

YOUNG PEOPLE

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

Aggression or violence towards parents or other family members by children or young people is more common than most people realise. It is not often talked about because parents can feel embarrassed to admit it's happening. Violence toward a parent is an attempt to control or bully them. It can involve using abusive language, pushing, shoving, kicking, throwing things or threatening with knives or other weapons. Children and young people may also hurt pets or damage furniture and property.

Violence towards parents often happens in the home but it can happen in other places too. Whether it happens only once or happens often, it is serious and must be dealt with.

Why are children and young people 'aggro'?

Aggression towards parents or other family members happens for a number of reasons. It may happen as the result of an argument or it might happen out of the blue. Whilst younger children can be aggressive, it is usually more frightening when an adolescent behaves aggressively. Their physical size and strength can really scare you.

It is more common for adolescent boys to be violent toward their mothers, but this is not always the case. Violence towards parents or other family members is unacceptable and in some cases can be a crime.

Some of the reasons listed below may help you understand why your son or daughter uses violent or 'aggro' behaviour. It doesn't excuse it, or mean you shouldn't take steps to stop it.

- They haven't learnt other ways to solve problems or get what they want.
- They haven't learnt to control or manage feelings, especially angry ones. They act out their feelings without using any self discipline.
- They see angry outbursts or violence as normal because it's what they've seen at home between parents, or what has happened to them.

- They haven't learnt that being angry and being violent are two different things. We all get angry but most people don't get violent.
- They haven't learnt to value or respect other people or their property.
- They haven't had to face the consequences of their violence and see no reason to stop.
- They see a parent (usually the mother) as weak and powerless, or they think it is okay to treat women this way.
- They haven't learnt how to manage stress in their life.
- They may be going through a really difficult time, such as a relationship break-up or loss of a job, and don't know how to cope with it.
- They may be affected by alcohol or drugs. Some drugs can trigger psychosis (being out of touch with reality) and violent behaviour.
- They may have a disability and haven't been able to learn other ways of communicating.
- They may have a mental illness and be very frightened.

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THIS GUIDE AND OTHERS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE

What you can do

Preventing violence

- **Understand the difference between conflict and violence.** It is normal for people to argue sometimes when they disagree about something. However, arguments don't usually end up with someone getting hurt.
- **Don't ignore it.** Young people who try to control a parent by using aggression or violence will often 'play down' what they do. The parent will often 'play down' the impact on them but live in fear that it will happen again. The longer everyone pretends it's not serious, the bigger the problem gets.
- When you are both relaxed, work out ways together to strengthen your relationship and set boundaries:
 - **let her know you love her** and all her good qualities. Work together at making the relationship more important than any differences you might have
 - **spend time talking with her** and getting to know her interests. Support what she likes doing, for example watch her play sport or listen to music together
 - **notice what she does well** and talk to her about it. Young people especially need encouragement—for all their bravado, they are often scared and lacking confidence
 - **agree to listen** to each other's point of view and learn to 'agree to disagree'
 - **agree on 'house rules'** which work for everyone. Be clear about what things she can make her own decisions about, and what things are your decision or a household decision
 - **help her look at ways she can learn** to manage her feelings and stop using violence
 - **work out together the 'bottom lines'** about behaviour. For example, make agreements with her about what behaviour is acceptable and what needs to change. Let her know what actions you'll take if her behaviour is violent or dangerous.
- If violence results from a fight, think what the fights are most often about. Think about what happens as a fight brews. What are the warning signs? When these signs are present, make sure you act early and take space from each other. You may need to leave the house. If so, take your younger children so they don't become the victims of violence. Talk about problems only when you are both calm.
- You may need to accept she is no longer a child, that she is becoming an independent young adult who has the right to make her own choices. She also needs to learn to accept the consequences of her choices to become mature.
- If the behaviour is out of character for her and has started only recently, think about what else may have happened or changed lately. For example, has anyone new had contact with your family? Have there been changes in the family or with her friends? Has anything happened in these relationships?

Taking action

When a parent experiences violence from their young person they can feel very scared, powerless, lonely, sometimes embarrassed, ashamed and guilty. They feel they have lost control in the home.

- Remember, whatever has happened between you, there is no excuse for violence.
- You need to take control early. You may not be able to change or stop his behaviour, but you can change yours even if you are scared or not feeling confident. Many parents find that acting early is better for them because they feel more confident. It also gives the young person a greater chance of changing the behaviour.
- Be prepared to make some tough decisions. Taking a tough stand is important for all the family. When a young person is violent toward a parent, no matter how much he excuses his behaviour ('It's her fault, she pushed me to do it') he won't feel good about it. If he never has to face the consequences of his behaviour, he will probably repeat the same pattern in other relationships or in the work place. It will continue to cause problems in his life and can even lead to problems with the law unless he makes some changes.
- Follow through with the consequences for abusive or dangerous behaviour. When you don't follow through you are teaching him, and younger children at home, that you don't mean what you say and that you are not in charge. When he is abusive or dangerous, he may need to leave your home. This can be by agreement, or by you calling the police or getting a restraining order.
- Whatever actions you take, you need to always ensure your safety and that of younger children in the house. They will be scared and need you to protect them and make them feel safe.
- If nothing seems to be working, it's important to get professional help. Don't try to handle it all alone.

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What you can do *continued*

Calling the police for help

It can be difficult to make the decision to call the police, and to make a further decision to have your young person charged. However, you need to keep yourself and others safe. You are likely to feel guilt, anger, sadness and fear.

You may feel you are betraying him and putting his future at risk. However, calling the police can help calm things down and support you to regain control. It can help rebuild a respectful relationship with him because he can see you mean what you say.

What will happen?

- The police will help manage the situation and protect family members.
- They will give information about your choices and ask what action you want to take, if any.

What action can the police take?

If you want the police to take further action, the young person will be taken to the nearest police station for a formal interview.

The police can:

- give him an informal caution (police keep notes but no formal report is made)
- give him a formal caution (a formal record is kept that can be used later)
- arrange a Restorative Justice Conference if the young person agrees and is between 10 and 17 years
- take the matter to the Children's Court (a Children's Court Magistrate makes a decision)

If the offence is serious, he can be arrested and taken into custody.

- Children under 10 years can't be charged, but police can still be called for assistance and advice.
- If the young person is between 10 and 18 years, cases are handled within the Juvenile Justice system. The Children's Court will decide what action will be taken if it is determined he has committed a crime.
- Young people over 18 are considered adults and are dealt with through the Magistrates Court.
- If you don't want to take action now, police will keep the matter on file in case you decide to take action at a later time.

Reminders

- Everyone has the right to feel safe, including parents. Sometimes violence by children or young people can be a crime.
- It's important to take action to ensure your safety and that of other family members.
- Younger children are very affected by violence in the home. They need you to protect them and make them feel safe.
- Loving your young person doesn't mean you have to put up with unacceptable behaviour.
- When things are calm work together to build the relationship.
- Decide on your bottom line, be clear about consequences, mean what you say and follow through with action.
- It might seem tough to call the police if you need to, but you are doing the best thing for everyone.
- Deal with this problem—it won't go away.
- Speak to someone who can help. Contact details are on the next page.

Contacts

Domestic Violence Crisis Service	24-hour	6280 0900
Kids Help Line	24-hour	1800 55 1800
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833
Police	24-hour	131 444

Websites

www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides

This guide's content has been produced by Parenting SA and adapted by the ACT Government to reflect the application to laws of the Australian Capital Territory.

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