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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 to 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

Kathy and Tom, the parents of a 14-year-old Marie, 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 her younger brother, had broken a door and window and had threatened to harm them with physical violence. They could not understand how Marie, who up until recently had been pleasant, happy, out-going 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, 2013), 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 (Wiltz, 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; Cundey & 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, with the intention to cause physical, psychological, or financial pain or to exert power and control over a parent (Cottrell, 2000; Calvete et al., 2013). We prefer to use the term ‘child-to-parent violence’ for a number of reasons:
a. it encompasses a wide range of abusive behaviours, including acts of violence and controlling tactics;
b. it indicates that it is the parent (or a person acting in the role of a parent, such as a foster carer, for example) who is the target of the abusive behaviour by the child under the age of eighteen years of age;
c. the term clarifies that it is the child who uses violence to dis-empower the parent/carer.

Therapists working in children and family services in the community may find it difficult to recognise that a child, who may be a survivor of domestic violence and/or abuse at home, can also be responsible for the use of violent and abusive behaviour. Sometimes, diagnostic labels such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or attachment disorder may be misunderstood in ways that can obscure the realities of accountability and choice involved in the use of abuse and violence at home by a child. Parents and therapists may also be uncertain about identifying the difference between what could be described as typical challenging behaviour (e.g. tantrums, bike-wrangling, cycling, 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, 2000; 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 assaulted by their children, mostly boys and mostly — though not

References


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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 Amstén 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
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Throughout eighteen sessions, the parents developed new skills and, with the help of the facilitator, 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:

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First impressions of practitioners’ experiences

The training events and presentations we have been part of seem to create welcome space for practitioners to be offered by the non-violent programme to each other their experiences of working with child-to-parent violence. For example, when Eileen spoke about non-violent resistance work with housing authority staff 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 against the second generation of Travellers. They report 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. And it seems that the non-violent-resistance approach helps practitioners find useful ways to think and talk with parents about how much such violence impacts on their experiences of child-to-parent violence.

Next steps for the non-violent-resistance programme in Ireland

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 relationship, we bypass these difficulties by rather than exclusively focusing on working with the child and his or her behaviour. One of the difficulties many practitioners face when working with parents who engage in such violence is that the child either refuses to accept any responsibility for their behaviour or they refuse to attend or engage in sessions. In Ireland, using the non-violent-resistance approach we try to bypass these difficulties by working almost exclusively with parents in a targeted and time-limited way to develop the confidence, skills and support needed to engage in 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-violent-resistance programme in Ireland.

Since February 2013, the responding to child-to-parent violence project has enabled us to raise awareness about, provide training and to discuss this work 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 has been done in these five 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 throughout Europe and to hear about these developments 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 restore the confidence and competence of parents and to assist families to develop more peaceful relationships.

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