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Challenging behaviour, Non Violent Resistance (NVR) and Parents/ Carers in a time of COVID 19

- Declan Coogan, PhD & Eileen Lauster, June 2020
- Post-date 3 June 2020



“It’s a lot worse than it was”

Thirteen year old Marie’s parents (not her real name), rang their social worker as their daughter’s behaviour had worsened since the COVID 19 pandemic closed schools and their workplaces. Marie was fighting with them much more, saying her parents were “crazy” and “it was all their fault”. As they spoke, Marie’s parents described feelings of hopelessness and helplessness as their daughter had, over the last few months, begun to use alcohol (and they suspected, drugs), gone missing from school and had broken a door and windows at home. Marie had beaten up her young brother, had pushed her parents around and threatened them with physical violence. They could not understand how Marie, who had been pleasant, happy, out-going and close to her parents, could change so much and treat them so badly. They felt there was nothing they could do. They felt at a loss...and initially, their social worker felt the same way.

Experiences within the family of this kind of behaviour (also known as child to parent violence and abuse, CPVA) are surrounded with a veil of silence, with embarrassment, shame and fear (Coogan & Holt 2015, Coogan 2018, Bonnicksen 2019). This makes it very difficult for a parent/ carer to start a conversation about CPVA.

The First Step

But reaching out and talking is always a good first step, even though that first step is always very hard. For the people who work with families, like social workers and family support workers, psychologists and psychiatrists, listening to parents or carers talking about these experiences is always a good start. And as more parents began to talk about being afraid of their son or daughter to us and other practitioners who listen and work with parents and families around Ireland, they tell us that listening without judgement is really very important to them.

But what can we do together to end the use of abusive and/or violent behaviour by some children and young people towards their parents? First, we can name the problem and let parents know that they are not alone. Conflict between parents and children is usually a rite of passage, a stage in changing relationships as sons and daughters grow and mature. But in some families, abuse, violence and fear enters the relationship when parents, like these feel they are unable to act as a parent.

CPVA is an abuse of power through which a child/adolescent under the age of 18 years coerces controls or dominates parents or those who have a parental role (e.g. grand-parents or foster carers). It is reported by parents from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds in Ireland, throughout the EU and further afield.

The Human Rights of Parents/ carers?

This is a question of the human rights of parents and of children: Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that no one should be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Yet parents or carers who talk with us about the abusive and/or sometimes violent behaviour of their son or daughter tell us about experiences of cruelty, of feeling degraded or constantly walking on eggshells. And because parents in these situations cannot live in a close and happy relationship with their child, then the child is also negatively affected by his or her behaviour. It can lead to a move out of home for the child or a placement breakdown for a child in care.

Parents/carers living with CPVA often talk about feeling ashamed, feeling completely powerless and feeling all alone.

No break in a time of COVID 19

Right now, as we live through the time of COVID 19, it is even harder to be at home, together all the time. We are living through uncertain and strange times. Normal

routines are disrupted. It is almost impossible to escape the tension and stress if we're living with it all the time, without the break usually brought about through separation because of school, training course, work or getting together with friends. There is uncertainty about when and how all our lives can begin to return to some sort of normal routine. In lots of different ways, we have all had to adapt the ways we work and live.

But more than that, life continues to make other extraordinary demands of us all at present. Social isolation and social distancing is hard. It is also hard for everyone to maintain personal, physical and emotional/ psychological health but especially when living with the strain of life as we need to live now. It is even harder for families living with abusive and/or violent behaviour. But there is hope.

Where does NVR come from?

Non Violent Resistance (NVR) for families living with children with abusive/violent behaviour can offer hope. It was pioneered in Tel Aviv, Israel by psychologist and family therapist Haim Omer and others. They adopted the principles and strategies of non-violence from socio-political struggles for civil rights to work with families where children and young people use violent/abusive behaviour at home.

Involving trained practitioners working collaboratively with parents, the NVR model moves the focus of intervention to where parents can effectively take action to change relationship and interaction habits between parents and children that can lead to the use of abusive/violent behaviour.

What does NVR mean in practice?

Using the NVR model in partnership with parents, the NVR trained practitioner becomes a type of adviser/coach for parents. Parents are supported to develop skills for de-escalation, self-control, resistance and protest against/rejection of abusive behaviour. This empowers parents to take their place as a parent in the family. Parents commit to avoiding all forms of abusive behaviour and make a clear announcement to the family that specific types of behaviour are no longer acceptable. Although abusive and violent behaviour is rejected and resisted, the child is treated with respect and love as a member of the family. Parents increase their positive presence in their child's life and make unconditional acts of reconciliation towards their son/ daughter. Parents often also ask the NVR trained practitioner for help in recruiting and co-ordinating a Support Network (people chosen by parents to take on certain tasks to help them end abusive and/ or violent behaviour at home).

Does NVR work?

Parents tell us that the support they receive through using NVR helps them to end abusive/ violent behaviour. Our own experiences and the experiences of other NVR trained practitioners, including those who offer NVR through Parentline and other

services in Ireland, is that it seems to be very helpful for parents and in a relatively short space of time.

Is there research about NVR (and where can I find it)?

There is also a small but developing amount of research exploring intervention with NVR. For example, Gienusz (2014) described three research studies in the UK and Germany which found that NVR improves parental well-being, decreases parental helplessness and leads to positive improvements in the child's behaviour. Haim Omer and Dan Dolberger (2015) outlined the use of NVR with parents where a child threatens to commit suicide. Two research studies, one by Paula Wilcox and her colleagues in 2015 and another by one of us (Declan) in 2016, demonstrated that practitioners who took part in the training in NVR increased their confidence and skills for talking about and responding to CPVA.

Coogan (2018) describes NVR implementation in detail. NVR Ireland, a network of practitioners and academics in Ireland working to resolve the problems of children's abusive and/or violent behaviour towards parents/ carers, have developed a short guide for practitioners to use the NVR intervention over the phone or through social media platforms (see www.cpvireland.ie and www.iasw.ie). There are free on-line resources, some of which have been developed by practitioners and academics in Ireland (e.g. www.cpvireland.ie and www.newauthorityparenting.ie) and in England (www.holesinthewall.co.uk and www.familylives.org.uk). In this time of social distancing, many services in Ireland are using social media platforms to offer welcome support and a listening ear for parent/ carers coping with intense and stress-filled challenges.

A Lifeline

NVR is an evidence-based, non-blaming, systemic and relatively short-term intervention model that empowers parents and people working with them to take positive action to end the abusive and/or violent behaviour of a child. It also helps with respecting and protecting children and all family members. People trained in NVR have been offering NVR support to parents/ carers through a variety of services, statutory and voluntary throughout Ireland since 2011. It seems to work. At a time of COVID 19, social isolation and social distancing, providing NVR on line or over the phone can be a lifeline.

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developing NVR as a helpful intervention for parent, families and practitioners.

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