

Family violence of adolescents and young adults against their parents

Core findings from exploratory research

Little is known about *family violence by adolescents and young adults aimed at their parents* in the Netherlands. Movisie and TNO conducted an exploratory study, to gather knowledge on character and prevalence, and to present leads for prevention and support. This summary contains the major findings, conclusions and recommendations.

For the sake of readability we use the term 'parent abuse', and even though they are not always easy to distinguish, we speak of 'perpetrators' (adolescents and young adults) and 'victims' (parents).

What do we mean by parent abuse?

Definitions of parent abuse in academic research differ per study and country. They often only relate to physical violence. In the Netherlands there is no common definition yet. In this study we used the following (provisional) definition: parent abuse is violence in the family, committed by a young person between 12 and 23, and aimed at (one of the) parents. It concerns repeated and serious violence which cannot solely be explained by puberty. Violence may be psychological and verbal, physical or sexual, but can also relate to financial exploitation. Excluded from this definition are spousal abuse, sibling abuse, and elder abuse (although these may occur in combination with violence against parents).

Recommendations

- *Formulate a univocal Dutch definition, in order to be able to raise awareness on the issue of parent abuse and to register, combat and study it. Parents, children, young adults and professionals will then be able to articulate this form of family violence, meaning they can be heard and supported.*
- *Facilitate the registration of parent abuse according to a univocal definition by police, Family Violence Advice and Support Centre (SHG's) and municipalities (with regard to domestic exclusion orders applicable from age 18 years).*

How often does parent abuse occur?

A systematic literature search yielded only three large-scale quantitative studies:

- In the USA, 11 to 20 percent of parents claim to be or to have been victim of (only or at least) physical violence by their child(ren) in the previous six months to a year (Pagani et al, 2003; 2009; respectively Ulman and Straus, 2003).
- In Canada, 6.5 to 11 percent of young people admit to use physical violence against their parents (Peek, 1985; Agenew and Huguley, 1989; Brezina, 1999).

The prevalence of parent abuse has not been a topic for large scale epidemiological research in the Netherlands. However, the percentages known do provide a rough indication:

- In Van der Veen and Bogaerts (2010), 7 percent of victims of family violence indicate 'my child' as perpetrator. This concerns an estimated 12 percent of family violence perpetrators annually (however, these percentages could also partially relate to elder abuse).

- In one Youth Care Agency (*Bureau Jeugzorg*) parent abuse appeared to be an issue with almost 8 percent of the young clients (reported to the crisis intervention team) (Schoneveld, 2010).
- Approximately 10 percent (more than 9,500 in 2012) of all incidents of family violence reported to the police involve parents as the victim (this percentage does not include elder abuse) (Ferwerda and Hardeman, 2014).

We also explored how many reports of parent abuse are received by the Family Violence Advice and Support Centre (SHG's). This showed the following.

- Annually the SHG's receive at least 2,000 reports of parent abuse.
- In 2011 an estimated 11 percent of temporary domestic exclusion orders were imposed upon young adults between 18 and 23 years old (however, part of this percentage could relate to partner violence).

Recommendation:

- *More research is needed into the nature and prevalence of parent abuse and the effects of specific support programmes. Include questions on parent abuse in the next national survey on family violence.*

Who are the perpetrators and victims?

The overall picture emerging from academic literature is that parent abuse is mainly inflicted by boys of 14/15 years of age onwards, living at home, is primarily aimed at single, white, biological mothers, in families in various socio-economic classes (SES).

In the exploratory research we studied the characteristics of families in which parent abuse occurs. We used data registered by SHG's over a period of three months. This showed the following (based on 50 percent response by SHG's and a total of 249 cases). The findings are largely in line with those in academic literature.

- Perpetrators were mainly boys (87%).
- Violence rapidly increases after the age of 14 (this also shows in police data). Among girls violence decreases, while among boys it increases.
- Victims were most often the biological mothers (72%).
- 82 percent of all perpetrators lived at home: close to 38 percent lived with both biological parents; close to 47 percent lived only with the biological mother; none of the perpetrators lived only with the biological father.
- If frequency and duration of the violent episodes were known, in a third of the cases the frequency was weekly. In 60 percent of cases the violence continued over a period of more than a year.
- Most reports at SHG's came from the police; in 40 percent of these cases charges were also pressed. This is high compared to the 27 percent pressed charges in all cases of family violence reported to the police (Ferwerda and Hardeman, 2013).
- The violence against parents was physical (78%) and mental (70%), and in 11 percent of the cases (also) concerned financial exploitation.
- Nearly all perpetrators had other problems besides violence: (other) behavioural problems (41%), psychiatric disorders (25%), addictions (28%), debts (10%), intellectual limitations (10%), criminality (9%), learning disabilities (6%), victim of abuse or neglect (4%).
- Very often violence also took place outside the family: abuse of the (ex-)partner of the young adult occurred in one in ten cases.

- In 86 percent of the total number of cases other problems also existed with the parents or in the family besides the perpetrator-related problem. In almost a third of the cases parents were divorced; one in ten cases concerned partner violence between parents; parenting problems with other children occurred regularly (14%).
- Almost two thirds of perpetrators were already involved with professional care-givers; in almost a quarter of the cases this concerned more than one category of support or care. In almost half of the cases professional carers were already in touch with members of the family.

Focus groups, interviews with professionals and conversations with parents formed part of the exploratory study. The resulting picture is one of a tremendous taboo. Parents are reluctant to admit that they are afraid of their children. They are ashamed and feel guilty. They also say that it is difficult to find information on the Internet and they feel insufficiently heard and understood by caregivers. Professionals generally seemed more familiar with youth as victims than as perpetrators of abuse. This may put parents in a difficult and frustrating position. The reports to the police and SHG's therefore are probably just the tip of the iceberg and probably concern only the very serious cases.

Recommendations:

- *In general more attention needs to be paid to the issue of aggression and violence committed by young people against their parents, in order to help families at an early stage.*
- *Raise awareness on the issue of parent abuse and include it in national media campaigns on family violence.*

Parent abuse is often a family problem, when negative communication and behavioural patterns lead to disturbed relationships and disturbed parental authority. It often commences with verbal violence by adolescents between 12 and 14 years of age.

A specific group however are adolescents with a (possible) psychiatric disorder which only emerges in the course of puberty. Aggression and violence are part of the symptoms, and often depression is too. When problems arise at school as well, young people with serious behavioural problems may fall into a downward spiral of truancy, suspension, (soft) drugs abuse, lack of daily occupation and excessive computer use.

Recommendations:

- *Prevention is needed specifically at the onset of puberty (12 to 14 years of age) – this seems to be a window of opportunity. Pay attention to extreme aggression at the onset of puberty.*
- *Aggression and violence need to be included as a topic in the contact moments that youth public health care workers have with pupils in Form 2 of secondary school. Also parenting support services should be attentive to aggression and violence initiated by adolescents and young adults.*
- *Special attention needs to be paid to adolescents at risk due to (emerging) psychiatric disorders or severe behavioural problems with little capacity to adapt, low frustration tolerance and oppositional behaviour.*

The group of 18 to 23 year olds is especially problematic, because they are no longer in youth care and therefore more difficult to reach out to if they are not motivated for help. At the same time violence committed by boys increases from 15 years onwards. This stresses the need to persist. There are also not enough (supported) living arrangements for this age group. Parents are left with no other option than to report to the police.

Recommendations:

- *Police, SHG's and youth care should gear their interventions towards each other and consider which approach is called for to prevent or stop violence.*
- *Consider a temporary domestic exclusion order for young adults (18 to 23 year olds); report into care and, if needed, out of home placement for younger perpetrators under 18.*
- *Extra attention is needed for housing arrangements for perpetrators between 18 and 23 years old.*
- *Don't forget the siblings and pay attention to their safety.*
- *Take parents seriously. Collaborate with them. If necessary, refer them into care too.*
- *Be tenacious; do not give up when adolescents are not receptive to care.*
- *It is essential that care providers, SHG's and police work together in the field of parent abuse. Parent abuse needs to be included in the regional and municipal family violence policy plans and in the new Dutch youth care infrastructure (by 2015). Parent abuse also needs to be guaranteed in the merging of SHG's and Advice and Reporting Centres on Child Abuse & Neglect (AMK).*

Which are signs and risk factors?

The following signs and risk factors emerge from larger studies on parent abuse abroad (Pagani, 2003 and 2009; Ulman and Straus, 2003; Kennair and Mellor, 2007; Elliott, 2011; Holt, 2011; 2013; Routt and Anderson, 2011):

- the biological parents have divorced;
- experience with family violence (partner violence, child abuse & neglect);
- low frustration tolerance and low adaptation skills;
- oppositional behavioural problems;
- a psychiatric disorder;
- alcohol and drugs abuse (particularly as triggers);
- parenting styles that are too permissive, too protective or too rigid;
- lack of mutual involvement in the family and of appreciation;
- influence of social environment (media, peers) and (or lack of) social support;
- views on gender roles and violence;
- delinquency in the public domain;
- problematic behaviour at school, (long term) truancy and being subject to bullying.

Recommendations:

- *Professionals should enquire about aggression and parent abuse in families with an occurrence of other forms of family violence (partner violence, child abuse & neglect), (messy) divorce and single parenthood with children from 12 onwards.*
- *Professionals in youth care and youth mental health care should enquire about aggression and parent abuse with regard to adolescents with a (possible) psychiatric disorder.*
- *Mentors and supervisors in secondary education should consider the occurrence of parent abuse when pupils show aggression, (severe) behavioural problems and long term truancy.*

Which prevention and therapeutic interventions are available?

There are no preventive programmes in the Netherlands aimed at awareness raising or prevention and early recognition of parent abuse, and there are little or none in other countries. A few SHG's developed a method for first response, crisis intervention and case management in cases of reported parent abuse *Wat wil je eigenlijk? Methodische handleiding bij de aanpak van geweld tegen ouders*

(What is it you really want? Manual in dealing with violence against parents - SHG Groningen, Blijf Groep Amsterdam, and Fier Fryslân).

Academic literature contains very little about care programmes aimed specifically at families involved in parent abuse. Most programmes work with group sessions for parents (especially in Australia) and sometimes also with the adolescents, and/or sessions with both parents and adolescents.

Randomised controlled trial research was conducted only with the Non-Violent Resistance method in England and Germany (Weinblatt and Omer, 2008; Ollefs, 2009).

Quasi-experimental research with a fairly large sample took place with the American programme Step-Up (ORS, 2005). These studies show positive effects of the programme.

There are no specific care programmes for parent abuse in the Netherlands. There are however programmes and aggression regulation training courses aimed at combating anti-social, aggressive and delinquent behaviours of adolescents and young adults in general. These deal mainly with severe behavioural problems and/or delinquent behaviour. With the exception of 'Tailormade Aggression Regulation' (*Agressieregulatie Op Maat* – Hoogsteder et al, 2012), all Dutch care programmes originate from abroad: Multisystemic Therapy (MST), Functional Family Therapy (FFT), Non-Violent Resistance and EQUIP. These programmes have been acknowledged by the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice and/or the database Effective Youth Interventions (NJI).

Recommendations:

- *Promote SHGs' knowledge about parent abuse and relevant interventions and educate parents (and adolescents and young adults) through information and mass media campaigns.*
- *Call attention to MST, FFT -programmes and forms of aggression regulation training as potential options for referral.*
- *Non-Violent Resistance can possibly be scaled up to (also) offer a response to problems in less severe cases.*
- *Explore whether the Signs of Safety approach can be applied when dealing with parent abuse.*

More reading?

The full report and list of resources are available for downloading from www.movisie.nl and www.tno.nl (available only in Dutch).

Colophon

© Movisie/TNO 2014 – Texts may be used with acknowledgement of source.

This study has been conducted by Remy Vink and Fieke Pannebakker (TNO), Annemiek Goes and Nicole Doornink (Movisie), funded by Stichting Kinderpostzegels Nederland, TNO and Movisie.

We thank the advisory committee members: Prof. Dr. Stefan Bogaerts (Tilburg University), Barbara Schmeits (City of Amsterdam), Gerrienne Rozema (Regional Centre for Domestic Violence Midden-Brabant), Mariëtte Christophe (National Programme Domestic Violence and Police Work).