/Latino | 11 | 4% |
| Other | 9 | 3% |
| Income level | | |
| Public assistance | 28 | 11% |
| Less than $25,000 | 54 | 20% |
| $25,000–$75,000 | 132 | 49% |
| Greater than $75,000 | 54 | 20% |
| Marital status of victimized parent | | |
| Divorced/separated | 132 | 49% |
| Single | 12 | 4% |
| Married | 122 | 46% |
| No marital status | 2 | 1% |
| Teen resides with | | |
| Mother | 114 | 43% |
| Father | 17 | 6% |
| Mother and father | 68 | 25% |
| Mother and stepfather/partner | 54 | 20% |
| Other | 15 | 6% |

the program, they were all appropriate as youth offenders and victimized parents.

The gender of the perpetrators in the Step-Up families is 70% male and 30% female. Of the youth who were referred to Step-Up from 2001 to 2004, 76% were White, 10% African American, 6% Asian, 1% Native American, 4% Hispanic/Latino, and 3% other ethnic groups.

Almost half of the adolescents came from families that earned between $25,000 and $75,000 per year. The data show that 11% were from families on public assistance, and 20% made less than $25,000 per year. Families that made more than $75,000 per year were 20% of the total. Whereas African Americans were referred to Step-Up at a higher rate than their population in King County, Asian Americans were referred at a lower rate. Also, a higher percentage of referrals to Step-Up came from lower income levels than the population in King County, and a smaller percentage came from the higher income levels.

Victimized mothers or female caretakers who were divorced or separated from the offender's father or male caretaker made up 49% of the total. Results show 4% were single and 46% were married, either to the offender's father or a new partner. Whereas 43% of the offending adolescents lived with their mothers, 25% lived with their mothers and their fathers, and 20% lived with a stepfather or a male caretaker who was not the offender's biological father. Only 6% lived with their fathers. "Other" includes grandparents or aunts and uncles who are parenting the offending adolescents, either permanently or temporarily.

Table 3 provides detailed Step-Up youth data. The data reveal 53% of the adolescents interviewed for Step-Up were exposed to domestic violence, which is defined as living in a home where their father or a male caretaker used physical violence towards their mother. Adolescents who were physically abused by a parent made up 38% of the total. Thirty-two percent were both physically abused and exposed to domestic violence.

Of the adolescents interviewed, 72% were referred for a physical assault or the threat of physical harm against their mother, 16% for assaulting or threatening their father or male caretaker, 5% for assaulting or threatening their sister, and 5% for assaulting or threatening their brother. Interviews revealed 83% of the adolescents had previous incidents of assault or threatened physical harm against their mother prior to their arrest or court involvement. This same violence was used by the adolescent offender at some time in the past against 16% of fathers, 20% of sisters, and 23% of brothers. At the time of their first incident of violence, 23% of the youth were under 12, 17% were 12, 15% were 13, and 11% to 12% were between 14 and 16. Only 9% were 17.

Interviews with these adolescents revealed other issues in their lives. Current problems with school attendance affected 49% of the interviewees, 14% had an identified learning disability, and 50% had problems with either

**TABLE 3** Step-Up Youth Data, 2001–2004

| Demographic variables | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Total *N* | 268 | |
| Only witnessed/exposed to domestic violence | 57 | 21% |
| Only physically abused | 18 | 6% |
| Witnessed/exposed to domestic violence | 143 | 53% |
| Witnessed/exposed to domestic violence and physically abused | 86 | 32% |
| Referred for violence against | | |
| Mother | 194 | 72% |
| Father | 43 | 16% |
| Sister | 14 | 5% |
| Brother | 15 | 5% |
| Other | 8 | 2% |
| Teens referred also used violence in the past against | | |
| Mother | 224 | 83% |
| Father | 43 | 16% |
| Sister | 55 | 20% |
| Brother | 61 | 23% |
| Age when violence began | | |
| < 12 | 60 | 23% |
| 12–14 | 119 | 44% |
| 15–17 | 89 | 32% |
| School attendance problems | 131 | 49% |
| Identified learning disabilities | 38 | 14% |
| Behavior problems at school | 135 | 50% |
| Identified substance problem | 59 | 22% |
| Identified mental health issues | 106 | 39% |
| Bipolar Disorder | 49 | 18% |
| ADHD/ADD | 35 | 13% |
| Bipolar and ADHD/ADD | 20 | 7% |

their teachers, other students, or both that resulted in some action on the part of the school. Identified substance abuse issues affected 22% of the adolescents, 40% had an identified mental health diagnosis, 18% of this group had a bipolar diagnosis, 13% had an Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or an Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) diagnosis, and 7% had both bipolar and ADHD or ADD diagnoses.

The authors conducted 200 group sessions between 2001 and 2004. All youth and parents were interviewed before they participated in group sessions. During this time, the authors observed 238 youth–parent dyads. Among this group, 149 finished the requirements of the program. Youth who completed the program attended at least 15 sessions, and the majority attended 20 sessions. Those youth who did not complete attended between 5 and 10 sessions. All youth gave weekly reports on specific abusive behaviors they used during the week. Parents also gave input on the youth's behavior. The participation in group sessions gave the authors a

unique opportunity to directly hear the experiences of victimized parents and assaultive youth. In this way they were able to learn how these families resolved conflicts, what changes youth made from week to week, and how parents responded to their son or daughter's abusive behavior.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion here is based on clinical impressions drawn from the individual interviews the authors conducted with youth and parents who were prospective program participants. As described earlier, the authors created a set of specific interview questions for the parent interview and for the youth interview that were intended to gather a broad range of .information about the specific needs of the youth and parents. In addition, the observations and conclusions in the following discussion are also clinical impressions the authors drew from their group session work with these youth and parents. Although the Step-Up staff has not done any formal research of their own, the discussion demonstrates a striking similarity between their experience with clients referred to the Step-Up program and the insights of published research about aggressive youth.

In spite of the lack of public attention abused parents have received, adolescent-to-parent violence has features that are common to all forms of family violence. Control and domination is central to domestic violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1979) and is a preeminent concern of all parents whose youth use violence against them. Adolescents who use violence at home perceive their parents as weak and ineffective and perceive themselves as lacking power (Pagelow, 1984). Adolescents use violence and abuse to take power away from their parents and to control decision making in their families.

Social isolation is another feature common to all forms of family violence (Pagelow, 1984). Victimized parents are isolated in a number of ways that they readily identified in Step-Up interviews. Most parents who were interviewed felt they could not talk to friends or family members about their son or daughter's violence. Books on parenting rarely mention violent youth, and parenting classes do not discuss children who use abuse and violence. Because these youth are often not violent outside their families, teachers or other adults who come into contact with these youth do not see any signs of an abusive or violent teenager. Therapists and counselors are often at a loss to help parents who are victims or youth who are assaultive.

Shame works in tandem with social isolation to produce a feeling of helplessness among parents. Parents feel others will blame them for their child's violence because they have failed to control him or her. They often keep the violence in their home a secret from everyone. They protect their

children by denying the abuse. As a result, most parents are very reluctant to get help from anyone, and when they finally call the police, parents often reported to the Step-Up interviewers that the calls were "the most difficult decision of their lives."

Another feature common to both adult domestic violence and adolescent violence against parents is the types of violence used against their victims. The behaviors that are used by adolescent perpetrators are strikingly similar to behaviors used by adult perpetrators. Adult perpetrators of domestic violence have been characterized as using instrumental aggression and impulsive aggression against their victims (Dutton, 2007), and adolescent perpetrators fall into similar categories (Hubbard, McAliffe, Rubin, & Morrow, 2007). The first category is purposeful and intended to get something or establish dominance. The second is impulsive, emotion driven, and sometimes is intended to hurt another person. For adolescents, the two types more often represent two ends of a continuum of violence rather than distinct types. Parents and youth often discussed both types of violence in Step-Up group sessions.

Instrumental violence is evident when violence is modeled by a parent at home and a child learns a lesson that aggressive behavior is a way to get what he or she wants (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990). When violence and aggression succeed, the reward is a powerful reinforcement to repeat the same behavior. Impulsive violence is a reaction to something the parent has done that the youth perceives as a personal attack. Rather than trying to get something, the youth has an extreme emotional response to something the parent has done or said. Parents often describe these responses as "temper tantrums." This reaction suggests an emotional mechanism is at work rather than a cognitive one (Hubbard et al., 2007).

The data from Step-Up interviews reflect a myriad of risk factors. Wolfe, Wekerle, and Scott (1997) developed the analogy of the "funnel of violence" to organize adolescent risk factors into a coherent explanatory model. This framework has three levels of risk that increase as the youth move from general at the top to specific at the bottom. The wide mouth at the top of the funnel, the general level, includes societal messages that glamorize violence and abusive power from the culture at large, including the variety of media that most youth experience. Although the influence of cultural and social messages is practically impossible to determine, they do contribute to tolerance for violence and abuse among youth. The middle of the funnel are personal relationships that include family, friends, and peers that sharpen these messages and provide a powerful template for how to survive and use violence and abuse towards others. At the narrow end of the funnel, individual psychological characteristics and personal history of aggression towards family members are identified.

## Family and Systemic Risk Factors

The media and other cultural institutions play a role among the more general and systemic risk factors. Continual exposure to violent images and language can have a disinhibiting effect on adolescents. As with other risk factors, individuals are affected differently by the media. Adolescents who have personal experiences of violence at home or with peers are more susceptible to these messages, and they might add to a perception that violence is a legitimate means of resolving conflicts (Levine, 1996).

Single parents are victims in almost half the families ($n = 144$, 49%) described in the Step-Up interviews earlier, and most of these parents are mothers. Although single parents do not per se lack authority, the conditions created by divorce and separation impair parenting and can in some cases lead to a loss of authority with children. Single parents are often overwhelmed with responsibilities of work, loss of financial security, and caring for other children. At the same time, children in these families often change schools, lose contact with friends, move to a new home, and have less money to spend due a loss of income of their parent (Coontz, 1997). These new conditions set the stage for conflict with a single parent.

Mothers are more vulnerable in a single-parent family. Mothers are often physically weaker than their adolescent child and are less able to defend themselves against physical violence. They might also be perceived as acceptable targets by their children, as their role in the family is primary caretaker and crisis manager. Mothers continue to be rule enforcers even when male stepparents become a part of the family. In two-parent families, mothers are the prime recipients of difficult behavior when an aggressive child is present, and so as single parents, they are an even larger target (Patterson, 1980).

Other characteristics also create vulnerabilities for families. In some cases, a stepparent or intimate partner ($n = 54$, 20%) is involved in the family, and this adult's authority in the family is not always clear or accepted by the adolescent. Victimized parents might also feel emotionally overwhelmed by previous drug or alcohol problems or having mental illness. Some single parents also begin to rely on their children for help managing family matters and emotional support, and thus healthy parent–child boundaries are blurred (Walker & Hennig, 1997). These parents often have difficulties reestablishing their authority with their child during adolescence. Finally, parenting a difficult adolescent requires a different set of skills than parenting younger children, and resources are not readily available to learn these skills, especially when there is violence.

Many of the mothers of the single-parent families already described are victims of domestic violence ($n = 143$, 53%) from their former partners or ex-husbands. In addition to confronting the challenges faced by

any single parent, they are also reexperiencing domestic violence from their children, often in a fashion similar to their previous partner's abuse. These women often remarked that their children were using abusive language and behaviors similar to those of their violent fathers. None of the families that participated in Step-Up counseling were currently experiencing adult domestic violence. However, these single mothers are experiencing domestic violence a second time from their adolescent children.

Battering in an adult relationship itself can have serious effects on parenting. When children see their mother as a victim of abuse, it affects their perception of her. A mother's authority is undermined because she is seen as ineffectual and powerless. Ongoing verbal abuse, such as humiliation, put downs, and criticism of her parenting adds to the image of incompetence. The emotional aftermath of battering, such as depression, withdrawal, and emotional volatility, can contribute to the image of a mother as unstable and difficult (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Rossman et al., 1999).

Unlike adult domestic violence, where victims can find some safety in protections provided by the courts, these mothers continue to be responsible for their children, and most of them want continued contact with their children. Research indicates some women who have been victims of domestic violence feel helpless and lack confidence (Rossman et al., 1999). Feelings of fear, guilt, depression, or low self-esteem, all effects of domestic violence, hinder parenting. These feelings could result in impaired decision making and can lead to undermining mothers' parental authority. An adolescent might lose respect for a parent who is inconsistent and feel justified in asserting power over his or her parent.

Similar to adult victims of domestic violence, mothers who are victims of abuse by their teen often feel that they are responsible for their teen's behavior (Pagelow, 1984). Victimized parents often believe that they are causing the abuse as a result of inadequate parenting, or they feel responsible for the father's abuse towards their children. Such feelings can interfere with the parent's ability to hold her child responsible for the behavior and set limits and consequences. Abusive adolescents get the message that they are not responsible for their behavior, and lack of consequences reinforces their notion that the abusive behavior is not serious.

The effect of fear on parenting creates the impression of a "permissive parent" to the outsider who does not consider the context of a parent who is a victim (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cottrell, 2001). Parents of violent adolescents are often afraid of imposing consequences out of fear of retaliation from their son or daughter. Parents will "give in" to keep the peace and "walk on eggshells" to avoid a violent confrontation. What appears to be "permissiveness" is often a decision to avoid further abuse and violence. Ironically, violent incidents are often the result of a parent who decides to impose consequences, not the parent who "gives in."

## Individual Risk Factors

Certain factors create a risk for individual adolescents to become violent with family members. Particular mental health diagnoses increase the risk for youth to be aggressive. Thirty-nine percent ($n = 108$) of the interviewed youth had been diagnosed and prescribed medication. Bipolar disorder and ADHD were the most common diagnoses among the interviewed youth. Regarding those who were exposed to domestic violence, exposure to violence alone is traumatic and often results in anxiety and depression (Singer, Anglin, Song, & Lunghofer, 1995; Sternberg et al., 1993). Hyperactivity is a known risk factor for aggressive youth (Englander, 2007; Taylor, Chadwick, Heptinstall, & Danckaerts, 1996). Some youth who are depressed are hostile and aggressive (Englander, 2007; Rudolph & Clark, 2001).

In addition to these psychological characteristics, other important individual risk factors are early learning experiences in the adolescent's family environment. The data indicate 53% ($n = 143$) of those interviewed were exposed to or witnessed domestic violence in which fathers used physical violence against mothers and 38% ($n = 104$) experienced physical abuse by their fathers or male caretakers. In addition, 32% ($n = 86$) were both exposed to domestic violence and were physically abused. However, none of the adolescents interviewed was currently living in a home with domestic violence or was being physically abused. For the vast majority, their experiences occurred at least five years prior to the interview. Moreover, adolescents were not violent towards the parent who committed acts of violence in their home.

Although most child victims of physical abuse or child witnesses of domestic violence do not become violent, some do, and this childhood experience can have profound effects on interpersonal relationships (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990; Ornduff, Kelsey, & O'Leary, 2001). For those children who were exposed to domestic violence and were physically abused, the effects are more severe (Hughes, Parkinson, & Vargo, 1989).

When youth witnessed domestic violence, they often used some of the same violent behaviors and emotionally abusive attacks they were exposed to earlier in their lives. However, victimized parents reported their teenagers did not simply repeat the behaviors they saw earlier in their lives, but exhibited the attitudes and expressed the beliefs of their fathers. These reports confirm Earls, Cairns, and Mercy's (1993) observation, "Interpersonal hostility and the norms for violence are organized in childhood, then activated in adolescence" (p. 291). The same authors reported nonviolence and violence are not individual behaviors, but "classes" of behaviors they referred to as "action patterns" that are established at some point in early development along with attitudes towards violence or nonviolence (p. 291).

For those youth who were exposed to domestic violence, any number of behavioral and emotional problems can result in increased aggression.

Poor impulse control, negative affectivity, and an external locus of control are individual characteristics of adolescents who are violent towards their parents (Wolfe et al., 1997). Emotional coping mechanisms, cognitive processing capacity, social competence, and self-esteem are impaired for children exposed to domestic violence (Dodge & Frame, 1982; Perry, Perry, & Rasmussen, 1986; Rossman et al., 1999; Song, Singer, & Anglin, 1998). Step-Up youth and their parents routinely discussed these characteristics in group sessions.

Even for adolescents who were not exposed to physical violence, a pattern of emotional abuse towards them or their mother was often reported by interviewed parents, and increased aggression is a possible consequence for these youth (Crittenden, Claussen, & Sugarman, 1994; McGee, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1997; Nesbit & Karagianis, 1987; Rossman et al., 1999; Wolfe, Wekerle, Reitzel-Jaffe, & Lefebvre, 1998). Another impact on youth who experience abuse in different forms is the development of an outlook in which the world is divided into "victims" and "victimizers" (Dodge et al., 1990; Wolfe et al., 1997). Step-Up youth regularly expressed this attitude in interviews and group sessions.

Some children living with a victimized mother feel an alliance with the abusive father and develop a belief system similar to his (O'Keefe & Lebovics, 1984). A sense of entitlement is the most important feature of an abuser's belief system (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Children who feel entitled believe they have special privileges and rights that their mother should respect. Mothers of youth in Step-Up often feel subservient to their children, particularly when their children talk to them in a demanding way. These children also express a sense of superiority to their mothers by talking down to them, making degrading comments to them, and dismissing things their mother says. To parent a child who acts this way is particularly challenging, especially for mothers who have been previously victimized by the children's father.

## CONCLUSION

Data from King County, Washington indicates adolescent-to-parent violence is a significant problem. Multiple risk factors for these youth and their families reveal a complex, multilayered issue that only further research can address. Mental health and juvenile court professionals should be trained to identify and intervene with these youth and their families. An integrated approach that combines the efforts of all interested professionals can begin to address this hidden form of family violence.

As with adult domestic violence, a coordinated community response model is the most effective way to support families where an adolescent is using violence against a parent (Sullivan & Allen, 2001). The single most

important concern for everyone involved, including the adolescent perpetrators, is safety. This model has been shown to be successful in addressing domestic violence and should be expanded to include all forms of family violence, not just interpersonal violence. At its simplest, the model combines the efforts of all professionals and community members who are dedicated to the goal of holding abusive family members accountable for their actions and ensuring the safety of victims of family violence. Adult domestic violence prevention has support in communities across the country, but other forms of violence that are part of the intergenerational cycle of violence go unaddressed. Just such an approach would allow families experiencing violence from their teenage children to find institutional support.

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