

# Violence towards parents

**Violence towards parents or other family members by young people is more common than many people think.**

**Everyone has the right to feel safe and be respected, including parents. It is important not to ignore violence or abuse, and to keep yourself and other family members safe. It is also important to take action early to stop the violence.**

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### Parent abuse

Most parents and young people disagree and have conflict or arguments at times. However, if a young person is abusive or violent, it is more than conflict. It is an attempt to control and have power over you or others in the home. It can happen in families of any culture, religion or situation in life.

A young person is being violent or abusive when they frighten you, threaten or hurt you. They may:

- swear or call you names
- yell, push, hit, spit or kick
- throw or break things

- hurt pets or damage property, e.g. punch holes in walls
- steal money, run up debts without your permission, or demand things you can't afford
- threaten to run away or harm themselves if you don't give in to them
- threaten you with weapons.

Violence towards parents is often not talked about. Parents can feel embarrassed and as if they have lost control in their own home.

## Why do they do it?

Young people can be abusive or violent for a number of reasons. It is more common for adolescent boys to be violent toward their mother, especially if she is the sole parent, but this isn't always the case. If a young person has seen violence between parents, or a parent has been violent toward them, they may believe it is the way to work things out.

Violence or abuse can be a sign they:

- haven't learnt to control or manage feelings, especially anger. They act out their feelings without using any self-control
- haven't learnt to deal with the stresses of life, to solve problems or cooperate. They might think it's their right to have all their demands met above others
- don't value or respect other people or their property
- see a parent, often the mother, as weak and powerless or think it's OK to treat women this way
- are affected by alcohol or drugs. Some drugs can trigger psychosis (being out of touch with the real world) and violence.

Violence towards parents or other family members is not OK and in some cases can be a crime.

A young person might act aggressively if they have problems with their mental health. They may be anxious and lash out because they start to think they can't trust those around them.

Young people with a disability can be violent if they are frustrated or have trouble dealing with their feelings. They may find it hard to say how they feel or struggle to control their impulses.

Whatever the reason, it doesn't excuse violence or mean you should put up with it.

## What you can do

### Set limits

Limits help children and young people feel safe and secure and to know what is expected of them. As young people mature, limits need to be adjusted to enable them to become more independent.

When you and your young person are both calm and relaxed, it helps to:

- agree on 'house rules' which work for everyone. Be clear about what things they can decide for themselves, what things you will decide, and what things are household decisions
- talk about what behaviours are OK. Let them know what you will do if they become violent or dangerous. They may need to leave the house, either by agreement or by you calling the police.

The longer you think violence is not serious, the bigger the problem can get.

### Use consequences

To become mature, young people need to learn to accept the consequences of their choices and actions. If they haven't had to face consequences for abuse or violence they might see no reason to stop. They may continue to be violent in future relationships.

Consequences send a clear message that you won't put up with violence. It also helps you feel more confident as you take back your right to be the parent. Consequences help young people learn they are the ones choosing to use violence — they can't blame others.

It is important to:

- start small and set two or three consequences that are linked to

a behaviour, e.g. if they swear and abuse you because you ask them to tidy their room before you drive them to the shops, you could say 'I won't put up with swearing and bullying. If you want me to take you to the shops, you need to speak respectfully and tidy your room as I asked'


- follow through with consequences. When you don't follow through you're teaching them you don't mean what you say and that you're not in charge
- involve them in deciding consequences if possible. However, if they are violent, there is no negotiation.

### Know the triggers

Notice what happens before your young person gets aggressive or abusive. They might lash out when they are stressed or frustrated, when under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or when there is conflict.

- If arguments trigger abuse or violence, look at what causes fights. 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. If you need to leave the house, take other children so they are safe.
- If alcohol or drugs contribute to violence, have clear rules about your young person not being in the house when affected by substances.
- If violence or abuse is out of character, think about what else may have happened or changed for them. Has anyone new had contact with your family? Have there been other changes in the family, or upsets with friends?

Help young people find ways to manage their feelings and deal with stress. They might want to talk with a trusted adult or youth counsellor.



Taking early action can help you feel more confident as a parent. It sends a clear message that you won't put up with violence. If nothing seems to be working, it is important to get professional help. Don't try to handle violence alone.

### Strengthen your relationship

It can help to work out ways to build your relationship. Work together at making the relationship more important than any differences you might have. You could:

- let them know you love them and all the good things about them
- notice what they do well and talk with them about it. Young people need encouragement — for all their bravado, they're often scared and lacking confidence
- spend time talking and getting to know their interests. Support what they like doing, e.g. watch them play sport or listen to music together
- talk about problems only when you're both calm. Agree to listen to each other's point of view and learn to 'agree to disagree'.

### Consider your parenting style

With the best intentions, sometimes parents can do things that send the wrong message, such as:

- putting the young person's needs or happiness ahead of their own, or others
- always giving in to keep the peace or avoid conflict
- letting them do what they want without any limits or consequences
- doing everything for them or not expecting them to share the responsibilities of the household
- trying to make up for disappointments such as the family breaking-up
- being too strict and not allowing them to become more independent. You may have to accept they are no longer a child. They are becoming a young adult who has the right to make their own choices.

Some young people can be aggressive if they're frustrated at not being able to please you. Do you expect too much or always find fault? Do you focus enough on what they do well and the things you value about them?

### Take action to stop the violence

It is important to take control early. You may not be able to change or stop their behaviour, but you can change yours even if you're scared or not feeling confident. Many parents find that acting early helps them feel like the parent again.

It is also important to plan what you will do in an emergency. Make sure you have:

- a list of people you can call for help
- a safe place you can go and take other children
- spare keys for your home and car, and some cash in a safe place in case you need to leave in a hurry.



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## Looking after yourself

When you make changes things can seem to get harder before they get better, so make sure you have support. It is important to:

- believe in yourself — the violence isn't your fault and it doesn't mean you are a bad parent
- learn to remain calm and find ways to deal with stress. Go for walks, have coffee with a friend or do other things that relax you
- build your confidence by patting yourself on the back for each small step you take
- talk with someone who can help. Your doctor is a good place to start
- join a group with other parents who are dealing with this too.

Dealing with violence in the home is difficult and stressful. Recognise positive changes, even if they are small steps.

## Getting police help

Deciding to call the police can be hard, and it's even harder to decide to have your young person charged.

You may feel you're betraying them and putting their future at risk. However, helping them learn that violence is not OK is the most loving thing you can do.

Getting help early gives them the best chance to make a change.

Calling the police can help calm things down and support you to regain control. It can help rebuild respect with your young person because they can see you mean what you say.

### What will happen?

The police will:

- help manage the situation and protect family members
- tell you about your choices and ask what action you want to take, if any.

### What action can the police take?

If your child is under 10 years they can't be charged with an offence but the police can still assist you and give advice.

If your young person is between 10 and 18 years and you want the police to take further action, they will take them to the nearest police station for an interview. If the young person admits the offence, the police can:

- give an informal caution (police keep notes but no formal report is made)
- give a formal caution (a formal record is kept that can be used later if they offend again)
- refer them to a Family Conference where someone sits down with you both to work out solutions (a record is kept of any agreements made).

If the young person doesn't admit the offence, the police can lay charges and the matter will go to the Youth Court. If the matter is very serious, the police can arrest the young person and take them into custody. You can ask the police to apply for an Intervention Order if you feel scared about them coming back home or being around you or other family members.

Young people over 18 years are considered adults and are dealt with by the adult justice system.

The police can give you more information about these options. If you don't want to take action now, police will keep the matter on file in case you decide to take action later.

This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

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ACT Government Publication No. 17/0608 (November 2017)

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