



When it hurts to seek help: identifying non-harmful routes to support for families living with child-to-parent violence and abuse



Key points

- Parents and children begin seeking help for their harmful experiences at the very early stages of child-to-parent violence and abuse.
- Parents are not clear about the way services work, the way they are organised, and how they connect to other services.
- Pathways to support should be identified and provided much earlier to prevent families reaching crisis (the risk of child removal or the criminalisation of the child causing harm).
- Specialist intervention was welcomed by children in particular.

Summary

This project was funded by the Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre's inaugural Early Career Researcher Development Fund.

The work was conducted by Dr Nikki Rutter (Durham University) in partnership with Investing in Children, and Walworth Primary School.

Working collaboratively with families living with child-to-parent violence and abuse (CAPVA) and collaborative research partners, new, appropriate, and non-harmful pathways to support and intervention were identified.

The project involved semi-structured interviews and participatory creative workshops with eight children instigating CAPVA and 12 parents experiencing this form of harm. The interviews and workshops used a feminist collaborative autoethnographic approach, whereby children and parents were able to share their lived experiences. This process facilitated their understanding of their own lived experiences; they were able to reflect on how these experiences could be improved for families in the future.

Background

CAPVA is a highly complex form of family harm, instigated by children, but harmful to parents, the wider family, and the child themselves.

A social problem, not a parenting problem

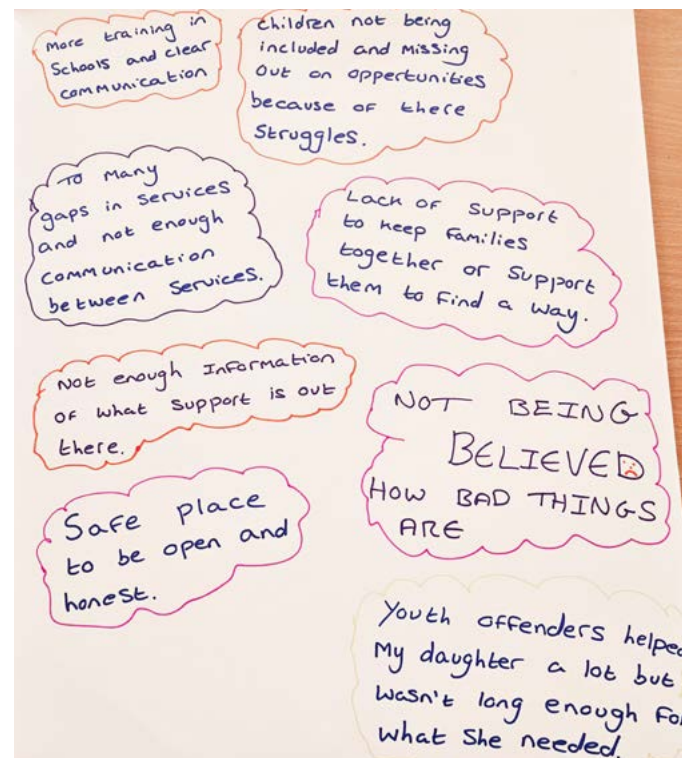
Similar to how domestic abuse was formerly understood as a 'private' matter which should be managed within the family; CAPVA has historically been viewed as a parenting issue, or a 'problem' with the child. This misunderstands the complex social, neurobiological, and environmental factors that impact upon children and their wider family. CAPVA is a social problem, not an individual one.

Help-seeking

Typically, interventions for this form of harm are not available until children reach the age of 10, despite some evidence the harms begin much earlier.

A significant problem in CAPVA is that it is a 'hidden' form of family violence, with many families not seeking support for fear of criminalising their child. This is compounded when families feel their child is not causing the harm intentionally, but due to developmental, emotional, neurological, or social difficulties, such as in the case of explosive and harmful impulses.

Nevertheless, there are also associations between neurodevelopmental or social difficulties and an increased vulnerability to instigate CAPVA. Therefore, families often seek support from many different agencies rather than police. It is unclear how families begin seeking help for CAPVA, what this looks like, and how this could be improved.



What we did

This project was underpinned by participatory principles and interpretivist perspectives, meaning those with lived experience of CAPVA led the work at each stage.

There was an understanding that they each had unique perspectives and interpretations of their lived realities. The design, data generation, analysis and subsequent write-up have all involved those with lived experience of CAPVA.

The project's collaborative partners identified parents and/or children living with, or instigating, CAPVA. They were invited for semi-structured interviews to establish their help-seeking experiences, assist in the

co-design of participatory workshops, and establish any access or support needs they had in attending the workshops. On completion of all semi-structured interviews, the initial workshops were designed.

Four 90-minute workshops for children instigating CAPVA were hosted with and by Investing in Children. The workshops collaboratively explored children and young people's experiences of instigating harm, their relationships, and how systems could be re-designed to better respond to their needs. Four two-hour workshops for parents experiencing CAPVA were hosted by Walworth Primary School. They collaboratively explored parents' experiences of seeking help for their experiences of harms, and how systems could be re-designed to better respond to their needs.

Key findings

This project highlighted that parents and children were seeking help early and often, with parents reporting challenges from as early as birth, and children reporting challenges from ages 5–7, which escalated after transition to secondary school at age 11.

Both parents and children reported negative experiences of seeking support, although all demonstrated help-seeking practices. Parents and children explained how better pathways to support could have been provided at a much earlier stage. Furthermore, collaborative partners highlighted families often were not referred to the appropriate services until crisis, where there was a risk of family breakdown or further police intervention, despite early intervention being their goal.

Public sector agencies and partners could effectively respond to CAPVA in a timely and appropriate manner if they were available to meet the needs of the child and family, rather than being restricted by high referral thresholds designed to respond as a crisis intervention. Children spoke about their positive experiences of specialist intervention, but these could have been provided earlier.

Families highlighted that between ages 0–7, health services were the public service they most frequently approached for help; typically relating to eating, sleeping, and relational challenges. Between ages 3–14, families sought help with education services; typically seeking guidance for children's harmful impulses. Once children reached 10 years old or over, safeguarding services would become involved.

This was in response to contact from other services, rather than being sought directly by families, as referrals to safeguarding would be made by education services. Therefore, parents and children were disempowered when they sought support from education, as they experienced blame and judgement before additional referrals were made to the more appropriate teams for intervention.

Parents and children were able to provide recommendations for how, at these periods, public services could have intervened, with organisations working together in a more cohesive way. How services interact and work together should have been communicated to families earlier, as they frequently referred to a lack of transparency regarding how public services worked.

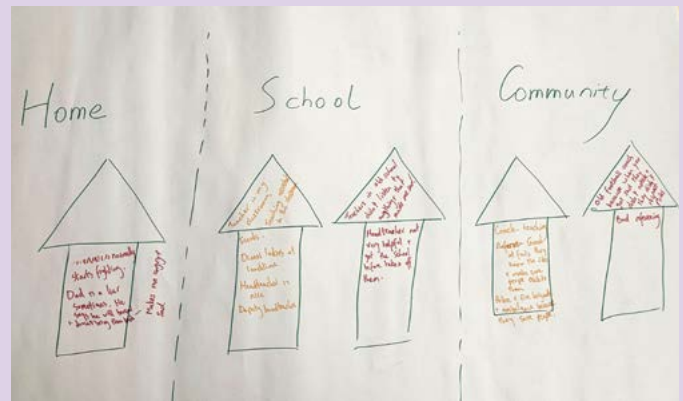
Next steps

Co-design

Through engaging in participatory workshops, parents and children involved in this research have co-designed a new way of exploring how systems should work together to support children and families where there is CAPVA. The next step in this project will be to assess and examine the design, feasibility, cost effectiveness, and practicalities of innovative pathways to CAPVA support and intervention. This has the potential to make a significant impact on how policymakers and external partners consider the way in which families living with CAPVA can access support and intervention. This is timely work due to the increase in CAPVA funding from the Home Office with adolescent-to-parent violence being included in the Domestic Abuse Bill 2021.

A new way of working

As a result of this project, the principal investigator is continuing to work with collaborative partners, and potential wider partnerships to develop the basis of an approach that will, hopefully, be piloted. It is hoped a pilot will improve both rates of referral to specialist intervention and be viewed as non-harmful for families living with CAPVA prior to the families reaching crisis. The second phase of what is envisaged as a three-phase project attempting to improve support pathways for families living with CAPVA, will work with parents and children experiencing CAPVA, strategic managers of relevant services, operational managers of relevant services, and practitioners, to explore whether the systems approach designed in this project would work in practice.



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For further information

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vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/capva

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