Restoring competence and confidence- non-violent resistance as a response to child-to-parent violence in Ireland

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Restoring competence and confidence – non-violent resistance as a response to child-to-parent violence in Ireland

Declan Coogan and Eileen Lauster

In this article, we describe some of the difficulties some parents and therapists can encounter when faced with child-to-parent violence. We hope to show that an adapted non-violent-resistance programme restores confidence and competence in parents who have lived with such violence; the programme also provides therapists with a helpful way to talk with parents about their experiences of violence. Such conversations can lead to an end to the fear and isolation at the heart of the experience. We will also outline an innovative research project involving five countries in the European Union that includes, as its objectives, increasing awareness of child-to-parent violence and exploring participants’ responses to a two-day training programme on non-violent resistance. As a way of reflecting on experience and practice, we will also use an anonymised case-example, drawn from the experiences of one of us.

Child-to-parent violence: Helplessness and hopelessness

Kathryn and Tom, the parents of a 14-year-old Maria, attended an appointment at their local out-patient child and adolescent mental health service in Dublin. She had refused to join them, shouting that there was nothing wrong with her; her parents were ‘crazy’ and ‘it was all their fault’. As they spoke to the therapist, the parents described feelings of hopelessness and helplessness as their 14-year-old, over the last few months, had begun to stay out all night, use alcohol and drugs, shout and scream at them and at her younger brother, had broken a door and window and had threatened them with physical violence. They could not understand how Maria, who up until recently had been pleasant, happy, outgoing and close to them, could change so much and treat them so badly. They felt there was nothing they could do. They felt at a loss... and, initially, the therapist felt the same way.

The experience of child-to-parent violence is surrounded with a veil of silence, with embarrassment, shame and fear (Gallagher, 2004; Holt, 2015), making it very difficult for a parent to initiate a conversation about it. It can also be very difficult for a therapist to detect that this may be a reality for family members with whom they are working. One of the reasons it can be difficult for therapists and for families to even begin to think about is that there are similarities to, but important differences also between, child-to-parent violence and domestic violence (Weltens, 2012). Such difficulties are not helped by the invisibility of child-to-parent violence in domestic violence official guidance and policy in Ireland and the UK (Coogan, 2011; Coney & Miles, 2013), making it seem as if the problem does not really exist and as if there are no meaningful ways to respond to it. Neither are such difficulties helped by the potentially confusing variety of terms used to describe the problem.

What is child-to-parent violence?

Child-to-parent violence can be defined as an act carried out by a child towards a son or daughter, such as a daughter shouting, hanging doors and name calling and child-to-parent violence. We suggest that one useful way to make that distinction is to consider the power dynamics within families: from this perspective, it is an abuse of power by the child or adolescent through which he or she attempts to dominate, coerce and control others in the family (Tew & Nixon, 2009; Coogan, 2011).

There is evidence to suggest child-to-parent violence can be found across a range of family circumstances and socio-economic backgrounds. Witzblatt & Omar (2008) and Calvete et al. (2013) refer to studies in Spain, Canada and the United States that indicate 5% to 13% of parents are physically assualted by their children, mostly boys and mostly – though not
exclusively — targeted at mothers. As part of the European Union funded Responding to Child-to-Parent Violence Project, we are working with partners to develop a clearer picture about the experiences of the violence and raising awareness about this problem in five European Union countries, including England and Ireland.

What is the Responding to Child to Parent Violence Project?

Led by Paula Wilcox and Robb Cunningham from Brighton University and Michelle Pooley from Brighton and Hove City Council, the Responding to Child to Parent Violence Project runs until January 2015, with an emphasis on integrating intervention and research in responding to child-to-parent violence. It is funded by the European Commission’s Daphne III Programme which supports Europe-wide projects that address issues of violence against children, young people and women. The practitioners and researchers involved in the project are in Bulgaria, Spain, Sweden, England and Ireland. We share the common hope of increasing awareness about such violence and of implementing and carrying out research on two intervention programmes – namely Break4Change and the non-violent-resistance programme. The Break4Change programme is a group and multi-media based intervention which involves parents and children in separate and concurrent group-work sessions. It has been developed by the Brighton & Hove City Council and their partners. Contact details for Break4Change can be found at the end of this article.

In Galway, Ireland, the Responding to Child-to-Parent Violence Project at the National University of Ireland is joined by COPE Galway/ Waterside House, a women’s refuge and outreach service in the West of Ireland. Colleagues from COPE Galway/ Waterside House will join us in hosting an international conference at the National University of Ireland Galway on 12-13 June 2014 entitled, Child-to-Parent Violence: Innovations in Practice, Policy & Research. Scheduled speakers include Peter Jakob (who developed the non-violent-resistance programme in England) and Eddie Gallagher (who works with families in Australia). Project members from the five different countries will describe their local responses and their research findings and activities. More information about the conference can be found on the website given at the end of this article.

Non-violent-resistance as a response

But the question remains: how best to respond to problems described by parents such as Kathy and Tom in a way that avoids the cul-de-sac of blaming parents but yet offers real promise of a resolution? An empowering and innovative response seemed to be offered by the non-violent-resistance programme (Omer, 2004; Weinblatt & Omer, 2008). There were promising results in Israel from this programme, which assists parents in the development of a new awareness of their own role in de-escalation cycles, of new skills and of a support network in their responses to child-to-parent violence. The programme, adapted in Ireland with the support of Omer, seemed to enable Marie’s parents to regain a sense of confidence and competence as parents, while building on the positive aspects of their relationship with their daughter. It also made room in clinical sessions for stories of resilience and strengths, which seemed to be much more useful for the family, rather than focusing on the role of genetic factors or family ‘deficits’ (McKenna, 2010).

Throughout eight sessions, the parents developed new skills and, with the therapist, explored successes and setbacks in their implementation of the approach at home. Key factors of the programme are described elsewhere in this issue of Context. In relation to the work with Kathy and Tom, these included:

- the parents’ disclosure about the extent of the problem of violence with a number of significant people whom they also invited to be part of a support network, including a grandmother, who until recently had ceased contact with Marie;
- the parents’ development of self-management and self-calming skills;
- the announcement to the family that violence at home was no longer tolerated;
- parental reconciliation gestures.

On completion of the programme, Kathy and Tom reported their relationship with Marie had hugely improved, they were no longer living in fear of their daughter and she was no longer going missing for long periods.

The non-violent-resistance training programme in Ireland

The positive experiences of the clinical team members and of the families in North Dublin who had used the programme over an 18-month period between 2008 and the end of 2009, led to an appreciation of the potential that lay within the approach to enhance the safety of children and parents, to end violence and to improve family relationships. Following a presentation outlining the key elements of the programme by Declan at the annual conference of the Irish Association of Social Workers in 2009, some individual practitioners and managers in children and family services suggested the development of a training programme to assist practitioners in responding to the emerging problem of child-to-parent violence.

When Declan commenced employment as a social-work educator and researcher at the National University of Ireland in late 2009, this presented an opportunity for the development of such a training course, together with the integration of research and practice development. As part of a PhD research project, the two-day training programme in non-violent resistance was developed, piloted and delivered to practitioners in different voluntary and statutory children and family services in Galway, Ireland.

Researching child-to-parent violence and intervention in Ireland

As part of the five nation Responding to Child-to-Parent Violence Project, the non-violent-resistance training programme was delivered to a multi-disciplinary group of child and family and domestic-violence practitioners in Galway in Ireland and in Brighton in England. At the same time, training on Break4Change was also delivered in Brighton. The training events were also delivered to local authority workers in Amål in Sweden. Eileen joined the project in August 2013, enabling the expansion of the training and research activities. Daphne co-funded non-violent-resistance two-day training, and research on child-to-parent violence is taking place throughout 2013-14 with, for example, probation officers, national family support network members (who work with families with drug and alcohol abuse problems), staff and volunteers of Parentline (a national telephone-support service for parents in Ireland) and domestic-violence refuge practitioners in Northern Ireland. Participants are asked to complete questionnaires that gather data on the effectiveness of the training. All of this information will be disseminated by the
Non-violent-resistance as a response

The question remains: how best to respond to problems described by parents, such as Kathy and Tom in a way that avoids the cul-de-sac of blaming parents but yet offers real promise of a resolution? An empowering and innovative response is to weave conversation in with individual practitioners and managers in children and family services suggested the development of a training programme to assist practitioners to deal with the emerging problem of child-to-parent violence. When Declan commenced employment as a social worker educator and researcher at the National University of Ireland in late 2006, he was confident that his educational and research development of such a training course, together with the integration of research and practice development. As part of a PhD research project, the two-year training programme in non-violent resistance was developed, delivered and delivered successfully to practitioners in different voluntary and statutory children and family services in Galway.

Researching child-to-parent violence and intervention in the community

As part of the five nation. Reaching out to Child-to-Parent Violence Project, the non-violent-resistance training programme was delivered to a multi-disciplinary group of professionals and family practitioners in Galway and in Britain in England. At the same time, training on Break4Change was also delivered to groups in Galway. These professionals were also delivered to local authority workers in Amal in Sweden. Eileen joined the project in August 2013, enabling the expansion of the training and research office. Declan’s own family support network who works with families with drug and alcohol abuse problems, staff and volunteers of Parent 2 Parent (a family support service for parents in Ireland) and other non-violence refuges practitioners in Northern Ireland. Participants are asked to complete questionnaires that gather data on the effectiveness of the training. All of the information will be disseminated by the completion of the programme. In addition to training events, both of us have delivered papers at conferences.

First impressions of practitioners’ experiences

The training events and presentations we have been part of seem to create awareness for practitioners to see themselves as non-violent in raising each other’s experiences of working with child-to-parent violence. For example, when Eileen spoke about non-violent resistance with a housing authority social worker in the south east of Ireland, they shared their experiences about drug dealers approaching families for drug debt caused by a son or daughter. They also spoke of child-to-parent violence among Traveller families. They reported that, much like the experiences of working with domestic violence survivors, it is difficult to start a dialogue within this minority community on the subject of child-to-parent violence. Also it seems that the non-violent-resistance approach helps practitioners find useful ways to think and talk with parents about how to help their children with their experiences of child-to-parent violence.

Next steps for the non-violent-resistance programme

As we listen to, and take part in, conversations with practitioners, it also strikes us that a distinctive feature of the approach is that it directly addresses the response, we bypass these difficulties by rather than exclusively focusing on working with the child and his/her behaviour. One of the difficulties many practitioners face working with parents is the effect of violence that the child is carried either refuses to accept any responsibility for their behaviour or they refuse to attend or engage in sessions. In Ireland, the using the non-violence approach responds to this by working almost exclusively with parents in a targeted and time-limited way to develop the confidence, skills and support needed to help an adult and to the violence at home. Elsewhere in this issue of Context, others describe child-focused work where child-to-parent violence takes place in ways that could complement and enhance the non-violence-resistance approach in Ireland.

Since February 2013, the responding to child-to-parent violence project has enabled us to raise awareness about, provide training and discussion in Ireland about child-to-parent violence. We hear from our partners in Bulgaria, England, Spain and Sweden that this is also true in other parts of Europe. Although a lot in 2015 it is the first time to raise awareness about the violence and in three countries, there is still a great deal of work that needs to be done. We look forward to sharing the insights that emerge from the research taking place in other countries and to bear about the future of work throughout Europe from key speakers during our conference on child-to-parent violence at the National University of Ireland in Galway on 13 June 2014. It seems to us that the integration of intervention and research and the promotion of the key principles of the non-violence-resistance approach are useful ways to reverse the cycle of violence and competence of parents and to assist families to develop more peaceful relationships.

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References


