CHILDREN’S VIOLENCE TO PARENTS: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

By

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Abbreviations used:

CPV: Child to parent violence
IPV: Intimate partner violence
CTS: Conflict tactics scale
SES: Socio-economic status
Abstract

There is a dearth of literature on the subject of children’s violence to parents. Despite its small size, this literature is inconsistent on even basic facts such as gender of aggressor or of parent-victims. In general, survey research suggests that gender is of little or no significance whereas other sources of information (qualitative research, clinical, legal and medical) all suggest that boys are more often the aggressors and mothers far more often the victims. In addition some literature assumes that abused parents are themselves violent or over-controlling while the clinical and qualitative research overall suggests that parents are usually caring but permissive and that abuse by the parent victim is rare. This thesis is a critical examination of the literature on violence to parents and selected relevant literature on family violence, aggression, child behaviour problems and delinquency. It explores definitions, types of violence, methodological problems with survey data, incidence of violence to parents, gender of parentally violent children, gender of abused parents, socio-economic status and parenting styles, influence of past Intimate Partner Violence, and child abuse. The thesis concludes with tentative propositions about the nature of violence to parents and implications for social work practice and future research.
Acknowledgement

I wish to acknowledge the help of my supervisors, Professor Christopher Goddard and Associate Professor Rosemary Sheehan, and the many families with whom I have worked.

Declaration

The work in this thesis was conducted in the Department of Social Work, Monash University between August 2003 and January 2008. It contains no material that has been accepted for an award of any other degree or diploma in any university or institution. This thesis does not contain any material previously published or written by any other person except where due reference is made.

Signed: Date:

Edward Gallagher
Chapter 1  Introduction

“Since research is a personal activity… the value positions of the researcher should be faced squarely and addressed fully.” (Reinharz 1979: 10)

In exploring the literature on family violence one seldom encounters information on the experience and beliefs of the researcher or reviewer. Yet this is invaluable in assessing the literature, much of which, although presented as quantitative or clinical objectivity, is shaped by the values of the writer. As Gelles acknowledged, “the study of family violence is often governed more by the heart than by the head” (1995: 18). Though it is never possible to fully express one’s values, any review is guided by the values of the writer and so a few paragraphs on my experience and values are appropriate.

In the 1970’s I worked as a child protection worker in the UK and was also a volunteer at a large women’s refuge, entertaining the many children who passed through. With hindsight these two activities were surprisingly unconnected. At that time, the effect of Intimate Partner Violence (hereafter IPV) on children was not a topic that had entered the collective consciousness.

On moving to Australia, I became involved in the counselling of adult and adolescent abusers (sexual and physical) and with running a men’s violence group (which I still do). This group was then unusual in taking an overtly pro-feminist approach rather than an “anger-management” approach.

My specific interest in child to parent violence (hereafter CPV) dates from the early 1990’s when I was counselling families and, by pure chance, had involvement with four
families at the same time where sole mothers were being intimidated or abused by sons aged from 11 to 13. The similarities were obvious and when I suggested the mothers meet, all were enthusiastic. A fifth mother joined, who was being assaulted by a 15-year-old girl. We adopted the name “The M.A.A.D. group” for “Mothers Against Adolescent Domination”. Once attuned to this issue, which I then conceptualised not as a form of family violence but as child behaviour problems, I began seeing a small but consistent number of such families. I began keeping basic records on characteristics such as age, gender and family type (Gallagher 2004a, 2004b).

I was surprised to find how modest was the literature on this topic and was surprised that many writers assumed that these children were reacting directly to being abused or neglected. This seemed unfair to the vast majority of the families I have met (now over 200) and an example of blaming the victim. The families I have encountered are almost all either a) women who have left abusive men or b) well-meaning, caring, but often over-indulgent parents (Gallagher 2004a).

I now counsel a steady stream of such families, run “Who’s in Charge?” groups for parents whose children are violent or beyond control (as described by Howard & Weir 2004) and regularly provide training on the subject.

1.1 Theoretical approach

In approaching this issue and reviewing the literature I have not been guided by specific theories. Given the limitations of the data and the paucity of specific theory I feel it would be premature to do so. I present the following more as background so that the reader can
judge my biases and assess my interpretations. Constructivism in this context is an overarching way of viewing and conceptualising research and theories rather than an applied theory. I will also mention feminism and strength-based approaches more as personal biases that I tried to minimise rather than lenses that I deliberately used to assess the data.

1.1.1 Constructivism

The literature on CPV, though small, still manages to be contradictory and confusing. My critical analysis is influenced by a social constructionist viewpoint which emphasises that we cannot take for granted the meaning of terms or measures that are used.

I was introduced to constructivism through several sources in the seventies: Personal Construct Theory (Psychology), Labelling Theory (Sociology) and the social construction of disability (my specialist field for a number of years). Constructivism was then considered rather avant-garde. In recent years, various versions of constructivism have become fashionable and the idea is frequently given lip service.

Parton and O’Byrne (2004: 24/25) list the main points of constructivism in social work practice. “Constructivism, they say,

- Challenges the notion that we can straightforwardly observe the true nature of the world;
- Views social constructions as historically and culturally specific;
- Pays attention to social processes and interactions as this is how we formulate our view of the world;
- Challenges the idea that people and their environment have a real nature that can be uncovered.” (Parton & O’Byrne 2000: 24/25)

These ideas are important to guard against theoretical narrow-mindedness and against imposing our own world-view on others in social work practice. However, I believe radical constructivism, usually associated with post-modernism, is unhelpful both theoretically and in practice. There is a contradiction in the very notion of radical constructivism. If no one approach or view-point is sacrosanct, then surely this also applies to constructivism and post-modernism. I also strongly believe that some constructions, such as psychiatric and disability labels, are socially constructed and culturally relative to a greater degree, and in a different way, than are run-of-the-mill constructions. Thus, to state that all our language and concepts are constructions obscures the point that labels such as “Intellectual Disability” (Gallagher 2002) or “Conduct Disorder” are quite different in kind to concepts such as “apple” and “aardvark”. What they represent are inherently “fuzzy sets” whose common reification inevitably creates prejudice, discrimination, and theoretical confusion.

An extreme constructivist view can be particularly problematic when dealing with violence or abuse, as all constructions are equally legitimate, thus “a child abuser’s view that their actions were justified might be equally valid to that of the child who wishes the abuse to stop” (Parton & O’Byrne 2000:4). Baldly stated, such an argument may appear farcical but such arguments are applied overtly to practices such as female circumcision and sometimes to various forms of family violence (e.g. in ethnic communities). More subtly, much research in the field of family violence, and especially in studies of CPV, takes at face value individual’s accounts of their own abusive behaviours, rather than
assuming that a) their perceptions are likely to be distortions of reality, and b) we cannot assume they are giving honest reflections of their perceptions.

Practitioners in family violence and child welfare cannot afford to view all abuse or violence as purely social constructions. Our precise definitions (explicit or implicit) of terms such as “violence” and “abuse” are socially constructed and enmeshed in ethical and political positions that are both culturally and historically relative. However, abuse is not merely a social construction but represents real pain, tragedy and the misuse of power.

1.1.2 Feminism

It is impossible to examine the field of family violence without taking a position on feminism.

As constructivism, but not radical constructivism, has guided my approach, in a similar vein I have been influenced by pro-feminist approaches (Gallagher 1992). I accept many core feminist assumptions on family violence, e.g. that male IPV is a far more serious social issue than female perpetrated IPV and that patriarchal attitudes play a significant role in much family violence. Thus as stated above I mention pro-feminism as a bias I have been aware of and that readers may take into account, rather than suggesting that I deliberately adopt a feminist lens. This is quite different to most explicitly feminist approaches and although many of my conclusions are sympathetic to feminist theory some are not. I do not believe that female abusive violence is rare or that it is predominantly defensive, nor do I believe that patriarchy comes close to being a sufficient explanation for family violence.
1.1.3 Strengths based approach

A major direct influence on my clinical practice, and indirectly on my clinical research and theoretical approach, are strength based (Saleebey 1992), solution-focussed (DeShazer 1982) and narrative (White 1989) approaches. These all attempt to counter the negativity and stigmatisation of traditional approaches with a more positive, respectful and hopeful view of clients and their problems (and I believe they are fundamentally quite similar). This philosophy, though I have attempted to counter this, may have affected my interpretations of the data, for example making me more attuned to issues such as parent-blaming and the over-use of concepts such as the inter-generational transmission of abuse.

1.2 Central research problem

Our current knowledge of CPV shows fundamental contradictions between different studies. While such basic issues as gender of aggressor and victim are unclear in the existing literature it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the issue of violence to parents. Attempting to make sense of the disparity between different sources of information, with survey data contradicting all other sources of information, is an over-riding objective of the present review.

It has been noted that in reviewing research studies “disagreements among findings are valuable and should be exploited” (Light & Pillemer 1984: 9). The most noticeable differences are between the results of quantitative survey research on the one hand and data from clinical and qualitative studies, court, police and hospital data on the other hand. I will use “survey” as shorthand for the approach of sociologists (and a few psychologists) such as Straus and Gelles, (e.g. Straus et al. 1980) although some of the legal and clinical
data has also used small-scale surveys. The substantial differences between these sources of data on CPV is summarised in the following table.

### 1.2.1.1 Table 1 Main differences between surveys and other studies of CPV

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<th>Quantitative surveys</th>
<th>Clinical, criminological, qualitative and health</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gender of</td>
<td>Roughly equal boys and girls</td>
<td>Boys outnumber girls two or three to one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perpetrating youth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of parent victims</td>
<td>Slightly more mothers than fathers, or equal</td>
<td>Far more mothers are victims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting style</td>
<td>Generally seen as authoritarian</td>
<td>Wide range, but often permissive/indulgent parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.E.S</td>
<td>No association, or higher S.E.S.</td>
<td>More sole mothers, but 2 parent families are sometimes higher S.E.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPV</td>
<td>Contradictory or null results</td>
<td>Often associated with past IPV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse by parent</td>
<td>Suggest (though evidence is weak) that parent-victim also an abuser</td>
<td>Parent-victims very rarely abusers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research on CPV closely parallels the survey research results on IPV which also finds substantially fewer gender differences than are found by clinical, legal and health data. Examining the validity of the quantitative survey research on CPV has clear implications.
for making sense of the contradictions in research on IPV and gender, although space prevents detailed exploration of this issue.

We shall question the validity of the family violence survey research by examining the methodological problems and other relevant research evidence. A central issue is whether asking family members ‘who hits whom?’ gives a valid measure of abusive behaviour. A number of writers have argued that our present quantitative measures are not measuring abusive violence with regard to IPV, but this crucial issue has seldom been raised with regards to CPV. Monk (1997), a rare exception, raises the possibility that the measures may be of doubtful validity but then discusses the survey data as if they were valid.

It should be stressed that the highly critical stance taken on much of the survey research is not motivated by a generally anti-quantitative or anti-science position. However, human behaviour is often so complex that premature quantification and classification can stultify and misdirect enquiry, as may have happened in the sociological research on family violence.

It should also be noted that the criticism of the survey research does not deny the advances in understanding, and particularly in raising awareness, of family violence that have come from this ground-breaking research.

1.3 Sources of information

The author has been actively collecting literature on the subject of violence to parents for over a decade, though initially in a somewhat haphazard fashion. Since commencing this thesis numerous electronic searches have been made (by the author, library staff and
correspondents) of databases such as PsychInfo, ProQuest Social Science Journals, Sage Journals Online, Social Services Abstracts and Informit Online. As there is no standardised terminology and none of these databases have CPV as a recognised subject category it is difficult to be systematic. On the other hand the small number of sources in the literature means that extensive cross-referencing of citations is possible and recent publications have not revealed any peer-reviewed articles on the subject that had been missed.

In recent years I have contacted (by e-mail) many researchers in this field and am in correspondence with a number of researchers in Australia, Canada and the USA as well as occasional contact with students in these countries and in the UK. I have shared my bibliography, with requests for indications of omissions, with all such contacts and my bibliography has also been available on my website for the past three years. For the past two years a Google Alert sends weekly e-mails of new mentions on the world-wide-web of “violence to parents” or “abuse of parents”.

As the great majority of studies on Child Parent Violence are from North America, to avoid repetition we shall generally note the country of origin only when this is not the case. There are a few qualitative or clinical Australian studies, but no surveys to compare with those from the U.S.A. I have been unable to locate any New Zealand studies and very little from the U.K.
Chapter 2 Why is violence towards parents so neglected?

“Child–parent violence (CPV) is arguably the most under-researched form of family violence, despite an extremely high rate of occurrence and increasing prevalence.” (Walsh & Krienert 2007: 563)

“We suspect it is very common. Perhaps one does not hear about it (and researchers do not study it) because of the need to preserve the myth that all children love and respect their parents.” (Straus et al. 1980: 119)

This chapter looks at some suggested reasons why CPV has been a neglected area, namely: parents blaming, victim blaming, seeing children’s violence as a symptom, and the assumption that children are victims.

At the time of writing there appears to be only one book published specifically on the subject of violence to parents (Cottrell 2005) although there are over two thousand on child abuse and close to a thousand on IPV or family violence generally (Miller & Knudsen 2007: 319). Most general books on family violence (even those comparing different forms of family violence) make no mention of CPV, although recent ones often include a chapter on elder abuse (e.g. Miller & Knudsen 2007). A few recent books at least mention the topic of CPV, for example Mignon et al. (2002) list this as one form of family violence and devote one page to the topic. Kurst-Swanger & Petcosky (2003) give CPV one and a half pages, the same coverage as pet abuse. Other books on family violence mention CPV as a single aside, e.g.: “…children may witness parental violence toward other children in the family or children attacking their parents. In short, many
forms of family violence exist, and little is known about the impact of these forms” (Jouriles et al. 2001: 17).

In a book on female victims of IPV there is this aside: “women who are abused in their relationships with an intimate partner experience abuse in other ongoing relationships, for example, from adolescent or adult children...” (Dutton 1993: 30). A similar solitary mention from a book on the effects of IPV on children (even more directly relevant to CPV): “The relationship between mothers and children at times also became strained as the children became violent to their mother” (McGee 2000: 48).

In a survey of the anthropological literature on family violence, Levinson (1989: 30) lists “parent beating” as one of many possible varieties of family violence but makes no comment other than to imply that it is extremely rare. The anthropological literature contains occasional mentions of very young children’s violence towards parents (e.g. Ammar 1966: 129; Dentan 1968: 60; Whiting & Whiting 1975: 153) but we have found none concerning older children or adolescents being violent to parents.

In the literature on delinquency there are occasional hints that young people may be violent to their parents but only a few studies even consider more generally the effect of the delinquent on their family: “It is obvious from the research on violent delinquents that violence against parents is not an isolated phenomenon. Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate a single study focusing specifically on the effect of such violence on various areas of the parents’ lives” (Ambert 1992: 32).
There is also an extensive literature on children’s behaviour problems, such as conduct disorder and ADHD in which the very rare mentions of CPV tend to be incidental and understated, e.g., from a chapter on Conduct Disorder, Kolko (1994: 385) notes that: “Serious physical assault [by children] is destructive to family relationships and is sometimes dangerous to family members.” Much research effectively conceals children’s violent behaviour in aggregate scores of externalising problems and labels such as “Conduct Disorder”, “Oppositional Defiant Disorder”, and “ADHD”.

The fact that this form of family violence is so neglected is curious when we consider that when writers do mention it, they invariably quote incidence rates of ten to eighteen per cent (see chapter 5).

2.1 Parent blaming

Mother blaming has been common in sociology, psychology and social work. Many schools of thought have worked on the premise that children are largely, or entirely, the products of the parenting they receive and also that parenting is largely, or entirely, the responsibility of the mother (Caplan & Hall-McCorquodale 1985; Sommerfeld 1988). Since the middle of the last century mothers have been blamed for an amazing array of problems with the two rival camps of psychoanalysis and traditional behaviourism agreeing that mothers shaped personality development (either by subconscious processes or by reinforcement schedules). Spitz (1965: 2006) wrote of “psychotoxic diseases” whereby “the mother’s personality acts as the disease-provoking agent”. The mother’s role has been further emphasised by a strong cultural and theoretical focus on the earliest years of development (Bruer 1999).
Since Lamb (1975) wrote of fathers’ “forgotten contribution to child development” there has been an increase in emphasis on fathers, though there remains far more focus on mothers (Shulman & Seiffge-Krenge 1997). In many cases the shift has been from mother-blaming to gender-neutral parent-blaming. Parent-blaming has been common in most social work and therapy approaches and is occasionally taken to extremes, for example in the cult-like practice of Feeling Therapy: “Parents were a particular target of attack, since one was encouraged to see them in large part as the cause of one’s problems. Many interviewees reported being told to call parents and scream at them, for a variety of reasons” (Ayella 1998: 85). Populist (mainly American) writers have promoted the idea of “toxic parents” as commonplace, even suggesting that 96% of families are dysfunctional (Bradshaw 1988). The continuing neglect of temperament as a major factor in children’s behaviour means that parents are inevitably blamed for having difficult children (Ambert 1992; Cohen 1999; Harris 1998).

2.2 Victim blaming

Devaluing victims is so common that it has been posited to serve a deep psychological function, such as allowing us to preserve our belief in a “just world” (Lerner 1980). “Blaming the victim” is widespread in society and in politics (Ryan 1979) and denigration of victims has been demonstrated in the laboratory, even when the “victim” has clearly done nothing to deserve their fate: “The victim of undeserved suffering runs the clear risk of being condemned by those who witness his or her fate” (Lerner 1980: 70).

Milgram (1975), in his infamous social psychology experiments, persuaded subjects to apparently administer electric shocks to another person. Once having acted abusively towards a victim many subjects devalued him (or her), finding “it necessary to view him
as an unworthy individual, whose punishment was made inevitable by his own deficiencies of intelligence and character” (Milgram 1975: 10).

It is possible that this dynamic has important implications not only for how parents are treated by professionals (see final chapter) and others, but also may play an important part in all forms of ongoing abuse and, more specifically, in children continuing the abuse of mothers following IPV, and to the escalation of their own abusive behaviour over time.

When parents are victims of CPV, parent blaming, victim blaming and a strong belief in environmental determinacy (narrowly equating environment with parent) all come together to allow professionals to preserve their belief in a just world by seeing the parent as guilty by implication of either abuse, neglect, or at best, stupidity. As mothers especially are often taking total responsibility for their child’s behaviour, and are hence frequently wracked with guilt, as well as being emotionally vulnerable as they struggle with a highly stressful and challenging situation, this unhelpful position is easy to maintain.

Victim blaming has been suggested as one reason why this form of family violence has had such a low profile. “This is the area in family violence that people want to talk about the least because somehow the victims, the society, and everyone else blames the victim. Somehow it’s the parent’s fault that the child is beating him up” (Gelles 1981).

2.3 Violence as a symptom

Rather than being seen as a problem in itself, youth and child violence is frequently viewed as a symptom of an underlying pseudo-medical condition. If there is no obvious
condition (such as a disability) then children showing this behaviour almost invariably fit the vague criteria of a personality disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder, or ADHD (Breggin 1998) The view that violence in children indicates pathology persists, despite far higher rates of violence in children than adults (meaning that it is less abnormal behaviour), ample evidence that family violence in adults is not usually associated with psychopathology, and general agreement that inter-child bullying is not helpfully considered to be a sign of pathology in itself (Olweus 1993).

When violent behaviour is seen as resulting from a disorder, then the context and choice of victim is often not seen as significant. Thus, numerous research studies on children’s aggression and conduct disorders fail to note to whom the child is being aggressive. Not only is hitting another child more normative behaviour than hitting adults but the effects on the aggressive child themself are dramatically different. Hitting adults (at least if continued into adolescence) is far more likely to lead to educational disruption, family breakdown and problems such as delinquency, homelessness and substance abuse.

2.4 The assumption that children are victims

A term such as “child violence” may seem straightforward but in the literature on family violence this almost invariably means abuse of children by adults rather than the more grammatically logical violence by children. For example, Saunders (2003) lists academic fields concerned with “child violence” as the following: “Child sexual abuse; child physical abuse; child neglect; sexual offenders; juvenile sexual offenders; child sexualised behaviour; rape/sexual assault; community violence; school violence; dating violence; domestic violence; witnessing domestic violence; witnessing violence” (Saunders 2003: 368). This list reflects the fact that sexual abuse by children and adolescents has become a
field of study as have bullying in schools and physical abuse of dating partners by adolescents. Saunders lists “delinquency” and “aggression-conduct” as “outcome fields” but does not mention violence towards parents or towards siblings as either a field of study or a studied outcome (2003: 368).

As the term “child abuse” is such a familiar one it makes some sense for “child violence” to be taken as violence towards a child, however, “parent abuse” is also taken to mean the same as “child abuse”. Even when the focus is on CPV, “parent abuse” can be used for abuse by a parent rather than abuse of a parent (e.g. Utech 1994: 198). Similarly “parent victimisation” can mean victimisation by the parent even when CPV is the topic (Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Neidig 1995). This unusual use of language demonstrates just how pervasive and deeply rooted is the assumption of young people as victims.

A common assumption, inherent in many definitions of “abuse”, is that more powerful abuse less powerful individuals (Finkelhor 1983: 18). Straus (1990a: 193) asserted that “violence is used by the most powerful family member as a means of legitimating his or her dominant position.” The existence of CPV (which ironically Straus helped bring to our attention) clearly challenges this assumption and thus the tendency is often to assume that these children must be primarily victims rather than perpetrators. The general attitude in the literature is that “Violence against parents… is usually a response by the child to a consistent pattern of violent parenting” (Herzberger 1996: 15). Similarly, it is “important not to focus on the abusing teenager only as a perpetrator of violence but most importantly as a victim of his/her environment which has invariably been abusive” (McInnes 1995: 3).
This assumption, implicit in much research and practice, has important implications for work with families where there is CPV: “Children's maladaptive behaviour was viewed as a response to something done to them, and thus not something they were responsible for” (Brewer-Jones 1998: 63). This author gives an example of how this attitude may affect practice: “Social workers offered James emotional support and told him that his behaviour was a result of his mother failing to understand his needs” (Brewer-Jones 1998: 64).

The assumption that parent victims have probably been violent to the child is common in the literature. Eckstein (2004: 384) notes that this assumption, which she says is without empirical support, directly influences how research on CPV is presented, investigated and portrayed. The following typical quotes are taken from introductions to articles on CPV, rather than being based on the conclusions of the studies, and probably show the attitudes with which the researchers approached the topic:

- “...victimisation from parents and perpetration toward parents are likely to co-occur.” (Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Neidig 1995)
- “Harsh and inconsistent discipline acts as a template for retaliatory coercion and violence.” (Rybski 1999: 39)
- “Reciprocal-coercion is likely to be part of the process leading to CPV because many children are victims of coercive violence by parents in the form of corporal punishment.” (Ulman & Straus 2003: 42)

Here is the depiction of victimised parents taken from one paragraph, from a study whose sole means of assessing parenting was to ask the youth involved one question, “How often do your parents actually slap you?”:
“harsh and aggressive control strategies (such as parental slapping and hitting)… harsh and aggressive parenting practices… parental aggression… hostile and aggressive behaviour of his or her parents…. Violence is used by the child to cope with the hostile and aggressive behaviour of his or her parents… terminate negative treatment by parents… force them to cease their noxious behaviour toward the child… parents who are demanding and punitive may be forced to retreat… instrumental function that such behaviour serves for the child within a hostile and aversive family environment.” (Brezina 1999: 418)

More generally, Ambert argues that disregard for the effect that children have on parents stems from the fact that “it is taken for granted that parents affect their children rather than vice versa” (Ambert 1992: 51). This assumption is extremely common even when the topic is CPV. Even in non-longitudinal correlational studies, results are reported on the assumption that parents influence children even when logic and parsimony would dictate the reverse, for example: “there was some evidence that the more the parent showed controlling behaviours, the more the child was unresponsive to the attempt to control” (Inoff-Germain et. al 1988: 26).

2.5 Is family Violence one field or many?

Another reason that one particular type of family violence can be easily overlooked is that no one discipline covers the entire field. The field is ploughed in varying ways and in varying directions with no coordination and gaps are inevitable and may go unnoticed. Commenting on the narrower “field of child violence” (Saunders 2003) said that: “We now have a series of parallel literatures, parallel professional activities and parallel fields, oftentimes competing for scarce resources. At times, we are like toddlers, engaged in
parallel play, not acknowledging each other, and rarely sharing” (Saunders 2003: 372). In the wider field of “family violence” it has been noted that criminologists and psychologists studying aggression do not read each other’s literature (Hotaling et al. 1989: 316; Tedeschi & Felson 1994).
Chapter 3  Terminology and types of violence

"How many legs will a sheep have if you call the tail a leg?" They answered: "Five."
"You are mistaken," said Lincoln, "for calling a tail a leg, don't make it so." (Whitney 1892: 175)

“There will never be an accepted or acceptable definition of abuse, because abuse is not a scientific or clinical term. Rather, it is a political concept.” (Gelles & Straus 1988)

“He broke a banister in the hallway and began to beat on the walls… He pulled a knife at me and threatened me. In the past he promised to blow my brains out.” – excerpt from an affidavit of a mother against her 16-year-old son (Cochran et al. 1994: 16)

This chapter explores some issues of terminology relevant to our understanding of the literature on CPV. A tentative classification of violent acts is offered: playful, ritual, expressive, defensive and controlling.

Commenting on the literature on CPV, Eckstein (2002: 7) noted that “often researchers interchangeably use the terms ‘aggression’, ‘violence’ and ‘abuse’”. Such definitional laxity (and “assault” should also be included) causes confusion and may be at the core of many problems with quantitative research on family violence. Not all aggression is violence and not all violence is abuse.
Our primary concern is with recurring violence from adolescent and (occasionally) pre-pubescent children towards their parents, which is not immediately defensive and not directly associated with a serious disability or with serious mental illness. It seems important, both theoretically and clinically, that we do not confuse deliberate assaults on a parent with any of the following: an occasional temper tantrum, play fighting accidents, a toddler lashing out at a parent, a severely disabled child or young person lashing out at a carer, or children defending themselves or other family members from physical or sexual abuse. There appears to be reasonable consistency in the literature that researchers and clinicians do not identify such behaviours as being the same as “parent abuse’ or “violence to parents”, although these behaviours are clearly violent. Most research has either not defined the area of concern or has used a quantitative definition in terms of questionnaire responses that (as we shall see) does not take context or motive of the act into account.

It is necessary to go into definitions of aggression, violence and abuse in detail to clarify the distinction between different types of violence towards parents.

3.1 Aggression

Straus and Gelles (1990) define interpersonal aggression as a “malevolent” act whose “purpose” is to harm another physically, emotionally or through material deprivation. There are a number of problems with such a definition. For example, Straus and colleagues have been very clear that physical punishment of children, even if socially condoned, is violent (Straus et al. 1980: 53) but they have also acknowledged that “frequently, perhaps usually, this force is used with the best interests of the child in mind” (Straus et al. 1980: 190). So is well-intentioned violence not “aggression”? Bushman and Anderson (2001) attempt to get round this problem by differentiating between immediate
and ultimate goals. Thus a parent hitting a child has the immediate goal of causing pain even if the ultimate goal is socialisation, and is, they argue, clearly both aggressive and violent. However, the necessity of judging both short and long term goals before we can decide if an act is aggression or violence makes definitional precision impossible.

Someone who calmly physically defends themselves, or others, against attack is certainly using violence but is neither “abusive” nor “malevolent” (yet, as we shall see, all defensive violence is included as “aggression” in studies using the Conflict Tactics Scale). A young child, or a disabled person, lashing out may, or may not, have the purpose or intention of harming the other but they are clearly being “aggressive” nonetheless.

Other definitions of “aggression” (“interpersonal” is assumed) are similar, e.g. Olweus (1979) defines a class of behaviours that have in common an intrusive, demanding and aversive effect on others. Eron (1987:435) defined aggression as “simply an act that injures or irritates another person”. Bandura and Walters (1963:113) defined aggression equally simply as “the delivery of a noxious stimulus to another”.

The attempt to remove any discussion of intention or context in these definitions (following the behaviourist tradition) fails to logically exclude the unintentionally irritating (e.g. body odour). Individuals may be extremely intrusive, demanding, irritating and aversive without intent to harm (e.g., any crying baby). Is a teacher or parent who is being deliberately “intrusive and demanding” to get a child to study or take their medicine necessarily being aggressive? Eron (1987: 435) does note how difficult it is to measure the intent of an aggressive person. The clear deficiencies in these definitions of
aggression illustrate that the intent of the actor must be taken into account, making any simple objective measurement inherently problematic.

The word “aggression”, as it is most often used in the literature, really refers to a sub-set of aggression which is intended to hurt or control other persons (usually both). Confusingly, “aggression” is sometimes seen as being on a continuum with, but less serious than, “violence”. Archer (2000), in his influential meta-analysis of IPV studies, used the term “aggression” for violent acts that do not result in injury and “violence” for acts that result in physical injury. He thus focussed on the outcome of the act (which has a large element of chance, as well as characteristics of the victim such as agility or frailty) while neglecting the context and intention, which are socially and psychologically just as important. Archer (1999) made it clear that he is aware of the limitation of the data and has suggested that we need measures of family violence that will take context into account (which, as we shall see, the CTS clearly does not).

3.2 Violence

Not all aggression is violence. If one’s tone of voice shows irritation we may be seen as aggressive by those close to us or those who are especially emotionally sensitive but not by others. Such signs of aggression may be significant in a relationship but it would be stretching our language to use the term “violence” for such interactions. Whenever professionals use everyday language they would be well advised to stick as close as possible to common usage or they will continually mislead other people (including other professionals) and possibly themselves.
Straus and Gelles (1986: 141) define violence as “an act carried out with the intention of causing physical pain or injury to another person.” This is almost identical to their definition of “aggression”, but with the emphasis on the physical, and they often use the terms interchangeably. Does genuine self-defence fit such a definition? Striking someone, in sport or in play, can certainly cause injury or pain without this being the primary intention. Is restraining someone never violence? Surely intent to control or intimidate is relevant even if there is no chance or intention of physical pain or injury?

Physical violence between family members can be very varied: slaps, punches, kicks, bites, scratches, pushes, pinches, pulling hair, poking, throwing to the ground. By using weapons (knives, scissors, chairs, baseball bats, etc.) the possibilities are greatly extended and the possibility of doing serious harm becomes real even if the assailant is smaller and physically weaker than the victim. Guns are not often available to Australian children. In American households where guns are readily available to many children we see a large number of parents murdered by adolescents each year (Heide 1992).

The term “violence” is often used with qualifiers such as “verbal violence” or “emotional violence” but the meaning of the word may be extended beyond recognition. As an extreme example, the anti-psychiatry writer David Cooper (1970: 33) defined violence as “the corrosive action of the freedom of a person on the freedom of another”. It is noteworthy that he used such a redefinition in one of the most parent-blaming texts to date, claiming that all parents (and helping professionals), even if sincere and devoted “…are implicated more or less deeply… in a subtle violence against the objects of their care” (Cooper 1970: 32). This is a good example of how extremely wide definitions are used as a tool of ideological polemic.
The approach of most quantitative family violence research is to ask how often a selection of violent acts have been carried out by the respondent, and/or directed at the respondent, over a specified period of time (usually one year). However, if we are interested in “abusive” behaviour we must take into account that not all violence is abusive. It is essential that the social context of the behaviour and the intention of the attacker be taken into account. Various authors have suggested that one or more of the following dilutes the results of family violence surveys: trivial or playful violence, expressive violence, mutual violence and defensive violence.

Our review of the literature has not revealed any systematic combination of these various categories of violent or aggressive acts. Feminist writers for instance, while emphasising defensive violence seem loath to discuss trivial or playful violence, for fear of appearing to make light of abuse. Other writers have stressed a gender difference whereby female violence is more likely to be expressive than instrumental. Sociologists using the CTS often emphasise mutual combat but also do not acknowledge that much of what they are measuring may be trivial or playful. Although there is probably such a typology somewhere in the vast literature on violence, we are proposing a typology of aggressive acts pooled from many sources. Interpersonal aggressive behaviour may be classified as: Playful, Expressive, Ritual, Defensive, Mutual or Controlling/instrumental.

### 3.2.1 Playful violence

Violence is a part of many sports and central to some. It is extremely common in children’s rough-and-tumble play, may be part of a teasing or joking relationship and may
sometimes play a part in courtship and sexual play. We may wish to define all play fights as not “violent” but we then need to define kickboxing as a non-violent sport and our definition becomes almost wholly value based.

In one of the first sociological studies of IPV in America, Gelles (1972) mentions that “When a respondent reported that they ‘fooled around’ and ‘wrestled’ or ‘play fought’ with their spouse, this was not recorded as an incident of violence” (Gelles 1972: 91). However, the majority of studies since then have not gathered context information to enable them to exclude such playful violence when it is reported.

Every parent knows that there can be a very fine line between siblings having a fun fight, or playfully teasing each other, and them engaging in mutual combat or bullying. Similarly, verbal and some physical aggression are very common in some social settings, for example among groups of males who want to emphasise their toughness. Playful violence, especially in the form of teasing, is frequently hurtful to the recipient though the aggressor’s intention is not inevitably to hurt or control the victim. In addition, abusers (of any age) often create confusion by claiming playful intent or else alternating “playful” with controlling violence or abuse. Even more insidiously, sexual predators frequently disguise their initial sexual abuse and grooming as “playful”. “Playful” can be quite serious.

3.2.2 Ritual or institutional violence

Initiation ceremonies, some institutionalised punishments, some sports, female genital mutilation and male circumcision are examples of ritualised violence. This category is not of relevance to our discussion but is mentioned for completion.
3.2.3 **Expressive violence**

Aggressive or violent behaviour that is primarily an emotional outburst rather than being intended to control others has been called “expressive” (Straus 1973). Very young children frequently display this form of violence and there is even a tendency to assume that most children’s violence is expressive rather than controlling (and especially for children who have been traumatised in the past). That there are no unambiguous boundaries between these forms of violence is shown by a young child’s expressive tantrums evolving into an instrumental means to control adults. Expressive violence directed towards adults (between adults or from children) is usually less serious than instrumental violence. However, expressive violence by adults aimed at children can be very dangerous, even fatal, if very young children are involved. Anger is almost always an essential element of expressive aggression, although despair, fear or panic may be the motivator in some cases. Women appear to be far more likely to display expressive violence than are men (Campbell 1993), which may be of great importance in quantitative family violence research as such violence is not differentiated from abusive/controlling violence.

3.2.4 **Defensive violence**

Violence or aggression which is in direct response to an attack, or is primarily intended to stop another attacking (oneself or another), can be termed defensive. Such violence is often socially sanctioned as long as only “necessary force” is used. Many feminist writers have argued that much, or most, of women’s aggression in intimate relationships is defensive (Currie 1998; Dobash et al. 1992; Nazroo 1995; Tutty 1999; Walker 1979) and this has been acknowledged at times by those writing in the sociological tradition (Straus...
& Gelles 1990). The legal defense of “battered wife syndrome” has seen this accepted as a legal justification for homicide (Makepeace 1986; Walker 1984).

Some young people are violent towards abusive parents or intervene to prevent IPV towards mothers (see chapter 9). As with the battered wife defence, the situation may become very unclear when a young person is being violent towards someone who has abused them and although a majority of patricides (i.e. killing fathers) may be of this type (Heide 1993; Mones 1991; Tanay 1973) no accepted equivalent of the “battered wife” defence exists. If the attacker is a child or young person and the defender an adult there exists a social contradiction as the general public would expect defence by the adult but the authorities (child protection, police, courts and welfare services) may severely punish any such defensive violence and thus inadvertently exonerate the attacking young person. School teachers and residential workers may feel that they are put in morally ambiguous situations where they may have a duty to protect others but no right to use force to do so.

3.2.5 Mutual violence

This is a combination of simultaneous controlling and defensive violence against someone who is not significantly more or less powerful. This type of violence is common between children or young men and is often not seen as a serious problem (though attitudes are changing). Mutual violence between couples is controversial with some arguing that as much as half of IPV is mutual (Brush 1990; Stets & Straus 1990). Other writers have maintained that some couples engage in mutual combat which is not necessarily abusive, though definitely violent (Johnson 1995).

Johnson (1995) claimed that the evidence supported a distinction between ‘common couple violence’, which he maintained was usually mutual, and ‘patriarchal terrorism’ or
males using force to dominate female partners. He argued that low-frequency, low-severity violence between partners is far more prevalent than “patriarchal terrorism”, which is what is generally meant by IPV. Many feminists dispute the idea that couple violence can be truly mutual due to an inherent male-female power differential in our society (White et al. 2000). Although often less serious than more controlling IPV, mutual combat can still be highly stressful, occasionally dangerous and can probably have a major psychological impact on child witnesses.

Mutual violence between parent and child is serious as it represents a major breakdown in family structure. CPV probably occurs in some highly dysfunctional families where violence between older youth and parents (fathers and step-fathers especially) may appear to be fairly mutual (although it may be valid in such cases to view both parties as acting abusively). In a small number of families, adolescents may have mutual combat with fathers but be controlling and abusive towards their mothers. A few authors have implied that most CPV is effectively mutual as parents have used corporal punishment in the past (see chapter 10) but by this token almost any family violence (and most elder abuse) could be seen as mutual.

3.2.6 Controlling or instrumental violence

Instrumental violence (or aggressive behaviour) is primarily intended to control or hurt another. This is what most people think of as “domestic violence”, IPV or “abuse” (although adding an element of expressive violence may increase risk and unpredictability). Psychological consequences can be huge for the victim. A certain amount of controlling violence from parents to children, especially young children, is socially sanctioned in virtually all societies (Levinson 1989) and if physical restraint is
included (clearly a grey area) it is difficult to imagine this not being sanctioned against very young children (however, sanctioned physical punishment of children shades into abuse). Bullying (as opposed to teasing) between children and youth is generally controlling. Some violence is instrumental in its purpose though the primary intent is not to control the victim per se the aim being to impress others, to provide entertainment, or to make the aggressor feel powerful with the victim being a mere means to an end (this would include sadistic and sexual violence).

3.3 Implications of types of aggression

Though suggesting a new classification of violent acts may seem presumptuous, these ideas are helpful, perhaps essential, in making sense of the quantitative family violence literature. The central problem with much research and some theorising is that a great deal of violence in families, the majority when children’s behaviour is included, is not abusive and controlling but is expressive, playful, defensive or mutual. The extent to which family members recall or report these types of violence will vary greatly depending on their situation and attitudes (as we shall see in the next chapter). Hence most current attempts to measure violence by quantitative means are only loosely relevant to questions of abuse, unless the context and intention of the actor is taken into account (which has seldom been the case).

3.4 Other forms of aggressive behaviour

Although the above classification is clearest for physical violence it can be applied to verbal aggression, threats and psychological aggression. If our aim is to understand abusive behaviour and abusive relationships, it is necessary not to focus only on physical violence. Physical abuse, whether child abuse, IPV, or CPV is almost invariably part of a
pattern of hurtful and controlling behaviours, including verbal and psychological abuse, property destruction (Gallagher 2004a) and threats.

Defining “verbal abuse” is far from easy and some definitions are so vague as to be virtually meaningless. A typical example is “a communication intended to cause psychological pain to another person, or a communication perceived as having that intent” (Vising et al. 1991: 225). The first part of this definition acknowledges that intention must be taken into account but the second part is problematic as anything can be “abuse” if perceived that way. Since highly aggressive defensive or paranoid individuals often perceive other’s actions as intended to cause them “psychological pain” they are being abused according to this definition regardless of the intention of the other person. On the other hand if a self-righteous parent, or cult leader believes, and convinces others, that his cruelty is in their best interests this is not abuse.

There are very good reasons why verbal and emotional abuse should be included in the study of family violence, but this necessary extension of “violence” to cover emotional abuse becomes problematic in research, and sometimes in clinical work. Terms such as “verbal violence”, “emotional violence” or “economic violence” serve well as political tools to emphasise the hurtful and controlling nature of such behaviour but often stray rather far from the everyday use of the term “violence”. They can also allow virtually any family to be defined as abusive. Straus and Field (2003: 805) found that some form of “psychological aggression” towards children was “near universal” for American parents: “almost all parents reported yelling, screaming, or shouting as a method of correcting or controlling the behaviour of the child”.

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To understand abuse it is hardly helpful to define all families (or even all men) as abusive. Such usage devalues the emotional impact of the word “abuse” and trivialises the tragedy of genuine abuse.

3.5 Is violence to parents “Domestic Violence”?  

Objection is made to the term “domestic” as it sounds cosy and trivial (“just a domestic”) and fails to reflect that IPV frequently takes place between courting couples and after separation. However, the term is still in common use and the alternative, IPV, is not readily recognised.

CPV is definitely “domestic” in that it usually occurs in the home and it has occasionally been suggested that the term “Domestic Violence” should encompass this form of violence.

“Recently at DVIRC we received a telephone call from a woman who was being physically beaten by her 29 year-old son. We telephoned a regional domestic violence service… only to be told that the service was ‘only funded for domestic violence’, defined as violence by one partner towards another.” (McDonald 1998: 5)

This publication goes on to suggest a definition of domestic violence as any violence that “happens in the family” (McDonald 1998: 9). This would logically encompass child abuse, all physical discipline of children, sibling violence, and toddlers striking out at parents. This shows a lack of precision in a publication specifically on “definitions and domestic violence”.

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In recent years some agencies traditionally concerned with IPV have been aiding women abused by their children. As the above quote illustrates, definitions can have grave implications for what kind of help, if any, is received.

### 3.6 Abuse as violence, or controlling behaviour, plus power

As noted, the term “abuse” is commonly used to mean a violent, hurtful or controlling act perpetrated by someone with superior power over another, e.g. “We consider abuse to be a situation where a more powerful person takes advantage of a less powerful one” (Finkelhor 1983). An employer making a sexual proposition to an employee is probably abusive even if exactly similar behaviour by a colleague is merely annoying. A nine-year-old hitting a ten-year-old is very definitely violent but not necessarily abusive, whereas a 16-year-old hitting a ten-year old is probably acting abusively and a 16-year-old hitting a two-year-old in anger is definitely abusive.

Such usage of “abuse” presents a problem when a thirteen-year-old is violent to his mother as “we assume that parents have power over their children and therefore are not susceptible to abuse” (Cottrell 2005: 21). However, this behaviour by the thirteen-year-old may be a replica, in action and apparent intention, of his father’s behaviour towards his mother, which was “abuse” by any reasonable standard. If the boy was twenty-three-years-old and violent to both his partner and his mother few people would hesitate to call these assaults abuse. Yet if we accept that the thirteen-year-old can abuse his mother, do we also accept that an eight-year-old can abuse his physically far stronger mother? What then about a three-year old slapping his or her mother in impotent rage, is that also abuse?
Some writers solve this dilemma by clearly regarding young people who are violent to parents as victims and hence reject the term abuse being applied to CPV: “Can we speak of ‘parent abuse’ or are we stretching the concept of abuse to such ludicrous limits that we debase its meaning?” (Browne & Hamilton 1997: 195).

Frizzell (1998) described a series of interviews with professionals about their views on violence towards parents and noted that they “seemed to accept that the power dynamic in parent abuse operated in a manner similar to other recognised forms of family abuse”. She found that none of them considered as problematic the fact that “adolescent to parent aggression appears to reverse normal power dynamics within families” (Frizzell 1998: 54). Similarly, although a number of authors have used the term abuse when describing CPV (and others are clearly interested in abusive violence although not using the term explicitly) the implication that the child is more powerful than the parent is not discussed. It is also curious that a number of writers use the term “abuse” despite believing that most CPV is defensive.

Attitudes to power have important clinical implications:

“Any therapist treating domestic violence takes one look at a husband who is dominating and abusing his wife and recognizes that he exercises power over her. Yet, when a teenager threatens, dominates by shouting and imposing guilt and controls her parents by threatening to run away, most therapists fail to realize that abuse is going on.” (Price & Margerum 2000: 52)

What we must face is that there are no clear empirical definitions of abuse and no clear cut-off point where a growing child becomes “abusive” rather than merely aggressive.
The term “abuse” is a moral and political one and correct usage in one situation may not be helpful in another. Gallagher (2004b) suggested that the use of the term “abuse” with parents helped make them take their own rights and their child’s behaviour seriously, but it was unhelpful to call a child “an abuser” and that the word “abuse” was not usually helpful when talking to the children (Gallagher 2004b).

The issue of the balance of power between adult and child has been frequently alluded to in the literature but seldom explored. Eckstein’s (2002) research is an exception: “power-gaining involved adolescents intentionally manipulating, intimidating, coercing, or threatening their parents in an attempt to shift, challenge or prove their own power to control the reactions of their parents” (Eckstein 2002: 158). Space, and paucity of previous research, prevents a detailed exploration of the important issue of power and the ambivalence around this issue.

3.7 “Assault”

The term “assault” is often used in the literature on CPV (e.g. McCloskey & Lichter 2003). Although assault has clearly defined legal meanings which vary in different jurisdictions, the term is generally used in its everyday sense of a violent attack. The term carries a clear implication of seriousness and slaps from young children or a push from an older child would not be considered to be assaults by most people. Nor are defensive actions normally considered assaults. However, many reports of research using the CTS use the term assault, although both defensive and some quite trivial behaviour are included. Straus and Gelles (1990), for example, report that nine per cent of children “severely assaulted” a parent although this includes any hit, kick or thrown object (which could include pillows and teddy-bears) and also would include purely defensive acts.
3.8 Child Parent Violence - terminology

Harbin and Maddin (1979) in one of the first articles on the topic of CPV wrote of “Parent Battering: A new syndrome”. Although attention getting, the term battering tends to be restricted not just to physical violence but to serious assaults, limiting our understanding to the most severe cases and thus limiting research and preventative action.

The literature on CPV, whether using the term “aggression”, “violence”, “assault” or “abuse” is quite clearly concerned with “abusive” violence as opposed to, for example, playful violence, purely defensive violence, or violence from very young children. However, such distinctions have seldom been made in an explicit or consistent way and few authors have given an explanation for their choice of terms.

A quick comparison of some of the most important articles in the literature on CPV reveals the lack of generally accepted terminology (Adams 1991; Cornell & Gelles 1982; Downey 1997; Gordon 2003; Hotaling et al. 1990; Kratcoski 1985; Kumagai 1983; Libon 1989; Livingston 1986; Paterson et al. 2002; Peek et al. 1985; Pelletier & Coutu 1992; Rybski 1999; Sheehan 1997; Straus et al. 1980; Wells 1987). The word “violence” is most popular, with fourteen authors using fourteen different constructions such as “child-to-parent violence”, “domestically violent adolescents”, “filial violence”, “violence by young people against their parents”, etc. Seven authors use the term “abuse”. “Assault” and “battered” are each used by three authors and “victimisation” and “aggression” both used twice. Since most of these terms can be followed or preceded by “child”, “adolescent”, “teenager”, “young person” and/or “parent” “mother”, “filial”, and these can joined by “to”, “towards”, “against”, or hyphens there are well over 100 possible
combinations. The only exact word combination in this sample used more than once is “parent abuse”.

Nock and Kadzin (2002) suggest that “parent abuse” is ill-defined but also object to the term “violence” on the grounds that young children may not be physically capable of inflicting harm to parents. However an attack can be disturbing and damaging for the victim even if no physical damage is done. Since pre-adolescent children can threaten parents with knives and occasionally may actually use them, this objection to the term violence would only seem appropriate if we consider the actions of pre-school children, which most writers do exclude. Nock and Kazdin (2002) favour “parent-directed aggression” but this is rather wide in scope as any angry response, even by very young children, could be incorporated. These are normative child behaviours at some ages and quite different from violence or abusive behaviour intended to hurt or control a parent.

Ulman and Straus (2003: 42) argue that CPV from children as young as three should be included as “it can be assumed that a child who kicks or bites a parent wants the parent to experience pain”. This is of importance as their study is regularly quoted as showing that 18% of children are violent to parents (see Chapter 5).

Cottrell and Finlayson (1996: 3) describe CPV as "any act of a child that is intended to cause physical, psychological or financial damage to gain power and control over a parent." This incorporates the idea of “power and control” to differentiate abuse from violence which is primarily expressive, defensive or trivial (though they do not use these terms).
Although we are using the term “child parent violence” we are primarily interested in behaviour that appears intended to control, intimidate, disempower or hurt parents, whether this be physical violence, verbal abuse, threats, destruction of property or emotional abuse. So in some ways “abuse of parents” may be the more apt term. When it is necessary to differentiate from expressive, playful or defensive violence we shall use the term “abusive violence”.

3.9 Implications of terminology for research and practice

Terminological difficulties are far from being of mere esoteric interest. Much of the sociological and psychological research on family violence has adopted the convenience of quantitative measures of acts of violence as a proxy for “abuse” (mainly using the CTS). This premature attempt to quantify may have distorted much of the family violence research with grave implications.

In therapeutic and social work practice excessively wide definitions of “abuse” allow practitioners to easily confirm their prejudices about particular families. For example, those who believe that abuse is virtually always intergenerational can, and do, easily find confirming evidence, as some form of abuse can almost invariably be found in everyone’s background (particularly as those suffering from depression or other current problems view their past negatively – discussed under heading “Mood state” in next chapter). Those who believe that the majority of men in a patriarchal society are abusive can always find some evidence to confirm this expectation if abuse can include unintended intimidation, sarcasm, insensitive rough play, hurtful remarks, instances of emotional neglect, vaguely defined “spiritual abuse”, and even instances of apparent self-defence.
Conceptualising CPV as a form of family violence not only allows us to broaden our understanding of family violence but may mean that CPV is taken more seriously than it has been to date. “Child to mother violence needs to be reconceptualized to be seen as a form of family violence, rather than being positioned as an aspect of delinquency. Only then will it become visible” (Jackson 2003: 328).
Chapter 4 Problems with self-reports of family violence

“Because the family violence field has been largely research (rather than theory) driven, the CTS has been adopted by a wave of researchers who have never explored, questioned, tested, or, often, even shared its underlying theoretical assumptions.” (Yllo 1993:52)

This chapter explores some of the methodological issues raised by using survey methods in general, and the Conflict Tactics Scale in particular, in researching family violence.

Bias is a concern in any research. Random sources of bias and error will dilute the findings of individual studies but are of less importance when we have a number of different studies to compare. Systematic sources of bias, however, can lead to the accumulation of misleading results. Such results are particularly dangerous when they appear to have the weight of scientific evidence and have moral and practical implications for the lives of vulnerable individuals. Unfortunately it appears likely that when family members are questioned about violence and abuse many sources of bias may be systematic rather than random as we shall see when we discuss various types of response bias.

4.1 The Conflict Tactics Scale

Undoubtedly the most frequently used survey tool in the field of CPV and of IPV has been the Conflict Tactics Scale. The CTS was developed in the 1970s by sociologist Murray Straus and colleagues, pioneers in the study of family violence, in an attempt to measure various forms of violence within families (Straus 1979). It takes the approach of “counting” the number of violent acts over a particular period of time (usually the past
year) reported to have been either committed by, or directed at, the respondent. It attempts to rank actions in terms of seriousness, assuming that on average, a punch is more abusive than a slap, which is more abusive than a push, which is more abusive than verbal abuse. This attempt to rank forms of abuse has been criticised but seems an essential simplification for any attempt at quantification.

The introduction to the scale specifically asks about these actions taking place “when you have an argument” in an attempt to focus on tactics used in interpersonal conflict situations. This attempt to limit the contexts reported has been severely criticised by feminists who object that abuse does not just happen within arguments and that abuse is about control not conflict. However, the major criticism aimed at the CTS (and similar instruments) is that it de-contextualises violent acts. Straus acknowledges this problem but suggests that context needs to be measured separately as “there are so many context variables that including all would make an impossibly long and cumbersome instrument” (Straus 1990a: 56). This is the core problem but would appear to be an inevitable limitation of any reasonably straightforward quantitative measure of family violence rather than a limitation specifically of the CTS. The second version of the CTS adds questions about outcome, e.g. “was there any injury?” but not about context. For this review the minor changes made in the CTS2 are not of relevance and for simplicity will be ignored.

Highly relevant context variables are the size and strength of the aggressor and victim, as is acknowledged: “A punch by a 120 pound woman will, on the average, have different consequences than a punch by a 175 pound man.” (Straus 1990a: 56). Clearly a punch from a three-year-old is dramatically different, physically, psychologically and socially, from a punch by a 13-year-old or a 30-year-old.
By far the most controversial aspect of the CTS is that in a very large number of studies women appear to be overall as violent as men within the home (see Archer 2000 for a meta-analysis of over 100 studies). “A severe criticism of using CTS-like instruments has been the lack of sensitivity in detecting gender differences” (Pan, Neidig et al. 1994: 368). To call this controversial is to understate the case; one of Straus’ collaborators wrote about “Battered Husband Syndrome” (Steinmetz 1978) and apparently received death threats as a result (Gelles 1999).

Although it is claimed that the CTS has good reliability and validity (Straus 1990a), one of the main arguments for validity (other than face validity) is that results correlate with a small number of expected independent variables (such as SES, but as we shall see in chapter 8 this does not apply to CPV). However, since the results for gender were completely against expectations and are contradicted by many other sources of evidence, this could easily have been taken as an indicator that the scales lacked construct validity. The question of reliability is moot if validity remains unestablished, the crucial question remains “what is it actually measuring?”

The huge disparity between clinical, legal, and medical accounts of IPV, which all indicate that IPV is overwhelmingly (though certainly not exclusively) male to female violence, and the gender-neutral results of the CTS are explained in terms of a self-selection basis claiming that men do not admit to being victims to police, welfare or health services (Straus 1993). Although this would appear to be a key hypothesis it does not appear to have direct empirical support. On the contrary, it has been suggested by several studies that men are actually more, not less, likely to call the police and press charges when assaulted by intimates (Ferranti et al. 1996; Kimmel 2002; Rouse et al. 1988; Schwartz
Many writers in the CTS tradition simply dismiss clinical and legal data out of hand as being both biased and unrepresentative.

Referral processes for adolescent perpetrators and parent-victims of CPV are quite different from those for adult perpetrators and victims of IPV. Referral for IPV is overwhelmingly by a female victim and involves police, welfare or health services against the wishes of the male perpetrator, often at the point of family break-up. In contrast, male or female adolescents are almost invariably referred to clinical and criminal services by a parent, though the violence to a parent may or may not be presented at referral, or taken seriously by workers. The resistance of the adolescent to a family’s involvement with services is quite different from the resistance of the far more powerful and dangerous adult male perpetrator. Thus parents can attend for counselling or groups without (except in very rare cases) being afraid of direct retaliation from the adolescent. Unlike the situation in IPV, gender of the violent adolescent does not greatly affect choice of agency as most youth and family agencies deal with both boys and girls, unlike agencies dealing with adult IPV which are almost invariably intended for female victims.

Thus if the pattern of results from the CTS shows similar gender disparities for CPV as it does for IPV (see chapters 6 & 7) this will cast doubt on the explanation that the gender differences found in non-survey data are due to men being ashamed to be seen as victims and effectively hiding the fact that they are battered husbands.

4.2 Over-inclusive definitions using the CTS

It is possible that one reason the CTS and the research using it has been popular is that it gives high estimates of the prevalence of IPV and other forms of family violence. Studies
using wide definitions of abuse or violence, and hence giving high prevalence rates, make
for attention-getting headlines and are politically useful in raising consciousness. Those
campaigning for services routinely quote the most extreme statistics they can find to
motivate the politicians to fund family violence services. It is ironic that many feminist
writers quote these statistics despite their suggestion that violence towards husbands is as
common as violence towards wives. Some feminist writers stress the argument that all
men are potential abusers, since patriarchy and female-subjugation are inherent features of
our society, a position bolstered by high rates of abuse. Very wide definitions of IPV also
make it easier to investigate family violence in general population studies, as the number
of positives can otherwise be too small to draw any conclusions. Unfortunately, wide
definitions run the risk of creating spurious results. Here is a typical example of a wide
definition:

“[W]e classified the family as one in which spouse abuse was present if any one or
more of the CTS violence acts were reported for the year of the study, regardless of
whether they were acts of minor violence (such as slapping or throwing things at
the spouse) or acts with a higher risk of injury…” (Hotaling et al. 1989: 333)

Hamby et al. (1996) found that minor and infrequent acts of violence that were reported on
the CTS were not necessarily reported as being experienced as partner aggression. It has
been pointed out by critics of the CTS that “‘Hit, or tried to hit with something’ may mean
a husband punching his wife or a wife swinging a pillow” (Dobash et al. 1998: 385). Thus
a woman slapping a man’s face, or someone throwing a pillow or a slipper at their partner,
once in the previous year would constitute “spouse abuse”. This behaviour, in itself, is
hardly what most people mean by “spouse abuse”. It also uses the inappropriate term
“abuse” for those who are acting defensively. By such definitions very young children are consistently the most abusive family members.

A clear example of the dramatic widening of definitions which the CTS produces is revealed by rates of sibling violence quoted by Hotaling et al. (1989: 339). In two surveys using the CTS overall rates of sibling violence were 74% and 84%, whereas in a survey which asked parents if children’s fights were “a problem” in the family the rate was ten times lower, 7%. The authors state that this shows the “acceptance of this type of violence in American families”. Though this statement is no doubt true to some extent, it is also dismissive of the views of the majority of parents and shows unwarranted confidence in the validity of their quantitative measure in identifying problematic behaviour.

In their study of CPV, Agnew and Huguley (1989) asked youth if they had hit a parent and if so, follow-up questions distinguished ‘trivial’ incidents where “the blow was delivered accidentally or playfully” or “the blow was struck so lightly that the parent did not realize it was one”. They found that 21% of all incidents of parent assault reported were identified as trivial by this very narrow definition. Significantly, females were twice as likely to report perpetrating these trivial hits as were males. Most other studies have not differentiated this trivial violence from more serious violence.

The most common items reported in the CTS are ‘slap’, ‘push’ and ‘grab’. All of these can be abusive, defensive, mutual combat or expressive and can vary greatly in seriousness depending on context. Even in student populations as many as 30% of respondents, both male and female, have been victims of this type of physical violence
and, significantly, around the same number admit to perpetrating this type of violence (e.g. Alexander et al. 1991). The fact that so many people are willing to admit to perpetrating this type of violence, and the lack of difference between admissions of perpetration and victimhood, may indicate that most of this behaviour is not regarded by those reporting it as abusive or as an assault. This is often interpreted as a lack of awareness, or as showing tolerant attitudes to abuse, but it is equally possible that contextually most of these behaviours are not abuse by any useful definition.

Slapping faces is a significant proportion of the violence reported by women as perpetrators, or by men as victims (19% and 23% respectively in Magdol et al. 1997). A woman slapping a man’s face generally (though not invariably) has quite a different meaning from a man slapping a woman’s face. Usually the former is not physically intimidating but it can be an act of defiance in the face of bullying, a gesture of contempt, a reaction to sexual harassment or verbal abuse, or even playful teasing. When a man slaps a woman’s face it is far more likely to be a gesture of domination and humiliation. To equate the two, as does the CTS, is to ignore the social meaning of the acts. Slapping faces is usually considered “minor physical violence” but even some “severe physical violence” may have very different meanings when perpetrated by women as opposed to men. In Magdol et al. (1997) eight per cent of women said they had hit their partner with an object compared to only one per cent of men, but as victims six per cent of women and twelve per cent of men said they had been hit by an object. These figures show a dramatic difference between men and women in their interpretation, or memory, of these events. As objects as diverse as slippers and bottles may be involved, the meaning of such an action out of context is unclear.
A purely playful slap should not be reported on the CTS if the instructions are adhered to, as this is not in the context of an argument, but such an instruction is greatly open to interpretation. Whether or not such acts are reported will depend on how the reporter views the other person and what impression they wish, consciously or unconsciously, to make. Such issues are themselves greatly affected by gender and there is evidence that men and women tend to report differently. For example Currie (1998) gave interviewees the CTS but also then asked them about the meaning and context of the violent acts. She found women seldom reported trivial incidents but that men were far more likely to report female aggressive acts that they themselves said were trivial, or that teasing or horseplay was the context: “My wife and had I an argument over something, she got really angry and threatened to throw a teddy bear at me (23 year-old male who indicated on CTS ‘partner threw something at respondent’)” (Currie 1998: 106). Currie concludes that although men often find women’s acts of violence towards them “amusing or, at most, annoying” they frequently report such acts in surveys using the CTS (Currie 1998: 106).

Rather than considering if surveys are giving inflated estimates the overriding assumption is that they are underestimates. It has also been argued that correlations can still be valid even if the two variables are severely underestimated provided there is no interaction between the reasons for the underestimates (overestimation is not mentioned) of the variables (Straus 1970: 572; Hotaling & Straus 1989: 330). However, the likelihood is that either under- or over-estimation will introduce systematic rather than random biases, increasing some correlations but masking others.

Kimmel (2002: 1352) concluded that the CTS shows “what we might call expressive violence” in families but if we are interested in controlling, instrumental violence “then
the CTS would be a poor measure.” This is an important point which may be crucial to explaining the conflicting results between surveys and other evidence on CPV.

4.3 Agreement between family members

Agreement between family members, whether on violent or less emotive behaviour, is low in most studies. This will be of no surprise to anyone with clinical experience of working with couples or families. A few examples should suffice:

- Married couples have low levels of agreement even about non-aggressive behaviours and interactions (Christensen et al. 1983; Elwood & Jacobson 1982; Jacobson & Moore 1981).
- The few studies that have compared different informants’ perceptions of children’s behaviour problems find that individuals see the same children quite differently (Sternberg et al. 1998).
- Smetana (1995: 314) found that parents’ perception of their parenting styles differed markedly from adolescents’ perceptions and they conclude that their results “raise questions about whose perceptions should be studied and how discrepancies should be taken into account”.
- Engfer and Schneewind (1982: 137) found that correlations between parents’ and children’s reports of harsh punishment were low.
- It has been found that children’s self reports of their violent behaviour do not correlate significantly with observations of their behaviour in the playground (Henry 2006; Osterman et al. 1994).
- Mahoney et al. (2003) found that correlations between adolescent’s and mother’s reports of either physical abuse or of IPV were low.
A large number of studies have found only low levels of agreement between different family members in their reports of IPV. In a community sample, Szinovacz (1983) found 40% agreement between couples for violence by wives and only 27% agreement for violence by the husband.

It might be expected that levels of agreement would be higher when less serious violence is included. Whitbeck et al. (1997) compared adolescent runaways and their parents’ reports and found significant differences when it came to more serious violence but good agreement about pushing, shoving and slapping. Thus, as most studies using the CTS include much minor violence, we might expect more agreement, however even those studies cited as evidence to support the validity of the CTS only report a “moderate level of concurrent validity” in agreement between family members (Straus 1990a: 66).

In testing the validity of the CTS, Bulcroft and Straus (1975) found that students’ ratings of parents’ IPV correlated with the parents’ own ratings at 0.64 for husband-student reports but only 0.33 for wife-student reports. Clinical samples give different results to population studies: thus Browning and Dutton (1986) found far higher agreement in treatment couples for the men’s violence (0.65 correlation) than for wives’ violence (0.26). Men who are in treatment are forced to “own up” to their own violence but they frequently use excuses, one of which is that their partner is also violent.

Predictably both spouses generally report more violence for their partner than they do for themselves though men tend to report the violence as mutual while women are more likely to see the man as the aggressor and their violence as defensive (Browning & Dutton 1986).
Very few studies have compared adolescent and parent reports of CPV. Pagani et al. (2003) report that 60% of mothers and their children agreed about aggression to the parent, which means that 40% disagreed. As this included a great deal of less serious violence it may be that this underestimates the disagreement rate that would be found in those families where children are abusing parents. Kolko et al. (1996) found little overlap in child and mother reports of family violence. Specifically, in their study three times more mother-child pairs disagreed (21%) that there had been some form of child-to-mother violence than agreed (7%). They stress the importance of multiple perspectives within the family in assessing violence as “both children and parents may minimize the severity of violence that they direct towards one another (Kolko et al. 1996: 165).

4.4 Response bias

The process whereby individuals report on how often various forms of violence have occurred within their families is inevitably affected by response biases. This may be the result of a perceptual bias, biased recall, or a reporting bias. These are certainly not independent and it is seldom clear which is operating, but the distinction helps illustrate the complexity of the processes involved. Sugarman and Hotaling (1997) make a useful distinction between self-deception, i.e. perceptual and recall biases, and impression management (relating more directly to social desirability). It is likely that these interact in complex ways.

It has been argued that problems with self-reports of CPV are less important, as the perceptions of the respondents are of interest rather than “objective” reality. “From a phenomenological standpoint, it is adolescents’ perceptions that are of interest rather than
a more ‘objective’ measure of what actually occurs between mothers and their partners” (Carlson 1990: 295). Similarly: “If parental nurturance is an important contributor to aggressiveness in children, it stands to reason that it is the child’s perception of that level of nurturance that is a powerful driving force” (Levy 1999: 44). However, even if we were only interested in perceptions rather than actual behaviour in families, we still have no way of knowing if we are being told of respondents’ ‘perceptions’ unless we can control for impression management. If a man believed to be a perpetrator of IPV denies hitting his wife, or claims she is as violent as he is, do we assume that this is his honest perception of reality? Levy, despite the above quote, goes on to acknowledge that “adolescents may seek to use the claim of physical abuse [by parents] as a form of defence against the charges of parental assault” (Levy 1999: 90).

Writers on this topic have clearly been interested in what actually transpires between real people within real homes, rather than the perceptions of the individuals involved, and interpretations and theorising generally assume that they have valid measures of this reality. Even in the hypothetical situation where research subjects had accurate, “objective” perceptions of events and perfect recall, there would be no guarantee that what they actually tell us will be accurate. To start with, the most violent individuals may well refuse to either participate or to incriminate themselves (Straus 1990b). Impression management is relevant even in anonymous surveys and adolescents may be especially conscious of the impression they are giving to an imaginary audience.

Sugarman and Hotaling (1997: 275) expressed the issue well: “Research participants usually are acutely aware of the audience who is watching their behaviour, listening to their interview answers, or analyzing their survey responses. This awareness creates a
motivational state to respond in a manner that a potential evaluator would find socially acceptable.”

4.5 Mood state
Depressed people judge the world more negatively, almost by definition. This includes their judgements of their own behaviour and that of family members. A number of studies have shown that depressed people recall more negative childhoods and Lewinsohn and Rosenbaum (1987) demonstrated that this was only during depressive episodes and not the case for people recovered from depression. Several studies have found that distressed or depressed mothers evaluate their children’s behaviour more negatively than do other observers (Brody & Forehand, 1986; Hughes 1988; Kazdin et al. 1985). More specifically, women in women’s refuges and victims of IPV have been found to assess their children’s behaviour differently from other observers, and from the children themselves (Hughes & Barad 1983; Sternberg et al. 1993; Sternberg et al. 1998).

An interesting example of just how dramatically such response biases may alter correlations is a study of 120 preschool twins (Deater-Deckard et al. 1996) which found that the estimate of heritability for behaviour problems was a significant 0.59 when based on maternal reports. However when based on observational measures the estimate of heritability was precisely 0.0. Similarly, Griest et al. (1979) and Lobitz and Johnson (1975) both found significant correlations between mothers’ reports of deviant child behaviour and maternal depression but there was no significant correlation when the child’s behaviour was assessed by observation. Others have reached the conclusion that “there is mounting evidence that maternal negative affect (e.g. anxiety and depression) is a prime determinant for maternal ratings of child temperament” (Sameroff et al. 1982: 170).
It seems likely, though we have found no systematic test of the proposition, that assessments of family violence will similarly be tainted by respondents’ mood and attitudes. This is likely to introduce systematic rather than random biases. For example, victims of violence may rate not only their abusers more negatively but also their own and other family members’ behaviour. This may be a significant factor in many studies of family violence generally, and CPV specifically, which often use only one respondent, systematically inflating some correlations but obfuscating others.

4.6 Hostile attribution bias

Of great importance in family violence research is the fact that aggressive individuals show a general tendency to interpret and perceive violent or aggressive behaviours in others differently than do less aggressive individuals. Dodge and associates (1986) argue that antisocial individuals have a “paranoid” bias and tend to perceive other’s behaviour as a threat, which justifies counterattack (or pre-emptive attacks). A number of studies have shown that aggressive children tend to perceive aggression in others, i.e., they show a “hostile attribution bias” (Dodge & Frame 1982; Dodge & Newman 1981; Eron 1987; Nasby et al. 1979). Of course aggressive children (as with adults) are also more likely to actually elicit hostile behaviour in others, both peers (Dodge & Frame 1982) and adults (Martin 1975). As they are also statistically more likely to live in violent communities, to selectively associate with aggressive peers, and to have more aggressive siblings and parents, their hostile attribution bias may have a basis in reality and also act as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Aggressive parents, as with depressed parents, tend to be more negative in judgements of their children: MacKinnon-Lewis et al. (1992) found that more aggressive mothers generally had more negative views of their children.
Murray Straus himself has acknowledged this problem: “the association between the self-reported parental violence and the violence reported for their child may reflect a common tendency to view the world in violent terms, rather than a real causal linkage.” He goes on to say that “Detailed case studies, and especially observational studies, could help settle this issue.” (Straus 1983: 217). Two decades later we still have not settled the issue, as there are very few observational studies of older children and their parents and, as noted, most researchers in the sociological tradition following on from Straus’ work are dismissive of the evidence from case studies and clinical research.

Ambert (1992: 74) argues that one of the things that makes children “difficult” is that “their perceptions and cognitions are faulty, including the ones they maintain concerning their parents and other authority figures.” Thus we should be very cautious in relying only on their reports of the behaviour of their parents or teachers.

It is likely that hostile attribution biases will be found disproportionately in children exposed to various forms of family violence, as they will “tend to misperceive the intentions of others, over-attributing hostile intent” (Lieberman & Van Horn 2005: 70). This is, of course, not only relevant to assessing research using self-reports but is also likely to play a direct role in the development of behaviour problems, including CPV.

Eckstein (2002) in her U.S. qualitative study, describes how such an effect has a major impact in the day-to-day interactions of families where children are violent to parents: “a large number of abused parents revealed that touching the adolescent in any way prompted a more severe physical reaction from the adolescent… at this point the adolescent viewed touch as an act of aggression and often pushed, shoved, or hit the parent in retaliation”
(Eckstein 2002: 95). This is highly relevant to responses on instruments such as the CTS, as highly aggressive individuals may perceive innocent, even affectionate, interactions as aversive.

4.7 Cultural and attitudinal biases

A respondent’s views on violence and abusive behaviour are likely to affect what he, or she, perceives as notable, what is recalled, and what he or she chooses to report. Social differences in attitudes are likely to confound research data on family violence in relation to social class and ethnicity as well as gender.

Alexander et al. (1991: 665) in a study of students found that women who are more liberal in their attitudes reported more partner violence, more violence in their family of origin and also more violence by themselves. Although the authors make the surprising suggestion that the experience of IPV in the family of origin may “directly contribute to the development of more liberal attitudes in women” (Alexander et al. 1991: 666), the more parsimonious explanation of these findings is that women with liberal views are more likely to interpret and recall violence than are more conservative women, i.e., they define violence and abuse differently. Such an effect may not be obvious with a wider community sample, or a sample of abused women, but in a more homogeneous student sample it may be strong enough to overshadow the expected relationship between IPV and less liberal views. In clinical work it is a commonplace observation that those whose consciousness of abuse and inequality is raised, by counselling or group work, become far more aware of abusive behaviour and begin to interpret and note abuse which they previously ignored or trivialised. Wagner and Morgan (1998) found that women who identified themselves as abused were more likely to consider insults and spiteful words to be “abuse” than were other women.
The effect of social awareness of violence and abuse is likely to make comparisons of surveys in the 1970s with those of twenty or thirty years later problematic as people now are generally far more aware of the issue of family violence and less tolerant of it (see below, 4.10.3).

4.8 Response biases and gender

People differ greatly in what they perceive to be notable or unacceptable behaviour. Violence is so strongly gendered that it is likely that not only behaviour but perception, memory and reporting are all strongly affected by the gender of the subjects. The nature of violent acts depends not only on the gender of the perpetrator but also on the gender of the victim so that male-to-male violence has very different social and psychological connotations to male-to-female violence and both of these differ from female-to-female and from female-to-male violence.

As women are traditionally seen as more passive than men, their violence is more noteworthy than men’s, which is seen as more natural (Currie 1998; Deal & Wampler 1986; Graham & Wells 2001; Morse 1995; Straus 1973). Thus it has been suggested that aggressive acts by females are more noticeable and that aggressive acts by males are less often registered or remembered. Currie suggests that research findings show heavily “gendered expectations about appropriate behaviour” and that men “upgrade” women’s violence while women tend to “discount or underestimate” the violence of their male partners (Currie 1998: 97). It has similarly been suggested that mothers underestimate how much fathers hit children and that fathers under-report hitting children (Nobes & Smith 2000: 59).
Bacon and Landsdowne (1982) found that parents felt that aggressive behaviour was unequivocally bad and abnormal in their daughters, but were ambivalent about this in their sons, with fathers especially more likely to see aggressive behaviour as normal for boys.

However, it is also possible that in some circumstances this effect could act in the opposite direction whereby the observer notes what they expect to see and thus exaggerates male violence and minimises female violence in line with social stereotypes. The evidence overall suggests that this is less common in the aspects of family violence being studied.

Women report more guilt and anxiety about aggressive behaviour than do men (Eagly & Steffen 1986; Frodi 1978) and hence are more likely to remember their own violent behaviour. Guilt could mean that they are less likely to report their own aggressive behaviour, but this does not appear to be a major factor, as suggested by the large number of CTS studies finding that women report using violent tactics just as often, or even more often, than do men (Archer 2000).

Pagani (2003) in a rare study of CPV which surveyed both mothers and their children found that the overall agreement about CPV between mothers and daughters was similar to the agreement between mothers and sons (61% and 59% agreed). However, where there was disagreement 57% of girls reported more CPV than did their mothers, while 61% of boys reported less CPV than did their mothers.

Perceptual distortions are unlikely to be equally common in males and females. Males have been found to be more readily aroused to anger by displays of anger in others (Cummings et al. 1989) but less emotionally upset by violence (Graham & Wells 2001;
Kruttschnitt 1994). Likewise, boys are more likely than girls to see hostile intent in a playmate’s assertive behaviour (Feldman & Dodge 1987) and girls are more likely than boys to associate anger with guilt, shame and internalising emotions (Zahn-Waxler 2000). “Women are socialized not to use violence, and as a result, they tend to remember every transgression” (Kimmel 2002: 1344). It has thus been suggested that females report relatively more violence overall on surveys, as perpetrator, victim or witness, as its “psychological visibility” is greater for them (Bulcroft & Straus 1975; Gully et al. 1982).

On the other hand, the most aggressive individuals, disproportionately males, will perceive more aggression in others and may frequently interpret their own aggressive behaviour as defensive. Thus response biases may greatly distort gender differences, sometimes in complex ways.

Straus claims that because men underrate their use of severe violence “data on violence by men obtained from men needs to be treated with skepticism” (Straus 1990a: 56-57). Such skepticism must surely be just as warranted (but is seldom in evidence) when youth are the source of information on their own violence, as is the case with almost all the sociological surveys on the topic of CPV.

The various sources of bias in self reports appear to have an overall effect (not specific to the CTS) in reducing gender differences in aggression and it has been noted that gender differences are greater by direct observation or by third party reports than when measured by self-report (Hyde 1984).
4.9 Recall biases

The process of memory may confound selective perception effects as well as adding other distortions. How individuals answer questions about how often something has happened is complex and not well understood. Even for non-threatening survey questions, individuals use a number of strategies to arrive at their estimates rather than simply recalling and enumerating episodes (Blair & Burton 1987).

One difficulty in comparing some of the survey research on CPV is that differing time periods are used. The standard CTS asks subjects about violence in the past year. However, some researchers have asked youth about violence over a five-year period (Paulson et al. 1990) or “ever” (Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Neidig 1995). The exact time frame may make less difference than one would expect as even one year is too long for reliable recall. Some researchers (Hilton et al. 1998; 2003) have found that self-reports of violence are actually insensitive to the specified time frame: “for example, participants reported almost the same number of violent acts in the past month as in the past year, something that could not be factually true” (Hilton et al. 2003: 234). This suggests that rather than “counting” incidents of violence, respondents make judgements based on their opinions and attitudes towards the other person. It has been found that gender differences in reported IPV are far less for recent time periods than for lifetime recall (Tjaden & Thoennes 1998). This demonstrates that gender interacts with recall biases but could be interpreted in very different ways: gender stereotypes may be influential with longer time frames so that male violence is remembered and female violence forgotten; violence may be more salient for females and hence remembered longer; or if males report more trivial female violence they may be more likely to forget it over time.
Brezina’s (1999) CPV study surveyed the same youth at two time points. He found an incidence of CPV of eleven per cent at the first point and seven per cent at Time Two, 18 months later. This is curious as they were asking about any violence in the past three years, so youth who were currently violent (i.e. in the previous 18 months) at Time One should still answer affirmatively at Time Two even if they have not been violent in the intervening 18 month period. It is possible that older youth are more embarrassed by violence to mothers and interpret and/or report their past behaviour differently.

4.10 Social-desirability response sets

Admitting that anyone in one’s family has acted abusively is likely to be shameful and may often be denied. The assumption by the majority of researchers is thus that survey responses are underestimates due to a common social-desirability response set. If a straightforward social-desirability response-set was usually present then it could be possible to make allowances for this, but unfortunately it is not nearly so straightforward.

Parents will generally have a desire to paint a socially desirable picture of their own and their children’s’ behaviour; thus for most families there may be distortions in the direction of social desirability. However, when parents are motivated to get help, or a diagnosis (which can be a very strong desire, often driven by guilt), this tendency may reverse quite dramatically and they will then be motivated to report far more socially undesirable behaviours and traits. Most adults also wish to present their spouse in a favourable light to the outside world but this tendency often dramatically reverses when they have separated or are contemplating separation. More generally, positive appraisals of one’s family may be reversed when there is high conflict and this may be particularly true of those adolescents who are distancing themselves from their families, for whatever reason.
Social desirability is not likely to be a uniform effect over different populations but will vary with gender, social class, attitudes towards violence, etc., and also vary greatly depending on the perceived seriousness of the violence. What is more, these are likely to interact. For example, there may be far less difference in social class or gender for reporting “trivial” non-abusive violence, but important differences in the way serious violence is reported. In studies of delinquency lower class youth do not report having been in trouble with the legal system more often than do middle class respondents, despite official statistics consistently showing that this is reality (a number of studies are quoted by Braithwaite 1981: 47). It has also been reported that lower-class youth score higher on lie scales (Braithwaite 1979; Hardt & Peterson-Hardt 1977) illustrating that social desirability will undoubtedly vary in different populations.

4.10.1 Social desirability: perpetrators and victims

It is not surprising that people generally tend to under-report their own violent or abusive behaviour (Browning & Dutton 1986; Edelson & Brygger 1986; Ganley 1982; Pence & Paymar 1993). In particular, men who are violent or abusive under-report these acts when compared to the reports of other family members, and men generally report less family violence than women (Arias & Johnson 1989; Edelson & Brygger 1986; Jouriles & O'Leary 1985; Pagelow 1981; Pence & Paymar 1993; Stets & Straus 1990; Szinovacz 1983; Walker 1979). Unsurprisingly, Sugarman and Hotaling (1997) found that those who reported perpetrating IPV had lower scores on measures of social desirability, though this is open to various interpretations.

Those who facilitate men’s behaviour change programs suggest that partner’s reports are more accurate than the men’s reports as shown by the fact that men will sometimes
dramatically change their reports, i.e. reporting more abuse, when they make progress in
the group (Edelson & Brygger 1986).

We cannot assume that victims of IPV will report accurately, as the fact of family violence
is often as shameful to them as it is for the violent perpetrator (Arias & Johnson 1989).
The few studies comparing reports for more than one family member find that some
victims of male violence fail to report violence which the abusive men themselves report
(e.g. Bohannon et al. 1995; Currie 1998). However, it seems likely that victims will
overall be more accurate than abusers (Hilton et al. 2003) and social desirability has a
bigger influence on reports of being an aggressor than of being a victim. This is of
considerable relevance in the study of CPV where almost all surveys use youth as
informants on their own violence.

Szinovacz (1983) found that combining partners’ CTS scores resulted in rates of violence
50% higher than that reported by male subjects and 20% higher than that reported by
female subjects, suggesting that women are more honest about their violence. Bohannon
et al. (1995) replicated Szinovacz’s results and noted that the implications of Szinovacz’s
study have been largely ignored in survey research into IPV. They have certainly been
ignored in survey research into CPV.

4.10.2 How socially undesirable is family violence?

What is seen as socially desirable is not uniform across age, gender and social class.
Many adolescent boys see evidence of toughness as highly socially desirable and thus
some forms of violent or abusive behaviour are likely to be exaggerated rather than
minimised. For some groups of youth, minor violence, especially towards women and
children, may be seen as “uncool” or a sign of weakness, whereas higher levels of violence are seen as a sign of strength and power, especially towards peers and older males. This, as we shall see, is a possible explanation of some of the results of youth surveys, particularly of at-risk youth, about violence towards parents.

Male violence towards women, unless “justified” by a major affront to male pride (such as infidelity), is far less socially sanctioned than violence towards other males (Graham & Wells 2001; Harris 1994) even among the most deviant populations. Thus we should not be at all surprised that men under-report their own violence against women more than their violence against other males (Graham & Wells 2001; Lawrence et al. 1995).

There appears to be confusion about the social desirability of partner violence generally. Some researchers and writers, especially feminists, stress the social support for male domination and violence against women. Surveys suggesting that substantial minorities of people see violence as “normal” or even “acceptable” in some circumstances, should not blind us to the fact that surveys have always found that the majority of both men and women state that it is never acceptable for a man to hit his partner. Stark and McEvoy (1970) in the 1960s found that 75% of men and 87% of women said it was never acceptable for a man to hit his wife under any circumstances. According to Straus et al. (1997) approval of husbands slapping wives fell from 20% to 10% in America between 1968 and 1994 (approval of wives slapping husbands remained at around 20%). Similarly in Australia in 1987, only one in ten people thought that a husband slapping his wife could ever be justified (Public Police Research Centre, Office of the Status of Women 1988).
The literature on men who are violent to their partners does not give the impression that most believe this is correct or desirable behaviour, though they may believe it is commonplace and excuse their own behaviour on various grounds (Bograd 1988; Dutton 1986). “Abusers externalize responsibility for their actions, believing that their partners make them behave in abusive ways” (Bancroft, 2002: 70). Teenagers may express similar views about violence towards their parents. Unfortunately, the dearth of qualitative research on youth who perpetrate CPV makes it difficult to generalise or make other than tentative suggestions. Gallagher (2004b) indicated that youth do not claim that hitting their mothers is desirable or admirable behaviour. On the contrary many, though not all, are shamed by their behaviour and deny it, downplay its seriousness or blame the victim (Cottrell, 2004: 72-84). In contrast, we will argue that some adolescent boys (and a few girls) may exaggerate or boast about violence to males, including fathers and especially step-fathers. They also see violence to siblings as generally acceptable, “normal” behaviour and boast about violence to older siblings. Thus we cannot assume that aggressive adolescents will always under-report their own violence, especially in selected high-risk groups, where being tough is particularly highly valued.

There is also evidence that, despite male violence being more normative, female family violence is more socially acceptable than male family violence (Arias & Johnson 1989; Greenblat 1983; Straus et al. 1997). This is probably linked to two common (and statistically reasonable) assumptions: a) that women’s violence to men is more likely to be retaliatory or expressive, and b) that it is less likely to result in injury, fear or intimidation.

The majority of writers on family violence assume that self-reports are always under-estimates of incidence, with Straus and colleagues suggesting that the real incidence is
double that reported (Straus & Gelles 1990: 96). The assumption of under-reporting is clearly justified where official statistics are concerned, as only a small minority of family violence is ever reported to judicial or welfare authorities, but this assumption is not warranted for self-reports when “normal” less severe violence is included. Admitting to minor, everyday violence is quite different to admitting to abusive violence and the assumption of widespread denial of such violence remains unproven.

A further confusing factor is that although the majority of individuals condemn IPV, we cannot assume that this condemnation applies to all social groups, to all individuals or to all forms of family violence. As Sugarman and Hotaling (1997) noted “the view of intimate violence as being universally socially unacceptable and thus likely to be denied needs questioning.”

The only studies of CPV to survey more than one family member suggest that under-reporting is not inevitable. Pagani et al. (2004: 531) found that adolescents (especially girls) reported more aggression towards their mothers than the mothers themselves reported. Similarly, in Seales-Gordon’s (2003) study of a treatment group for parentally violent youth, parents after treatment reported less violence from the youth than the youth themselves reported (perhaps because treatment had sensitised the youth to the issue).

4.11 “Openness” response bias

As well as a social desirability factor, other systematic biases are logically likely but have not been consistently studied. For example with a sensitive topic such as violence there is likely to be an effect of \textit{openness}. Some individuals are going to be, for a variety of
reasons, more willing than others to report any kind of problem or deviance within their families. This could interact with social desirability in complex ways, for example it has been suggested that individuals with high levels of social desirability may over-report their own minor violence but under-report their severe violence (Sugarman & Hotaling 1997: 281).

An openness bias could easily inflate correlations as those individuals who admit to any one form of deviance will be more likely to admit others.

4.12 Reliance on one source of information: problems of method variance

“Despite evidence from these studies that spousal agreement is usually poor, the predominant methodological approach to research on the family has been to obtain self-report information from only one respondent.” (Browning & Dutton 1986: 375)

Many studies in family violence generally use only one source of information about the family. A number of writers (including Straus, 1990a) have warned that such results are unreliable (Paulson et al. 1990; Sternberg et al. 1998). Sternberg et. al suggest that the conflicting and sometimes negative findings on the effects of IPV on children are partly, or even largely, due to methodological difficulties due to using only one source of information, typically the mother. Achenbach et al. (1987) have also stressed the importance of using multiple informants when obtaining information about children’s behaviour or adjustment problems.
This problem of “method variance”, where different measurements are based on one source of information, is greatly compounded when the informant is reporting on their own violent or abusive behaviour. This is the case with almost all of the surveys of CPV. Muller (1996) studied the effect of corporal punishment and concluded that the size of apparent effects was largely dependent on who was the source of information and that “effects were much higher for correlations of variables reported within reporters than for those reported between reporters” (Muller 1996: 486). Thus it is likely that the various sources of bias will increase correlations between different forms of violence or abuse when only one respondent is used.

4.13 Youth and ‘mischievous’ replies

It is rare for researchers in this area to question the reliability of respondents even though anyone familiar with adolescents knows that a certain amount of “mucking about” is common for this age group. An Australian study is unusual in that it makes explicit such an effect: “Given the nature of the respondent group [aged 12 to 20], the subject matter of questions [family violence] and the self-completion methodology, it was likely that some respondents filled in the questionnaire ‘mischievously’ – i.e. reported high levels of violence, anti-social attitudes, etc.” (Aust Dept of Education Training & Youth Affairs 2001: 57). This study found that one per cent of adolescent respondents answered every single question in the most extreme way possible. If one per cent of youth are so unsubtly and consistently mischievous it seems inevitable that another one or two per cent will be more subtly distorting results. Since most forms of violence have low frequencies in the general population, a shift of a few percentage points could make a dramatic difference to correlational studies, particularly as such distortions would be expected to be related to anti-social traits rather than be random.
Similarly, Bohm (2001) is unusual in questioning if adolescents give honest answers to surveys: “A problem with junior high and high school boys as subjects is the reliability and validity of the data. They could have lied on the surveys by either not confessing to what they had done or claiming to have done more than they had – two likely possibilities with boys that age and an inherent problem with self-report crime surveys” (Bohm 2001: 93). Populations of deviant adolescents could be expected to be even more likely to distort survey results.

In a rare test of adolescent honesty in surveys, Newcommer and Udry (1988) asked about sexual experiences and two years later asked the same adolescents about their previous replies. Seven per cent said that they had lied in the previous survey about virginity and another ten per cent said they had told the truth but their memories of their previous replies were actually incorrect. Thus 17% were giving responses that were both incorrect and inconsistent.

4.14 Adolescent reports of family violence and their own violence

For the reasons given above a comparison of: a) men’s reports of their own violence, and b) their accounts of their partner’s violence, would not generally be considered to be methodologically valid, and any correlations found could reflect the individual’s conscious and unconscious distortions. However, when the respondents are adolescents, their reports of their own violent behaviour towards others (such as parents) have been frequently compared with the adolescent’s reports of their parents’ violent behaviour towards themselves, and their parent’s violence towards each other, without acknowledging that any correlations found (or not found) could be largely or entirely due to response effects.
It seems inevitable that more aggressive and hostile children and youth will give more negative views of their parents (and of everyone else). Due to hostile attribution biases, even when aggressive youth (or adults) are being totally honest with researchers it would still be rash to assume that their views of their family are accurate and reliable. This effect may amplify the fact that parents are inevitably more likely to be distant and more punitive with youth who are aggressive or defiant (regardless of the initial cause of such child behaviour). Such obvious sources of bias should make us wary of research which looks at, sometimes quite low, correlations and then assumes a causal effect (usually after warning that correlations do not imply causality).

A closer look at one fairly typical study can highlight how unlikely are some of the results obtained from surveys of adolescents.

Langhinrichsen-Rohling and Neidig (1995) in their survey of “Violent Backgrounds of Economically Disadvantaged Youth” used a modification of the CTS which asked youth about “curse, threaten to hurt, push, slap, as well as more violent acts.” Instead of the usual CTS 12-month time frame they were asked if they had ever witnessed, experienced or perpetrated any of these. Thus a teenager who remembers, or thinks they remember, slapping, pushing or even threatening a parent as a young child could be counted as violent. It is thus not surprising that 30% claimed some form of “violence” against parents. Yet according to their self-reports, these disadvantaged youth had unusually gentle parents, since only 40% reported ever having experienced any violence from parents. This is surprising given that the rate of corporal punishment in American families overall is found to be around double this rate (Straus 1983) and is higher still in socially disadvantaged families (see chapter 8). Of the 30% of respondents who claimed to have
been violent towards parents, 56% of these claimed to have threatened or used a weapon against them. This is at odds with the general findings from all forms of family violence research (and from common sense) that more minor forms of family violence are far more common than more extreme forms of violence (in a study where parents of runaways were the respondents, over 50% had been pushed or shovved by their children but less than one per cent had used, or threatened to use, a weapon against a parent, Whitbeck et al. 1997). It seems likely that some of these young people were either trying to shock or were projecting what they saw as a tough-guy image (probably both). Receiving minor violence from parents or perpetrating minor violence towards parents (at least to mothers) is not “cool” or tough. Threatening others with a weapon or engaging in mutual violence with their fathers projects a far more “macho” image and the study results are clearly in keeping with an image management interpretation.

Once the veracity of adolescent responses is questioned, some clearly incongruous results appear and the acceptance of these at face value by researchers is of concern. For example, one of the studies of dating violence which found no difference between boys and girls also mentioned that equal numbers of their male and female 13- and 14-year-old respondents had dated, even though the same paper confirmed the well-known fact that the girls dated boys older than themselves (typically two years older). It is not impossible that the boys were dating 11- and 12-year-old girls or that a few girls in the sample had dated a large number of boys, but it seems a more likely explanation that these adolescents were not being accurate in reporting whether or not they had dated (recall the Newcommer & Udry 1988 finding that many boys of this age lie about having had sex, see section 4.14). If what adolescents say about having dated is unreliable, can we accept at face value what they say about dating violence?
One of the few researchers to interview youth who were violent to parents was Cottrell (2005). She found that even the few youth who were willing to talk to her tended to minimise and blame other people for their abusive behaviour: “[T]hey felt that circumstances or other people were equally responsible for their actions” (Cottrell 2005: 70). Similar observations have been made about clinical work with families where there has been CPV (Gallagher 2004b). Thus there seems no reason to regard adolescent’s reports of their own violent or abusive behaviour towards family members as any more reliable than reports by adult abusers of their own behaviour, and possibly they are less reliable.

4.15 Clinical Studies

No clinical sample can ever claim to be representative of the general population and none of the clinical studies reviewed make such an assertion. Those who come for counselling or attend groups are always a minority of those with any kind of problem. Caring parents are more likely to refer for counselling, or attend groups, than are less caring parents. With similar behaviour or emotional problems it is likely that educated, middle class parents are more likely than others to voluntarily attend mental health or welfare organisations. On the other hand more wealthy families access private services (which are seldom included in research) and lower class families are far more likely to be coerced into attending services (by child protection services, legal or other welfare agencies). Thus evidence on issues such as social class can only ever be suggestive in clinical samples.

Age and gender of child are also highly likely to bias selection processes but not in any simple way. Parents may be more likely to be concerned enough to refer older children
for violent or beyond control behaviour but they are less likely to be able to get such youth to attend or cooperate. Few youth initially attend voluntarily for therapeutic interventions. Thus possibly the age range of 12 to 14 may show a peak for referrals for violent children in agencies which cover all age groups because they are big enough to be a worry, are not likely to have left home yet, but are still able to be coerced into attending.

The problems with clinical and qualitative studies are real but not so great that they should be ignored when their findings contradict survey data. As we shall see there is surprising consistency between clinical, qualitative and legal samples from a wide variety of agencies and countries.
Chapter 5  Incidence of Child Parent Violence

“The principle questions that organise policy efforts are ultimately quantitative – how many are there, who are they, where are they, how bad are the consequences, how much does it cost?” (Bart, Miller et al. 1989: 433)

This chapter explores the limited, and confusing, data on incidence of violence to parents, suggesting that surveys (following from the discussion in the last two chapters) may over-estimate CPV.

Estimating the “real” incidence of any form of family violence is fraught with difficulties. Without clear definitions such difficulties are inherently insurmountable as “real” incidence has no real meaning. Estimates of IPV in the general population vary widely. Barling et al. (1987) claimed that estimates ranged from 10% to 60% but this could be extended; e.g. Kessler et al. (2001) give a five per cent rate. Similarly, estimates of courtship violence range from 9% to 66% (Sugarman & Hotaling 1989). Such ranges undoubtedly reflect differing measurements and definitions rather than variations in incidence.

As CPV is far less researched, recorded and discussed than IPV we might expect that incidence rates will similarly vary widely. On the contrary, there is a clear consensus in the existing literature, almost all quoting the same figure of around 10% CPV. This figure is reproduced repeatedly in the literature and seldom questioned, although a higher figure of 18% is also quoted, both being based initially on Straus et al. (1980). These figures lead to the conclusion that “teenagers attack their parents about as often as the parents
attack each other” (Straus & Gelles. 1990: 107). Most authors appear to have accepted this but a few even suggest that CPV is actually more common than other forms of family violence e.g. (Kethineni 2004: 375).

5.1 Over-estimating Incidence?

“These incredible rates of intrafamily violence by teenagers make the high rates of violence by their parents seem modest by comparison.” (Straus & Gelles 1990: 107)

In the same article these authors also point out that population surveys give a rate of IPV 50 times greater than the U.S. National Crime Survey and say this “raises the question of why the NCS rate is so low”. Though this is a reasonable question they do not consider that surveys may be giving inflated estimates. Although they refer to the teenage violence rate as “incredible”, they clearly mean surprising rather than implausible and there is no suggestion that they consider that rates could be overestimates. Such an idea has not been explicitly suggested by any writer on CPV. There seems to be a common reluctance to suggest that any form of family violence is being over-estimated. Referring to high estimates of the incidence of child sexual abuse, but equally relevant to CPV, Goddard (1996: 49) stated that “Unless such statements of prevalence are strictly qualified, they come close to ‘statistical abuse’ or amount to creating a numbers illusion.”

5.2 General population surveys

General population surveys (either using a measure such as the CTS or one or two questions inserted into a questionnaire) are one way to estimate incidence. For all the
reasons given in the last chapter such results must be interpreted with considerable caution if we are interested in abusive violence.

Straus and his colleagues can be thanked for raising awareness of various forms of family violence and were among the first to link child abuse, IPV, sibling violence and CPV. Although CPV was only a small part of the study reported by Straus et al. (1980) (and this form of family violence alone is missing from many of the comparisons they make) it set the scene for later research. They reported that 18% of children from ages three to seventeen had hit a parent in the previous year and suggest that this is an underestimate:

“Since we interviewed mothers in half of the families, and fathers in the other half of the families, the number of children who had hit a parent during the year might actually be double. This means that one out of three children between the ages of three and seventeen hit their parents each year” (Straus al. 1980: 119).

This assumption seems both unwarranted and illogical. It is, however, in keeping with their stated belief about family violence in general that “true rates could be as much as double…” (Straus & Gelles 1990: 96).

The 18% figure, often quoted in the literature on CPV, includes children of all ages down to three. Rates of violence to parents in very young children are extremely high (Kolko et al. 1996: Sears et al. 1957) and generally “the younger the child the higher the rate of CPV” (Ulman and Straus 2003: 41).

Since most writers on CPV would not include violence by children under eight (at least), the more relevant figure (though not necessarily more reliable) is that for adolescents, which was 10% in this study.
Other survey research finds quite similar rates. Figueira-McDonough (1985) conducted a school survey of self-reported delinquent and deviant behaviour in which nine per cent of 2000 USA tenth-grade pupils (typically 15-year-olds) reported they had “hit parents”. Peek et al. (1985: 1054) gave a prevalence rate, according to male high school students’ reports (ages 14 to 18), for hitting either parent in the past three years as 10.8%. McCloskey and Lichter (2003) claimed that 13% of youth had “attacked” a parent in the previous year (any incidence of pushing or throwing something was classed as an “attack”).

Gelles and Straus (1988) also quote a 10% incidence, but this includes “considerable hitting and kicking done by young children”. They go on to say that only looking at children over 11 who had used what the CTS defines as severe forms of violence, the annual figure for at least one violent action towards a parent is three per cent. Thus it may be that by including all the forms of violence towards parents and for all ages, an incidence of any one violent act per year of 10% is a reasonable estimate. However, if this includes temper tantrums, out-of-hand play, expressive violence, self-defence, and even the occasionally misperceived accident then it is certainly not a valid measure of “abusive” violence.

Agnew and Huguley (1989) reported a five per cent incidence once they had removed the 22% of reports deemed to be “trivial” (by a narrow definition of trivial). It is interesting to note that the great majority of these youth claimed only to have hit a parent once in the past three years (very different to clinical and qualitative accounts of CPV). If only those who had hit parents more than once were included, the incidence would be below two per cent.
Pagelow (1989) sampled 473 university students (85% female, with a mean age of 26) using a modified CTS, and reported that 13% had used some type of violence against parents. Most of this was pushing, grabbing, shoving or slapping. Only 3.3% (a quarter of those reporting any violence) reported having kicked or punched a parent. Two per cent said they had “beat-up” a parent and three per cent said they had threatened a parent with a knife or gun (Pagelow 1989: 298/9).

In a similar study of UK undergraduate students, also using the CTS, Browne and Hamilton (1998) found that 14% of students reported any violence and 3.8% claimed “severe” violence to parents.

Brezina (1999) surveyed the same youth at two time points 18 months apart. They found an incidence of all CPV of 11% at the first point and 7% at Time Two, 18 months later. The recall period at the first interview was 18 months and the next recall period, 18 months later, was three years, i.e. including all of the first period, so logically all those who reported hitting a parent on the first interview should still report hitting a parent on the second. If we assume that a few, say two per cent, of those who admitted hitting a parent at Time-2 would had answered negatively at Time-1 (either because the violence had begun in the intervening period or because of inconsistent honesty) then almost half of those admitting violence to a parent at Time-1 had either forgotten about it by Time-2 or else chose not to admit it at Time-2. Such variability suggests that responses to such questions may often be impressionistic and subjective.

Paulson et al. (1990) asked young people in a youth survey (aged 9 to 17) if they hit a parent in the past five years, and classified 14% as “hitters”. However, as some of their
subjects were aged nine, they could be remembering (correctly or incorrectly) hitting a
parent at age four. The time frame of five years is long enough to be effectively
meaningless, even for teenagers, never mind younger children.

A Belgian survey of school students reported that 14.8% of students admitted “abusing”
their parents in some way but most of this was emotional with 3.9% of students admitting
to physical violence to parents (Van Langenhove 2004).

The study by Cornell and Gelles (1982) is of interest as they surveyed parents (only in
two-parent families) rather than youth. They used the CTS and found an overall rate of
nine per cent for all forms of CPV. However, for any act of severe violence in the
preceding year (punching, kicking, biting etc) the rate was three per cent.

In a more recent survey, Pagani et al. (2004:531) interviewed both mothers and
adolescents (with only 15% disagreement between them) and reported that 64% had been
verbally aggressive towards their mothers and 13.8% had been physically aggressive in
the past six months. Of those who were physically aggressive, 73% had pushed or
shoved, 24% punched, kicked or bit, 12% had thrown objects and 4% had “attacked” their
mother. If we were to exclude the pushing, shoving and throwing objects (which
admittedly would be excluding some serious aggression) this gives an approximate rate of
four or five per cent serious physical violence. This may be our best recent estimate.
However, on the assumption that people under-report violence rather than over-report,
these authors appear to have taken the higher value whenever a mother and child disagreed
(Pagani et al. 2003), which would inflate their figures if over-reporting is at all common.
Just how common are some of the behaviours reported in CTS studies for younger children is shown by a study by Kolko et al. (1996) which reported that the rate of violence to mothers was 15% according to children but nearer 80% according to their mothers.

A general population survey by Malone et al. (1989) is unusual in that young adults (average age 25) were asked about their perpetration of violence towards their parents during or after high school. Two per cent of males said they had been violent to their mothers during junior high school (typically aged 12 to 15), only one per cent during senior high (ages 15 to 18), compared to 4.6% and 3.4% respectively for girls. More men admitted violence to fathers, 3.1% during junior high and 4.3% during senior high, compared to 1.2% and 2.4% respectively for girls. As these lower figures represent only four individuals from a sample of 328 we cannot attach much importance to the differences. However, the low rates are of interest and could mean either that the bulk of minor violence, as reported by the above studies, is not recalled ten years later or that maturity makes such behaviour more shameful and less often admitted.
### Table 2 Surveys giving incidence of CPV

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Any violence</th>
<th>Serious violence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Straus et al.</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Ages 3 - 17 Teens</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cornell &amp; Gelles</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Parents reports</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figueira-McDonough</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>10th grade pupils</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peek</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Male high school</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gelles &amp; Straus</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Parent reports</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnew &amp; Hugely</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>12 to 18 year olds</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pagelow</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Adult students (85% female)</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malone et al.</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Young adults, retrospective</td>
<td>2 – 4%*</td>
<td>2% – 4%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paulson</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Ages 9 - 17</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Browne &amp; Hamilton</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Same 18 mnth later</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCloskey</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Langenhove</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>School students - Any parent abuse Physical violence</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>3.9%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pagani</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Parents &amp; children</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>~ 4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* not clear if respondents are reporting any violence or only serious violence

Wakabayas (1982) in Japan estimated that 3.4% of youth were violent to parents, apparently by extrapolating from psychiatric referrals and Laurent (1997) gave a similar
estimate, three or four per cent for France, though neither writer is clear on how they arrived at their figures.

There is some consistency in these results suggesting that children hitting parents is fairly common. Taking the evidence of the last two chapters into account it is likely that the 10 to 13% who say they have hit a parent includes a great deal of expressive, trivial and defensive violence and the best estimate of more serious CPV may be around three or four per cent. We should also bear in mind the suggestion that at least one per cent of adolescents may give the answers they find most amusing or most likely to shock.

The figure of around three per cent of adolescents being violent to parents, represents a significant social problem but does not necessitate believing that there are large numbers of families successfully hiding abuse by adolescents, nor that CPV is more common than either IPV or child abuse.

5.3 Surveys of at risk populations

Surveys of special populations suffer from some of the same problems as the general population surveys. Uncritical acceptance of responses from populations of abusive or delinquent adolescents may produce overestimates of some forms of violence and underestimates of others. Clinical samples cannot give estimates of incidence in the general population but they can, however, serve as rough upper estimates, if we make the assumption that the general population incidence will be lower overall (though as we shall see in the chapter on socio-economic status this may not be as simple an assumption as one might assume).
Nock and Kadzin begin their 2002 article by reporting the 18% and 13.7% figures from general population studies yet they find only a 12% incidence in their clinical population. Not only would we logically expect the actual incidence to be higher in a clinic population but we may also expect a higher disclosure rate (especially from parents). Once parents decide to seek help they may even have a tendency to exaggerate their children’s difficulties rather than minimise them.

A study of 250 adolescent substance abusers gave a rate of 20% abuse of other family members, including siblings as well as parents (Potter-Effron & Potter-Effron 1985).

When parents of runaways were asked about various types of violence from their children (Whitbeck et al. 1997), the results were:

- pushed or shoved in anger 52.5%
- thrown something in anger 36.7%
- slapped 25%
- hit 15%
- beat up 13.3%
- threatened with weapon 14.2%
- assaulted with a weapon 0.8%

If a similar definition to the studies using the CTS were to be applied, about 75% of these youth would be classed as having been violent to parents. It is thus interesting to note how much more common is minor violence than serious assaults. This is in marked contrast to reports from at-risk youth themselves who claim far more serious assaults than
minor violence (which we have suggested shows that impression management is a major factor).

Of 72 Belgian youth in a residential training centre, 22% were violent to their mothers (Helin et al. 2004).

In samples of generally violent youth, large proportions have been found to have been violent to parents. Cairns et al. (1988) and Kethineni et al. (2004) both found that about half of their samples of violent youth had been violent to their parents. However, Ellickson et al. (1997) found only a quarter of violent youth violent to any family member, including siblings and other relatives. Such rates (even if some are over-estimates) make the silence of the delinquency field on this issue even more surprising.

These incidence rates suggested for highly at-risk populations are surprisingly low if compared to the generally accepted 10% rate. However, when compared to general population estimates of more serious CPV of three or four per cent, they make intuitive sense.

A local newspaper article on CPV gave an incidence figure of 70% based on preliminary reports from a Sydney survey (Birnbauer 2005). It appears that this survey had asked about any incidents of “physical violence, intimidation, psychological torment and verbal and financial abuse”. Such an inclusive definition means that comparison with studies of abusive violence is difficult but it is in line with Pagani et al.’s (2004) finding of 64% verbal aggression towards mothers.
A statistic routinely quoted in the literature is that 29% of sole mothers experience CPV. This is from a study by Livingston (1986) which sent out 669 questionnaires to sole mothers (contacted through a sole parents’ social organisation, not likely to be representative of all sole parents) of whom 151 (22%) replied. This is a good response rate for a postal questionnaire but it is likely that those with a personal interest are far more likely to reply, for example: McNutt and Lee (2000) found that women with personal experience of IPV were more likely to take part in relevant surveys. If all of those in Livingstone’s original sample who had experienced CPV had replied to the questionnaire (highly unlikely) this would represent a true rate of around six per cent and if half of those with such experience replied (which is more likely) then 12% rather than 29% would be a more accurate estimate. However, even this may be an overestimate as there was no way of knowing the age of the violent child from the data collected and some very young children may have been included. Further, the violence included pushing and throwing things and may have been only once in the previous year, meaning that some of those included may not have experienced abusive violence from their children. The much quoted 29% incidence in sole parents generally is not reliable and may even be a gross overestimate.

5.4 Evidence from criminal and health data

In a UK study of all people attending a hospital Accident and Emergency Department (Smith et al. 1992), six per cent of all the family violence was CPV. The British Crime Survey gave figures which suggest about three per cent of all reported family violence incidents are CPV or assaults by adult children on parents (Mrrlees-Black et al. 1996: 30-31). It was reported that five per cent of all calls to the Queensland Domestic Violence Telephone Line were about CPV (Hastie 1998).
In the USA in 1994, of 213,000 emergency department visits recorded as resulting from violence by a family member, 5.4% had the perpetrator identified as a child of the victim but this includes abuse of parents by adult children (Rand 1997). Earlier Justice Department data gave a figure for CPV of 3.9% of 1.2 million cases of family violence (United States Dept Justice 1980). Similarly Evans and Warren-Sohlberg (1988) in the U.K. analysed reports to police of family violence and found that 5.2% of these identified CPV where the child was seen as the initiator of the violence.

In Victoria in 1995/96, 1159 intervention orders were taken out against children and step-children, about an eighth of the rate of orders against partners. Though there was a huge increase in such orders against children between 1990/91 to 1995/6 (from 267 to 1159) it would be wrong to conclude that this demonstrates an increase in CPV as orders against all categories of non-partner relatives (parents, uncles, sibs, etc) increased in roughly similar proportions. Hence it probably represents a widening in the use of such orders.

Figures for Court orders and Police in Victoria are available for the years 1999 and 2000 from the Victorian Family Violence Database. The Court figures give eight per cent of all family violence as having a parent as victim, however two thirds of these had defendants of age 20 or over, suggesting that about two or three per cent of Court orders were against teenagers with a parent as complainant. The police data show approximately 13% of all family violence as being directed towards parents with about half of these offenders being under 20. Thus, of all family violence being reported to the police, roughly six per cent were teenagers aggressing against parents.

In Australia there are about twelve parricides each year, which represents nine per cent of all family homicides (Mouzos & Rushforth 2003). This is similar to the proportions in
America, 300 per year or 10% of family homicides (Heide 1993). Intimate partner homicides are six times as common as parricides in Australia.

Cochran et al. (1994) report that almost a third of restraining orders issued in 1992-1993 at the Massachusetts Trial Court were requested by parents against their children.

Such figures can only indicate rough lower limits for the incidence of violence against parents as it is well known that only a small percentage of family violence incidents come to the attention of the authorities. Comparing rates of violence towards parents with other forms of family violence as represented by official reports or hospital visits, might suggest that about five per cent of all serious family violence is CPV and that the rate of CPV reported overall may be roughly 10% of the rate of IPV. What the police actually record is far from being unproblematic and it seems likely that CPV from younger children such as eight- to eleven-year-olds is not recorded even when reported.

It would seem a reasonable assumption that the rate of serious violence from children would be far less than the rate of minor violence. We know that with IPV there is far more minor violence than serious physical assaults.

In comparing the rates of CPV and IPV we should remember that there are far more adults than teenagers in the population. Even if IPV were entirely restricted to adults between 20 and 50 (it is not, but does decrease with age), and we take into account that not all men have partners, there are at least four or five times as many potential perpetrators of IPV in the population at one time than there are teenagers living with their parents. Thus it could
be that each adult male is two or three times (rather than ten times as suggested by absolute rates) more likely to assault a partner than a teenager is likely to assault a parent.

Translating any of these figures into a population incidence is subject to enormous difficulties, primarily a lack of accepted incidence for other forms of family violence. Taking a rough estimate of IPV as being five to ten per cent of families (at any one time) we might then estimate that about two to four per cent of adolescents are violent to a parent.

This is at least consistent with our estimate of three to four per cent in the general population based on the various surveys.

5.5 Is the incidence increasing?

“Collectively, the literature on [CPV] indicates that there is a belief – publicly and professionally – that this is increasingly becoming a significant social problem.” (Frizzell 1998: 2)

“[T]he occurrence of battered parents remains (fortunately) rare. This phenomenon is nevertheless increasing, as can be inferred in our study from the doubling of the sampling frequency in the past five years [i.e. 1991 to 1996].” (Laurent & Derry 1999: 26)

As we have so few reliable figures to indicate incidence we are certainly not in a position to say for sure if CPV is increasing. Such an increase has been suggested by a number of authors (Alibhai-Brown 2003; Arrigo 1982; Cottrell 2005; McInnes 1995; Robinson et al.
2004; Smart 1984) and anecdotal evidence strongly suggests this. In 1998, Parentline in Ireland reported that they had seen a doubling of calls from parents being physically abused by their children (Birchard 1999). Du Bois (1998: 125) claimed that referral of cases of severe CPV to adolescent psychiatry in Germany is a new phenomenon: “all professionals confirmed that cases of this kind had emerged only in the last few years” and none preceded 1988. Media reports in Australia, the US and Britain have all suggested an increase in this phenomenon over the past few years, mainly based on anecdotal evidence: “Police are concerned about the rising trend of violence committed by children against their parents” (BBC, UK, 2004). “Growing reports of violence against parents…” (Manly Council, NSW, 2007). “[T]he number of juveniles charged with domestic violence in Cuyahoga County [Cleveland, USA] has jumped nearly 60% in the past decade… More kids sit in detention for abusing a household member than for robbery, assault or drug dealing” (The Plain Dealer 2006).

Bonnick (2006) lists a number of such reports from a number of countries.

### 5.6 Summary and implications

The existence of this form of family violence as a widespread phenomenon questions the traditional assumption that violence in the family is predominantly a function of structural power. However, it is not common enough to be regarded as developmentally normal behaviour and it seems unlikely that it is as common as either IPV or child abuse. The oft-quoted figure of 10% would appear to be an over-estimate, possibly a gross over-estimate, of abusive CPV and three per cent seems a more likely figure for the past few decades. There is a widespread view that this is an increasing phenomenon but no evidence is yet available to make any firm conclusions.
Chapter 6  Gender of children who are violent to parents

This chapter examines the evidence on gender of children who engage in CPV, first looking at the surprisingly consistent ratio of boys to girls found in clinical, legal and qualitative studies then contrasting the inconsistent, but generally gender neutral, results of survey research. The evidence that boys are more violent than girls in other contexts is briefly explored as is the idea that girls are becoming more violent.

It is a clear indication of how little solid information we have on this topic that such a basic fact as the gender balance of children involved remains in dispute. A number of reviewers, assuming that the survey data is more reliable than the clinical, qualitative and legal data, conclude that the evidence suggests no overall gender differences (e.g. Kennair & Mellor 2007; Wilson 1996: 103). We argued in chapter 4 that self-reports are highly problematic and strongly influenced by gender. The gender of parentally violent children is of interest in itself but also provides a test of the validity of survey methods, particularly of the CTS, as the standard explanation for the anomalous results with IPV is not applicable to this form of family violence.

6.1  Clinical evidence

Gallagher (2004a) has found, in clinical contact with a large number of families over the past twelve years, that boys outnumber girls as perpetrators of CPV by about three to one. This is fairly similar, to the ratio found in other clinical, qualitative and judicial studies from around the world as the following table shows.
### Table 3 Children’s gender - clinical studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sample type</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>N of boys</th>
<th>% boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inamura</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Clinical (Japan)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dugas et al</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Clinical (France)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mouren</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Clinical (France)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Clinical (US)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honjo</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Clinical (Japan)</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairns et al</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Clinical (US state wide)</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gadoros</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Clinical (Hungary)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurent</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Clinical (Canada)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheehan</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Clinical (Aust)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Du Bois</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Clinical (France)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurent &amp; Derry</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Clinical (US)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rybski</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Clinical (group treatment US)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nock &amp; Kazdin</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Clinical (US)</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seales Gordon</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Group treatment of youth (US)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallagher</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Clinical (Aust)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>765</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.1.1.2 Table 4 Children’s gender – qualitative studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sample type</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>N of boys</th>
<th>% boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monk</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Qualitative survey (Canada)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eckstein'</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Qualitative survey (US)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Qualitative survey (Aust)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKenna</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Qualitative survey (Aust)</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewart et al</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Qualitative survey (Aust)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>201</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.1.1.3 Table 5 Children’s gender – judicial studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sample type</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>N of boys</th>
<th>% boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evans &amp; Sholberg</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Police records (US)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cochran</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Court: restraining orders (US)</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kethineni</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Court (US)</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>62.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daly &amp; Nancarrow</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Court (US)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walsh &amp; Krienert</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Court records (US wide)</td>
<td>2096</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>68.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2459</td>
<td>1709</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A meta-analysis of all studies with clear gender data gives a total sample of 3660 youth who were identified by parents or researchers as violent towards parents, with 2609, or 72%, of these being boys.

1 Gender of sample stated in private correspondence from author 7.7.2005
Other writers have noted the great predominance of males but without clear enough figures to be included in the above tables (e.g. McInnes 1995; Warren 1978). Yasuda (1981) in Japan gave a figure of 80% boys. In France, Marcelli (2002: 992) wrote that 75 - 80% of cases were boys. Harbin & Maddin (1979: 1289) reported that the majority of “parent batterers” were males “but we have also seen this phenomenon in girls” citing one case of a female.

Data from intervention orders in Victoria also give a figure of 80% boys and 20% girls (Crimes Family Violence Report 1997) along similar lines to evidence from American juvenile courts (Adams & Doherty 1994; Kethineni 2004). One of the lower estimates above (65% boys) is of police reports that were not all based on physical abuse of parents and the authors, Evans and Sohlberg (1988), note that when only the physically abusive are included, 75% were boys. They also suggest, in line with their finding that female adolescents were more likely to be prosecuted for verbal abuse, that their 35% rate for girls in a police sample is an over-representation due to “role perception” whereby when “female aggression occurs it may be perceived by parents as even more serious than male aggression, prompting drastic action…” (Evans and Sohlberg 1988: 211).

Similarly, the Kethineni (2004) court study, reporting only 62% boys, included 25% who were not physically assaultive and also noted that the girls tended to be younger than the boys, both of which may have altered the gender ratios, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Charles’ (1986) study had a rate of 66% boys overall but this included pre-adolescents, who showed a fairly even gender split, while boys predominated after adolescence, suggesting a higher than 66% male ratio for adolescents.
Cottrell and Finlayson (1996), on the other hand reported they found no significant gender difference in their initial qualitative sample of 45 Canadian parents. However, Cottrell (2004: 72) accepts that boys are more often the aggressors overall. The study giving the next lowest number of boys, 61%, is a recent Australian qualitative survey of parents who were self-selected. The sampling method may have been similar to the Cottrell and Finlayson study and also included a number of families where there was verbal rather than physical abuse of parents (McKenna 2006).

Considering the variety of different agencies sampled (child psychiatric, drug, welfare, police, court, adult psychiatric, qualitative research, group treatment), a variety of countries (Australia, USA, Canada, France, Hungary and Japan) and decades (1970s to present) the consistency in gender across studies is surprising. If these gender differences are largely the result of sampling effects, such as differential referral processes, they are remarkably uniform. There is only a small difference overall between the qualitative studies with 67% boys, the legal with 69% boys, and the clinical studies with 76% boys.

An argument could be made that the qualitative studies are more representative of the general population than clinical or legal samples. However, given the difficulty in both finding and recruiting families for intensive face-to-face interviews on such a sensitive topic, we cannot assume on present evidence that the qualitative samples are any more or less representative of the general population. However, they may contain some less severe cases of abuse and this could reduce the gender difference (as we shall discuss later this chapter).
6.2 Parricide

Although caution must be applied when comparing the data on parricide to that of filial violence, it is worth noting that the great majority of parent murderers (well over 90%) are male (Eason & Steinhilber 1961; Heide 1992; Heide 1993; Kashani et al. 1997; Lubenow 1983). “Parricide is primarily a male crime. Combining data from all available studies yields a 15:1 male to female ratio of youthful perpetrators of parricide” (Hilbrand et al. 1999: 180). Australian data give a figure of 89% males for all recent parricides, though this includes adult offenders (Mouzos & Rushforth 2003).
### 6.3 Gender and survey results

#### 6.3.1.1 Table 6 Children’s gender – quantitative surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Tot N</th>
<th>Incidence in boys</th>
<th>Incidence in girls</th>
<th>Boys/total violent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cornell &amp; Gelles</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>608</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figueira-McDonough</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>High school students</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnew &amp; Huguley</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Youth (USA 1972)</td>
<td>1395</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malone et al</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Young adults in High school, to mothers</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>~27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“ “</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>~67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paulson et al</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td></td>
<td>455</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlson</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>At risk youth (US)</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotaling &amp; Straus</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td></td>
<td>2688</td>
<td>No significant difference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown &amp; Hamilton</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Undergrads (UK)</td>
<td>469</td>
<td>No significant difference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langhinrichsen-Rohlind &amp; Neidig</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>At risk youth (US)</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McClosky &amp; Lichter</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>IPV biased sample</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pagani et al</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Parents &amp; teens</td>
<td></td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>~50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above rates are not strictly comparable, as not only do definitions vary, but some studies give rates for violence to the parent informant (male or female), some violence to either parent, and some refer only to violence to mothers.

Ulman and Straus (2003), in their reanalysis of the same 1975 survey used by Straus et al (1980), claimed that although boys had a higher rate of CPV this was not a statistically significant difference. Van Langenhove (2004) reported no gender differences in a survey of Belgian school students.

Cornell and Gelles (1982) surveyed 600 parents in the U.S.A. in the late 1970s using the CTS. They reported CPV incidence of 11% for boys and 7% for girls and claimed that: “The modal type of adolescent-to-parent violence would appear to be older sons striking and abusing their mothers” (Cornell and Gelles, 1982:13). Although this study may remove some of the biases involved in using adolescents as informants about their own violence, it is still open to the criticism of the CTS that simple descriptions of “hitting”, etc. cast the net too wide to include some trivial or playful violence, emotional outbursts, self-defence and mutual combat. The rate of CPV involving boys (63%) is intermediate between the youth surveys and the clinical and court data. They also note that the “rate of severe violence for sons increases for each age group from 10 – 17 years, while the rate for girls declines” (Cornell & Gelles 1982: 13).

In the Canadian study by Pagani et al. (2004), both mothers and adolescents were interviewed but no significant gender differences were reported. However, as we have noted (section 5.2) girls in this study were significantly more likely to report more CPV than did their mothers while boys reported less than their mothers. If this is a typical
result then, as suggested by evidence in Chapter 4, self-reports may be systematically over-estimating the amount of violence by girls relative to boys.

Malone et al. (1989) asked young adults in U.S. high schools about their retrospective recollections and found that boys were twice as likely to report having been violent to fathers and girls were twice as likely to report having been violent to mothers. This made the overall rates, which were very low, roughly gender neutral.

Carlson (1990), in a survey of high-risk adolescents in U.S. residential shelters, found that 20% of male youth said they had hit their mothers, while 55% of girls claimed this. Unlike most authors of such surveys, Carlson did not assume that the young people’s replies were a valid reflection of reality. “It is also possible that girls are accurately reporting their violence toward parents (or even exaggerating it), whereas boys are underreporting their violence toward mothers because they are aware of its unacceptability” (Carlson 1990: 296). This author may have been alerted to the impression management aspect of replies by the fact that 42% of girls reported perpetrating dating violence but only 7% of boys admitted this (despite the fact that these were ‘at risk’ youth with very high rates of exposure to IPV).

Langhinrichsen-Rohling and Neidig (1995) also surveyed high-risk adolescents using the CTS and reported no gender difference in reports of CPV. However, as their sample was 75% male, their results are actually consistent with boys being several times more violent than girls in the general population. They found that subjects reported most witnessing of violence, then being victimised, then perpetration and suggest that these rates may reflect
minimisation, noting: “Researchers with access to validity checks report that perpetrators tend to under-report their own aggression” (Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Neidig 1995: 391).

There is thus some consistency in the finding that there is overall little or no difference by gender in youth self-reports of CPV. It is clearly not easy to reconcile a close to three to one gender balance as indicated by the clinical, medical, police and court data with the survey data which are overall gender neutral.

6.4 Are violent girls less likely to be referred to clinical or legal agencies?

One possible explanation for the divergent clinical and survey data on gender would be that boys are more likely to be prosecuted or referred for counselling or for other interventions, thus making the clinical and court data systematically biased; (it would also have to be assumed that sampling in qualitative studies reflects similar processes). This is the equivalent of the standard explanation given for the CTS results for IPV (suggesting that female to male violence is grossly underreported).

It could be that similar behaviour in boys and girls results in more referrals of boys because they are seen as more threatening because of greater size and strength, or because of cultural prejudices. Perhaps girls’ violence remains largely invisible as some argue is true of women’s IPV. Pagani et al. (2004: 531) suggest that mothers under-reported their daughter’s violence (compared to the girls’ self-reports) because they are perpetrating “the myth… that girls are easier to raise, quieter, and more delicate than boys ”. However, they acknowledge that it is possible that girls could be over-reporting their own violence rather
than mothers under-reporting, and this explanation is in fact more in keeping with other evidence.

The argument that boys are seen as more intimidating and hence over-referred compared to girls, would make most sense in terms of police and court referrals but seems less likely as an explanation of gender differences in mental health and welfare referrals. The fact that the ratio of boys to girls is actually less for the legal samples than the clinical samples makes this explanation less likely.

Overall boys do make up the majority of referrals to child mental health agencies for any kind of behaviour problem. Males outnumber females in diagnosis of conduct disorders in childhood by at least a three to one ratio (Martin & Hoffman 1990) but this is roughly the same ratio found in studies of behaviour problems in the general population, (Robins 1986) suggesting that any overall gender bias in referrals must be low.

Charles (1986) in a clinical sample, and Kethineni (2004) in a juvenile court sample, (both in the USA) reported that girls tended to be younger than boys, which goes against the idea that it is physical threat that motivates referral, but fits with findings that violence decreases faster for girls as they mature, than it does for boys (Cornell & Gelles 1982: 13; Loeber & Hay 1997). Evans and Warren-Sohlberg (1988) in their analysis of police reports, noted that girls reported as aggressive to parents were less likely to be physically violent than were boys, suggesting that different criteria are being applied for boys and girls and again contradicting the idea that threat motivates referral. Unfortunately, all these studies are from the US and it is possible that patterns may be different in other countries such as Australia.
There are several factors that may increase the likelihood that girls, rather than boys, are disproportionately referred:

1. Definitions of mental health and normality differ greatly by gender (Boverman & Boverman 1970) and as aggressive behaviour in girls (or women) is less normative (as noted 4.8) it is more likely to be seen as pathological than the same behaviour in boys (Bacon & Landsdowne 1982; Chesney-Lind & Brown 1999; Lloyd 1995; Maccoby 1998). People are less tolerant of aggressive behaviour in adolescent girls than boys (Cairns & Cairns 1986).

2. Parents are often far more concerned about at-risk and self-harming behaviour in adolescent girls than in boys (partly because of the double standard in sexual behaviour and because adolescent boys are given more freedom than girls).

3. Girls may be generally more likely to agree to attend counselling or meet with welfare workers than are boys, just as adult females are more likely to accept counselling or group work than adult males.

These suggestions are in keeping with research suggesting that girls are more likely to be referred for psychiatric treatment, institutionalised or criminalised than boys with similar problematic behaviour (Avoca 1999; Chesney-Lind 1973; Chesney-Lind & Pasko 2004; Lloyd 1995; Terry 1970). This need not always reflect discrimination (as most of these authors suggest) if aggressive girls are in fact overall more disturbed than are aggressive boys. Aggressive girls have been found to come from more disturbed homes (Davies & Windle 1997; Robbins 1966), to more often have been victims of sexual or physical abuse (Artz 1998; Chesney-Lind & Belkamp 2004), to be more likely to have emotional problems and other psychiatric problems and to be more likely to be suicidal or self-harming (Cairns et al. 1988) than are aggressive boys. It has been argued that even when
charged with assault, girls’ actual violence is often less than that of their male counterparts (Avoca 1999; Chesney-Lind & Belkamp 2004).

A number of studies have compared referral rates of children with mental health problems with incidence according to gender, but the results are inconsistent. Feehan et al. (1990) found no gender or age differences in rates of mental health service usage for children and adolescents. Offord et al. (1987) found no gender difference up to age 11, but that boys used more services than girls from age 12, while Goodman et al. (1997) found the opposite, that more girls used services after puberty (all these studies are US). As all of these studies included both internalising and externalising problems, patterns may well differ when only aggression is considered (clearly for a parent to get a depressed or anxious teenager to attend a service is quite different to getting a rebellious, acting-out teenager to attend). However, it seems safe to say that there is no evidence of dramatic difference in referrals that could explain the large gender differences found in clinical studies.

There is thus reason to suspect that gender bias in clinical samples is at least as likely, or more likely, to inflate the number of violent girls rather than the number of violent boys. The similarity of the clinical studies, legal samples and qualitative studies would seem to argue against a strong gender bias in referrals, though some gender bias might account for the small differences in boy/girl ratios between these three sources of data.
It has been suggested that girls are more likely than boys to try to control parents by “emotional blackmail” and verbal abuse, than by physical means (Bobic 2002; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg 1988; Smart 1984: 306).

6.5 Are clinical samples and sociological studies measuring different things?

Abusive violence is a sub-set of violent behaviour and we have suggested (3.2 to 3.4 and 4.2) that most hitting in families, especially when children are included, is not “abusive” as the term is generally understood. We might consider how likely a parent is to refer a child, or the family, for health, welfare or legal intervention following an act of violence. Where violence is a one-off outburst, relatively trivial (in the eyes of the parents), where there is mutual combat or where the child’s violence is largely in self-defence, parents will be far less likely to contact an agency, or even mention the violence if in contact with an agency for other reasons, than when a child is being persistently abusive to a parent. The evidence from surveys using the CTS, even taking into account the methodological limitations and gender biases in reporting, do suggest that for non-abusive, everyday, in-home violence female rates at least approach male rates.

When either an adolescent or a parent is specifically asked about incidents of hitting, as when they are given the CTS, all forms of violence may be reported as such surveys do not ask about context. Whether any form of violence is actually reported will depend on a number of factors and there may be great differences in patterns of selective reporting in different samples. As mentioned earlier (4.2) when Agnew and Huguley (1989) asked youth (11 to 18-year olds in US) about their violence towards parents, they found that 21% of all incidents reported were clearly “trivial” (on a narrow definition) and that
females were twice as likely to report trivial hits as were males. Thus it may be that in a general community sample, half of the violence reported on the CTS is abusive and half is “other”. In a clinical sample of parents experiencing some kind of family problem, the meaning and context of the violence are far more likely to be taken into account. Since the focus may be clearer in discussion with a worker than when being asked sensitive questions in a survey, they may be less likely to include the “other” violence in clinical interviews.

Parents who are dealing with an agency as an involuntary client may be motivated to downplay incidents of violence in the family generally, but may also exaggerate violence against them that is used as mitigating circumstances. On the other hand, those parents who are trying to get help or a diagnosis for their child may well be motivated to view non-abusive violence more negatively and report it more.

With samples of delinquent youth, the respondents’ motivation may be to present themselves as tough and to shock, but they also may be motivated to justify their behaviour. As violence towards males and females is viewed quite differently in our society this is likely to have a big effect on selective reporting of “other” violence. Thus, as we shall see in the next chapter, the studies suggesting that youth, by self-report, abuse fathers more than mothers makes sense in terms of impression management.

There is no reason why researchers must only study abusive violence rather than all forms of violence (although there are ethical and practical reasons to be more interested in abusive family violence). However, it is usually quite clear that researchers are primarily interested in abusive violence and their conclusions are invariably couched in these terms.
Thus the studies using the CTS must be interpreted with considerable caution if we are primarily interested in abusive family violence.

6.6 Are boys/males generally more aggressive than girls/females?

In judging the validity of the survey data we must surely take into account whether boys, or males, are overall more violent than are girls, or females. A number of sources of evidence suggest that males on average are significantly more violent than females.

6.6.1 General aggression in young children

Consistent gender differences in children are found by age four, by parent or teacher ratings and by observational studies (Achenbach 1991; Achenbach et al. 1991; Fagot & Hagan 1985; Maccoby 1998). Boys then remain generally more physically aggressive at all ages (Bjorkqvist et al. 1992; Broidy et al. 2003; Cairns & Cairns 1994).

6.6.2 Bullying in schools

As with young children’s general aggression, bullying in schools is far more observable and less stigmatised than family violence and hence our data on this form of violence may be more reliable. Various estimates, by self-reports, observations and victim statements, suggest that boys outnumber girls by at least three to one as bullies (Charach et al. 1995; Craig & Pepler 1997; Pepler et al. 2004). Among high school students in a variety of countries, about 80% of bullies are boys, with both boys and girls being more likely to be bullied by boys (Olweus 1991: 420). In addition, those girls who do bully use less physical forms of coercion and more emotional abuse (Dao et al. 2006; Pepler et al. 2004).
6.6.3 Sibling violence

There is consistent evidence that boys are more often violent to siblings than are girls, e.g.:
“boys in every age group are more violent toward their siblings than are girls” (Straus et al. 1980: 80).

6.6.4 Children’s behaviour problems

Males consistently outnumber females, again by a three or four to one ratio, in diagnosis of all kinds of conduct disorders in childhood (Martin & Hoffman 1990; Tuma 1989) and show a similar gender ratio is general population studies of behaviour problems (Robins 1986). This gender difference is found from age four to adulthood (Lytton 1990). Robins (1991) in reviewing the literature concluded that gender was the most robust of all risk factors for behaviour disorders.

6.6.5 Violent crime

Arrests of boys for violent crime are up to nine times more than those of girls (Chesney-Lind & Brown 1999) similar to the gender ratio of adult violent crime (Graham & Wells 2001).

6.6.6 Laboratory studies

Many social psychological studies have found consistent, though generally not large, gender differences in violence, with males being more violent under very varied conditions (Bettencourt & Miller 1996; Hyde 1984; Zeichner et al. 2003).
6.6.7 Intimate Partner Violence

Evidence from police, courts, hospitals, clinical studies and crime surveys show overwhelmingly and consistently (over time and in different cultures) that men are physically more violent to their partners than the reverse. Women are at least six times more likely to require medical care for injuries sustained by family violence (Kaufman Kantor & Straus 1987; Stets & Straus 1990). However, as noted, there are over 100 studies using the CTS (or occasionally similar survey instruments) which suggest that there is little or no difference between overall amounts of violence by men and women in intimate relationships (Archer 2000).

6.6.8 Child abuse

The gender of child physical abusers is a complex issue, with some studies suggesting that more children overall are physically abused by males than females, others suggest about equal numbers and a few suggest that more mothers than fathers abuse. In reviewing the evidence Finkelhor (1983: 59) concluded that “relative to the amount of time spent with children, fathers are generally more physically punitive and abusive than mothers.” Nobes and Smith (2000) came to a similar conclusion in reviewing the literature. Martin (1983) suggested that males and females are about equally likely to abuse infants but that abusers of older children are more likely to be male. As mothers spend far more time with children than fathers (four times more according to Pleck et al. (1978), sole parents are far more often female, and time spent with a child is a risk factor for abuse (Marks & McDonald 1989), even gender equality in child abuse supports the idea that males are more violent overall. Gil (1970) suggested that children living with both parents are 50% more likely to be physically abused by fathers. However, violence by females towards
children is undoubtedly both common and very serious and certainly does not support the notion that violence is a purely male prerogative.

6.6.9 Murder

“There is no known human society in which the level of lethal violence among women even begins to approach that among men” (Daly & Wilson 1988: 146). Overall, at all ages and in all known societies, homicides are far more likely to be committed by males, generally about 85 - 90 % of all murderers are male (Jones 1980; Lloyd 1995). Men are four times more likely to kill partners and when women do kill partners a large number are apparently responding to IPV (Bacon & Landsdowne 1982; Browne 1987).

6.6.10 Cross-cultural studies of violence

In a classic study of childhood in different societies, it was found that boys were “significantly more aggressive” in all societies reviewed and that this was “remarkably consistent” (Whiting & Whiting 1975:148). Although cross-cultural studies are sometimes taken as supporting a biological explanation of gender differences, rates of overall violence vary tremendously between societies suggesting that there are no biological determinants of aggression not strongly influenced by socialisation, in fact, “violence and aggression, far from being a constant, are among the most variable aspects of human life” (Lee 1979: 150).

6.6.11 Gender differences in aggression - summary

Kimmel (2002) concluded that violence was the only behavioural variable for which there was “intractable and overwhelmingly skewed results” for gender differences. Maccoby
and Jacklin (1974) also concluded that aggression was the only social behaviour for which there was clear-cut evidence of gender difference.

The idea of males being more violent is often simply taken for granted, e.g. “Men are more aggressive than women. There’s no argument about that” (Lloyd 1995: 20). Thus, the idea that the CTS surveys reflect the reality of gendered violence within the home is often ignored completely or treated with disdain, e.g., “to deny that the pervasive human pattern of aggressive male violence will cease once the male and female partners live with each other defies logic and common sense, and more importantly mocks all scientific evidence to the contrary” (Davis 1998: 56). Given the methodological limitations of the CTS, Davis does have a point, but to dismiss female violence as either insignificant or invariably defensive is not justified.

Three general patterns emerge from the research which are relevant to our understanding of CPV and help explain some of the conflicting findings. Gender differences in violence are not set in concrete and vary systematically with age, seriousness and location.

1. Gender differences increase with age

There appears to be a general trend for gender differences in violence and aggression to increase with age (Hyde 1984; 1986; Martin 1975; Rohner 1976) and this appears to apply to CPV (Charles 1986; Ulman & Straus 2003). Cornell and Gelles (1982: 13) reported that the “rate of severe violence for sons increases for each age group from ten to seventeen years, while the rate for girls declines.”
Aggression is also a more stable trait in individual boys than girls. A long term follow up of children identified as aggressive (Serbin et al. 1991) found that 45% of the boys had appeared in court by their early 20s, compared to only 4% of the girls. Aggressive girls are just as likely to show emotional problems in adulthood as to show violence (Robins 1986). Girls are thus more likely to “grow out of” physical violence and tend to do so earlier than boys. However, aggressive girls are at increased risk of developing other problems, internalising and externalising, and are at serious risk of early parenthood and/or inadequate parenting (Maccoby 2004).

2. Gender differences increase with the seriousness of violence

There appears to be a general trend that the more extreme the violence is, the greater the gender disparity. Thus there is far less difference between males and females (possibly none) in verbal aggression; only slight differences in everyday violence which includes trivial, playful, expressive and defensive violence; increasing gender difference with abusive violence and serious assaults; and the greatest gender difference for murder (including parricide).

Gender differences are thus markedly less for less serious forms of aggression and abuse (Dobash et al 1998; Gordon 2000) but at the other extreme there are large and very consistent differences in rates of serious assaults and murders. This also appears to hold generally for both physical punishment and abuse of children (Nobes & Smith 2000).

The slightly higher number of girls in qualitative research studies (33%, see table above, this chapter) could be explained by them being less biased towards severe physical violence than are the legal (26%) or clinical studies (24%).
3. Gender differences are greater outside the home than within

Even if *only* a quarter of parentally violent adolescents are girls, this is still greater than the proportion of girls who are criminally violent. Although girls are far less likely to be violent towards strangers than are boys, it seems likely that gender differences are not quite as pronounced for various forms of family violence as for community violence (Bjorkqvist & Niemela 1992; Kethineni et al. 2004; Wolfgang & Ferracuti 1967). Cairns et al. (1988) compiled statistics on all referred violent youth in North Carolina (USA) of whom 26% were girls. Of these violent girls, 74% were violent to parents compared to 53% of the violent boys. Burman et al. (2001) reported that when girls in a Scottish study were violent it was most likely to be within the home. It may also be that girls often use different tactics, more psychological and verbal rather than physical, to abuse and control parents.

Taking these points together we should not be surprised that there is far less gender disparity in CPV than for violent delinquency (Levy 1999). We would however, be very surprised if there was actually no gender difference between girls and boys in CPV. Overall the gender ratios indicated by the clinical, qualitative and legal samples are quite similar to gender ratios found for bullying and externalising behaviour problems and consistent with other forms of violence, if the above points are taken into consideration. The gender ratios suggested by the surveys do not appear to be consistent with any other sources of evidence except similar surveys of IPV.
6.7 Are girls becoming more aggressive?

There is no evidence available from the studies of CPV, clinical or survey, that the gender balance has shifted appreciably over the past thirty years, though nor is the evidence capable of ruling out this possibility. Despite a widespread belief (and occasional media sensationalism) that girls have become more violent overall, the evidence is inconclusive (Chesney-Lind & Paramore 2001). Robins (1986) concluded that there was evidence that the extent of conduct disorders was increasing for both boys and girls, but that the gender balance had remained fairly consistent over time.

6.8 Specific reasons for gender differences in CPV

There are a number of specific reasons why CPV may be more common for boys than girls, apart from higher overall rates of violence in males.

1. Boys are closer in size and strength to parents than are girls.

2. Boys are more likely to identify with aggressive fathers.

3. Boys may be more affected than girls by parents’ separation as they are typically separated from the same-sex parent.

4. Cultural stereotypes see males as superior to females which for some boys may create conflict when their mothers try to impose discipline.

6.9 Conclusion

The issue of gender differences in aggression often polarises opinion: assumed by some as a biological given but dismissed by others as a sexist myth. Feminists are divided with most emphasising men’s violence and domination over women but some reluctant to admit that there are any fundamental differences between men and women and unwilling
to ascribe to images of women as passive and nonaggressive. In recent years the so-called “men’s movement” has seized on the sociological data which suggests that women are as violent as men within the home.

The clinical, court and qualitative studies are fairly consistent in suggesting that boys are two or three times more likely to be violent to parents than are girls; this ratio is consistent with other evidence on gender and violence and similar to evidence on bullying in schools. This calls into question the validity of the survey data, especially self-reports of violence, as measures of abusive inter-familial violence.
Chapter 7 Gender of victimised parent

In this chapter gender of victimised parents is examined, with clinical, legal and qualitative studies all suggesting very large gender differences while surveys show only small differences in victimisation of fathers and mothers.

As with the gender of aggressive child, there is also a discrepancy between the clinical, judicial and qualitative studies on the one hand and the survey data on the other in the proportion of victimised mothers to fathers. Though overall both usually agree that mothers are more often victimised than fathers, the dramatic differences in clinical samples are quite different from the small differences found in surveys and some surveys, based on adolescent self-reports, even suggest a reversal, with fathers being more often victimised than mothers.

7.1 Gender of parent-victims: clinical, court & qualitative studies

In the table below “N” in some studies refers to violent youth and in others to parents, thus in most studies fathers plus mothers equals 100 per cent but in a few the total of fathers plus mothers is well over 100 per cent. A number of young people in two-parent families are violent to both parents.
### Table 7 Parents’ gender – clinical, judicial and qualitative studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study type</th>
<th>N=</th>
<th>Mothers</th>
<th>fathers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honjo 1988</td>
<td>Clinical Jap 57</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evans &amp; Sohlberg 1988</td>
<td>Police - US 73</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cochran et al 1994</td>
<td>Court - US 209</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monk 1997</td>
<td>Qual - Can 6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kethineni et al 2004</td>
<td>Court - US 70</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurent &amp; Derry 1999</td>
<td>Clinical - US 22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nock &amp; Kadzin 2002</td>
<td>Clinical - US 74</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallagher 2004</td>
<td>Clinical - Aust 75</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helin et al 2004</td>
<td>Youth residential -US 16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cottrell 2005</td>
<td>Qual research -Can 34</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKenna 2006</td>
<td>Qual - Aust 107</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daly &amp; Nancarrow 2007</td>
<td>Court - US 6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walsh &amp; Krienert 2007</td>
<td>Court records -US 2096</td>
<td>1499</td>
<td>71.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2845</strong></td>
<td><strong>2149</strong></td>
<td><strong>75.5</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 only those living with one or more biological parent included
2 not clear exactly how many mothers as a few children were violent to sibs or carers
3 includes four adoptive mothers

Numbers of sole parents vary greatly in different samples and this will obviously affect the gender balance as most sole parents are mothers. For example, Helin et al. (2004) reported that all of their sixteen youth came from sole parent families, which makes their finding of 100% mothers as victims understandable.
Most writers have stated that mothers are more often, usually far more often, victims of CPV than are fathers. Excluding those in the table above, this was also the conclusion of the following: Eckstein 2002; Harbin & Maddin 1979; Honjo 1988; Inamura 1980; Jenkins 1999; Kozu 1999; Kumagai 1981; Laurent 1997; Marcelli 2002; Mirrlees-Black et al. 1996; Pagani et al. 2003; Van Langenhove 2004; Warren 1978. No clinical, legal or qualitative study has suggested that the number of mothers and fathers are equal, or even come close to being equal, as victims of CPV.

In a South Australian study of 100 children referred to Education and Children’s Services (a S.A. Government Department) only two children out of one hundred were violent to a father (McInnes 1995: 11). Surveys of service providers report that they see mothers as far more often the victims (Cottrell & Monk 2004).

A few writers have only studied or discussed mothers, usually sole mothers, as victims (Alibhai-Brown 2003; Jackson 2003; Paterson et al. 2002). All of these imply that violence to mothers is far more common than violence to fathers. To date no study has focused on fathers as victims.

We would expect that young people who abuse one parent would have an increased likelihood of abusing the other parent. In practice it appears to be uncommon for fathers to be abused while the mother is not, whereas the reverse is common. Dugas and colleagues (1985) go so far as to claim that only mothers are preferentially abused. Laurent and Derry (1999) comment that in their clinical sample of 22 cases of CPV, only two fathers were hit without the mother also being a victim and of the other 10 fathers who were victimised, half (54%) were hit rarely and only three were hit more than
mothers. Gallagher (2004a) found in his clinical sample that the only father who was hit without the mother also being abused was a sole father who had been physically abused by his ex-wife. However, in half of the two parent families in his sample, fathers were targeted in addition to mothers.

In clinical samples of youth, the parents are almost always the ones approaching agencies and bringing the youth along (often reluctantly). As parents select agencies, clinical samples may vary systematically by characteristics of the parents. Significantly, sole mothers and families on low incomes often attend different agencies from those attended by better-off, two-parent families. As over 90% of sole parents are female, this factor can greatly alter the number of victimised fathers being seen. Thus a bias towards sole parent families (likely in many clinical settings) could be partly obscuring the number of fathers who are also victims of youth violence.

The figures in the table above are not fully comparable and it may be misleading to calculate an overall rate. However, with this proviso noted, it would appear that mothers overall are over five times more likely to be victimised by adolescent children than are fathers. However, this partly reflects a large number of sole-mother families and in two-parent families, although almost all the mothers are abused, so are a third to a half of the fathers.

7.2 Qualitative studies

The few qualitative community studies appear to be quite similar to the clinical evidence on the gender balance of parents. Eckstein (2002) in her qualitative interviews found that mothers were the primary targets of abuse; one straightforward reason for this was that
fathers physically defended themselves while mothers did not. Cottrell (2005) found that
of the first thirty-four parents she contacted, thirty-three were women. She has concluded
from a number of years of studying this issue in Canada that “without exception, more
mothers than fathers identify as victims, and both partners usually agree that the mother is
more severely abused” (Cottrell 2005: 45).

7.3 Court data

Cochran et al. (1994) found that for restraining orders involving “parent abuse”, 85% were
to protect mothers and 14% fathers. Evans and Warren-Sohlberg (1988) in a U.S. court
sample found 82% of abused parents were mothers and 18% fathers. In Kethikeni’s
Juvenile Court sample (also U.S.) almost half of the parentally violent juveniles were
living with sole mothers. Of the juveniles who lived with both biological parents, 53%
(i.e. 8) abused their mother but not their father, 33% (5) abused only their fathers and 13%
(2) abused both parents (Kethineni 2004: 382). As this was a Court sample, only fairly
severe violence is likely to have been recorded and only the most recent assault may result
in charges. The recently analysis by Walsh & Krienert (2007) of a large US-wide sample
of crime reports means that we can now be fairly confident in the suggestion that mothers
are three times more likely to report being the victims of assault or intimidation by their
children.

Overall, the evidence from clinical, legal sources and qualitative research is thus
unequivocally that mothers are far more often victims of CPV than are fathers.
7.4 Survey evidence

Once again the evidence from social surveys, mainly using the CTS, is markedly different to the clinical, court and qualitative research evidence and once again gender differences are greatly reduced in the survey results. A few surveys where youth reported on their own violence, even suggest that fathers are victims of CPV more than mothers.

7.4.1.1 Table 8 Parent’s gender – quantitative surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Mothers incidence</th>
<th>Fathers incidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ulman &amp; Straus</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Browne &amp; Hamilton (UK)</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>8.5% (all) 1.7% (severe)</td>
<td>6.1% (all) 2.8% (severe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnew &amp; Huguley</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malone et al.</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Young adults</td>
<td>1 – 4%</td>
<td>1 – 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peek et al.</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Male high school students</td>
<td>2 to 6%</td>
<td>5 to 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cornel &amp; Gelles</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>11% (all) 5% (severe)</td>
<td>8% (all) 1% (severe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pagelow</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>adult students, 85% female</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>Less for ‘minor’, more for ‘severe’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ulman and Straus (2003) in their re-analysis of the 1975 U.S. National Family Violence Survey found that 20% of mothers reported at least one form of violence as compared to 14% of fathers. However, as they included violence from children of three years and up, a preponderance of mothers is hardly surprising. The few studies which have reported on younger children’s violence to parents are quite clear that mothers are far more often the targets than are fathers (Cairns & Cairns 1986; Sears et al. 1957).

Browne and Hamilton (1998) in their survey of UK undergrads (two-thirds female) found that 8.5% reported violence such as throwing something, slapping, pushing, or grabbing their mother and 6.1% reported such violence to their fathers. For more serious violence (punching, kicking, beating-up, using a weapon) the reported rates were 1.7% against mothers and 2.8% against fathers. The authors note that students who report that they were violent to parents tend to report that parents were also violent to them. No respondent reported severe violence to their mother without also reporting violence by their mother.

Peek et al. (1985) surveyed male high school youth (aged 13 to 18) and found that five to eight per cent reported hitting their fathers compared to two to six per cent who reported hitting their mothers. Reports of mothers being hit declined faster with increasing age of the child than reports of fathers being hit, so that by the end of high school twice as many boys reported hitting fathers as mothers. The authors do suggest (in a footnote) that role prescriptions against males hitting women may make youth “less willing to define aggressive physical contact they initiate toward mothers as ‘hitting’” (Peek et al. 1985: 1057).
Although Agnew and Huguley (1989) give overall rates for mothers that are twice the rate of fathers (6.4% and 3.1%), they also report that older males claimed they hit fathers more than mothers.

Malone et al. (1989) questioned young adults in the US about their retrospective recall of CPV. Boys reported violence to fathers at twice the rate of violence to mothers, while girls reported violence to mothers at twice the rate of violence to fathers, with violence to mothers more often reported as having occurred in junior high (ages 12 to 15) but with violence to fathers increasing in senior high (however all the rates were low, i.e. one to four per cent of this community sample).

McCloskey and Lichter (2003) reported that two thirds of adolescent violence was aimed at mothers and a third at fathers. Although this is closer to the clinical and other evidence, it is likely that many of their high-risk families (half of whom had experienced IPV) were sole mothers.

Pagelow (1989) reported that in her US student sample (85% female, mean age 26) of those who said they had hit an adult since age 12 (13%), the violence was “mostly against parent-figures, 60% of the targets were mothers [i.e. 7.8% incidence], followed by fathers and step-fathers” (Pagelow 1989: 298). She does not state what the incidence to fathers was, nor if students could indicate more than one victim. This included “minor” violence such as pushing, grabbing and throwing things. When only the more severe forms of violence were considered, these were reported as more often directed at fathers.
Libon (1989) surveyed high-risk youth and found that they claimed more violence towards their fathers than mothers. The author commented that social desirability may have influenced the results and that it is “difficult to assess the true accuracy of the responses” (Libon 1989: 114). The respondents were interviewed in addition to being surveyed (thus this study combined quantitative and qualitative aspects) and as the study was published as a PHD thesis, it gives more details and is unusual in that it offers actual quotations from the youth interviewed about their violence towards parents. These accounts of violence towards mothers are reminiscent of accounts by adult males of their violence towards their partners, i.e. couched in ways which minimise and excuse. The accounts of violence towards fathers in this study are different in tone and are either portrayed as self-defence, as defence of mothers, or emphasise mutual combat, e.g. “one of us would get pissed off and start swinging and we’d start hooking at each other” (Libon 1989: 111).

Violence against fathers is often portrayed as acts of bravado by aggressive youth, as the following example illustrates: “One time my dad was hitting my mom and I got tired of it and said ‘leave her alone punk,’ and then I socked him in the mouth. Usually if he threatened my mom I’d hit him” (Libon 1989: 113).

Cornell and Gelles (1982) in their survey of parents using the CTS found that mothers were more likely to report being victims of children’s violence than fathers (11% as opposed to 8%). However, when they only looked at severe violence the difference becomes quite dramatic, 5% of mothers as opposed to 1% of fathers. It is interesting to contrast this survey of parents with Brown and Hamilton’s (1998) survey of youth, which also separated all violence from severe violence. For severe violence, students report almost twice as much aimed at fathers as mothers, whereas when parents are the
respondents, severe violence is five times more commonly aimed at mothers. Thus when parents are the respondents and ‘trivial’ violence is excluded the gender ratio of parent victims, i.e. about 80% mothers, is fully consistent with the clinical and court evidence.

7.5 Parricide

With regard to gender of victim, the data on parricide are markedly different. Although when all parricides are included (both by adolescents and adult children) mothers are more often victims than fathers (Bureau of Justice 2004), fathers are more often the victims of parricide by adolescents. Some studies suggest that (in the U.S. at least) about 70% of victims of adolescent parricides are fathers or step-fathers (Heide 1992; Heide 1993). A large number of adolescent parricides appear to be defensive or retaliatory, which may explain the higher rates of violence to fathers than mothers. It is noteworthy that in a number of detailed accounts of parent murders, this appears to have been the very first act of violence towards an abusive parent (e.g. Mones 1991), suggesting a very different dynamic to most CPV.

7.6 Conclusion

Overall, the evidence from a variety of clinical and qualitative studies, court data and the few surveys of parents are all consistent in suggesting that the most common parentally violent child is male (about 75%) and the most common victim is their mother (over 75%). Surveys of youth give far more varied results but generally suggest that girls are as violent as boys and that fathers are almost as often the victims.
If the clinical and other data are accepted, and they would appear to make far more intuitive sense, then survey results are clearly problematic. Given the methodological problems outlined in the validity of the surveys appears to be questionable and a number of the surprising results appear to be explainable in terms of the following:

1. The CTS (and similar survey questions) includes a great deal of minor and non-abusive violence (playful, expressive, defensive and mutual) which effectively masks gender differences in abusive violence;

2. Response biases differ greatly by gender of respondent and by gender of aggressor and victim;

3. Response biases for adolescents suggest a desire to present themselves in what they see as a favourable way, exaggerating “tough” violence to fathers and minimising embarrassing violence towards mothers. Violence to mothers may become increasingly embarrassing for male youth as they age although it is equally possible that violence to fathers also does increase with greater size and strength.

When researchers have commented on the fact that mothers are the usual victims of CPV, the explanation is generally in terms of length of time at risk, given the uncontroversial fact that mothers spend more time with children than do fathers (four times more according to Pleck et al. 1978). However, this is undoubtedly not the whole story and Eckstein’s (2002) finding that fathers physically defended themselves, while mothers did not, may be of at least equal relevance, a point we shall return to when we discuss the impact of past IPV and of child abuse (chapters 9 and 10).
Chapter 8  Socio-economic status, ethnicity and child parent violence

In this chapter some suggestive evidence is examined on the issues of “race” and SES, suggesting that CPV may reverse trends of other forms of family violence. A tentative explanation is proposed in terms of indulgent modern parenting methods which may lead to problem behaviours in some children.

Although the evidence on socio-economic and ethnic minority status of families where there is CPV is often methodologically suspect, there is enough consistency to suggest that it radically differs from that of other forms of family violence. CPV is either found to be unrelated to SES (socio-economic status) measures or is found to be more common in families with higher SES, reversing the usual association with other forms of family violence, child behaviour problems, and delinquency.

Gallagher (2004a) has suggested that, at least for two-parent families (or when the effect of past IPV is removed), those experiencing CPV tend to be of somewhat higher than average SES and often parents have high educational levels. He noted, though numbers were small, an over-representation in his clinical sample of parents in the helping professions: teachers, health and welfare workers (Gallagher 2004a). Although it is likely that these professionals (and middle class parents generally) are more aware of services, they were not noticeable in Gallagher’s (2004a) counselling practice generally and were often highly embarrassed to be admitting these problems. Price (1999) suggests that higher SES parents are actually less likely to come to the attention of law enforcement or welfare services in response to CPV, although Goodman et al. (1997) found a general tendency for children of better educated parents to utilise mental health services. It is
likely that middle class parents, given comparable problems, are less likely to be forced to engage with services but more likely to voluntarily seek them out for their children. Overall this could mean that any class bias tips either way and may vary from agency to agency and area to area.

The observation that CPV is common in families of higher SES is backed up by a number of studies, both qualitative and survey:

- Charles (1986) reported that the educational level of abused parents was significantly higher in comparison to other parents in his clinical sample, which he suggested was because they “overly intellectualise and examine the child’s behaviour without providing the needed interventions. This constant thinking but not acting, is perhaps a reflection of their educational backgrounds.” He suggests that most CPV is found in an “overly responsible, ‘democratic’ family constellation” (Charles 1986: 353).

- Libon (1989) in a sample of state wards, reported that parents’ “occupational levels run higher among [adolescent] batterers” (p 72) and also found that parents of ‘batterers’, compared to a delinquent control group, had better educated mothers.

- Nock and Kazdin (2002) reported that CPV was more often found in 2-parent, European American families of higher SES and with significantly higher incomes than had other clinic-referred youth.

- Kumagai (1981: 341), summarising Japanese studies, stated, “socio-economic backgrounds of the parents of filial violence usually are quite high; many are classified as upper-middle class…”

- Kozu (1999), also in Japan, states “it is most prevalent in middle school, male students who come from the upper-middle class.”
Dugas et al. (1985) said that parentally violent children in France were more often from middle or upper class families.

McKenna (2007) found that in a sample of South Australian parents (with 38% CPV, 90% verbal abuse, 75% emotional abuse) 36% of respondents had tertiary education qualifications. No doubt this is partly a sampling effect but it is large enough to be of note.

Jackson (2003) in her small sample of six families, reported “much higher than average” educational levels for the abused mothers, though this could also be a bias due, or partly due, to sampling.

Smart commented that the problem of CPV “crosses all economic and social barriers. It appears in families in which there is no evidence of neglect or abuse, in middle and upper middle-class families in which the mother has stayed home and the parents have been generous with their time and money” (Smart 1984: 306).

Paulson et al. (1990) in their survey found “hitters more likely to come from middle or upper-middle class than from lower SES families.”

Cornell and Gelles (1982) in their survey found that, “in contrast to domestic violence and child abuse”, CPV did “not appear to vary in any meaningful way with many family structural variables or social status indicators.” However, they also reported that white collar workers experienced more abuse by adolescents than blue collar workers and that no farmers in their study reported abuse by adolescents (Cornell & Gelles 1981).

Although Agnew and Huguley reported no overall effect for SES, they did report a statistically significant “tendency for assault to be highest among those whose parents are in the most prestigious occupations” and concluded that CPV “differs
from many other types of violent crime and is not concentrated in the lowest SES levels” (Agnew & Huguley 1989: 707).

Other quantitative surveys found no significant SES differences in CPV (Cazenave & Straus 1979; Peek et al. 1985).

Surprisingly, even with parricide, which is frequently associated with abusive fathers, “the disproportionate majority of these cases involve white middle-class or upper-middle-class boys” (Mones 1991: 12).

### 8.1 Race

Several studies of CPV have looked at “race” as a variable (all are American, and we shall use their terminology, as being “black” is not necessarily an ethnicity) All have consistently reported that CPV is considerably more common among white than black or Hispanic Americans.

- Paulson et al. (1990) found Anglo teenagers admitted parental violence at almost 3 times the rate of Hispanic families, suggesting as a reason that Hispanic parents emphasise “religiously sanctioned paternal authority.”

- Analysis of the 1970s survey by Straus and colleagues, give incidence rates of 11% for white families and only 3% for black (Cazenave & Straus 1979). This is dramatically different from this study’s findings on IPV where the percentages happen to be exactly reversed, i.e. 3% for white and 11% for black families.

- Agnew and Huguley (1989) found a significant difference between Anglo and non-Anglo adolescents and found that being white was the strongest predictor of CPV.
However, this was a difference purely in relation to hitting mothers, with no significant difference in reported rates of hitting fathers.

- In Nock and Kazdin's (2002) clinical study of 606 clinic referred youth, 8% of those families with CPV were black compared to 30% overall. Put another way, 15% of the white youth referred were violent to parents compared to 3.6% of the black youth.

- Charles (1986) similarly found a great disparity in his clinical sample, for although there were more non-white families than white in the overall sample, the rate of CPV was seven times greater for white families (34%) than for black (5%). Charles explains that the black parents they interviewed “saw the behaviour immediately as clearly unacceptable and directly put a stop to it. They were firm and consistent in conveying to the children that such behaviour would not be tolerated and that immediate and direct punishment would result” (Charles 1986: 353).

- Kethineni (2004) studied a court sample of convicted juveniles in the U.S. and concluded that the typical “parent batterer” was a white male aged 15 or 16. However, in sharp contrast to this conclusion, and other results on race, this study shows (hidden away in tables and not commented on in the text) that African-American youth were actually convicted for CPV at 4 times their population rate. This however, is typical of the vastly disproportionate representation of African-Americans in the American justice system generally (to take just one American example of racial prejudice: “Seven of every ten cases involving Caucasian girls are dismissed; only three of every ten cases are dismissed for African-American girls” (Prothrow-Stith & Spivak 2005: 75).
Parricide victims in the U.S. have also been found to be disproportionately white and Heide (1993) found this trend to be more pronounced for matricide than patricide. This is as we might expect if patricide is more often the response to severe abuse of the young person but matricide may have more similar dynamics to CPV generally.

We certainly cannot assume that these findings on “race” would be duplicated in any other society, but they are still of interest when considered alongside the findings on SES.

8.2 SES and other forms of family violence

How surprised should we be that studies find an association between higher SES and CPV? Up until the seventies it was widely believed that family violence was largely confined to the lower classes or to the poor. In the past few decades it has become accepted that the lower classes have no monopoly on family violence. In fact this has become so well accepted that “the myth of classlessness” (Pelton 1978) has ousted the earlier “class myth” i.e. it is often assumed that there is little or no real relationship between social class and family violence.

It is certainly likely that those without educational and economic power are over-represented, relative to actual need, in any involuntary contact with the authorities such as the child protection and criminal justice systems (note Kethikeni’s finding of black youth being convicted at four times the expected rate). It is also correct to stress that both child abuse and IPV are found right across the social class spectrum. However, the fact that various forms of prejudice exist against those with lower SES, is not sufficient for us to deny the strong evidence suggesting that low income families do in fact have higher levels of violence.
Higher rates of child abuse in low SES families were found by many researchers (Brown et al. 1998; Gelles 1989; Gil 1970; Lauderdale et al. 1980; Straus 1980; Straus et al. 1980; Wauchope and Straus 1995; and Whipple & Webster-Statton 1991). Similarly, a large number of studies have also found low income and poverty are associated with higher rates of IPV (Dibble & Straus 1980; Gelles 1972; Magdol et al. 1997). Hotaling and Sugarman (1986), in reviewing the literature, suggest that over 200 reports of IPV have found higher rates associated with lower educational level. They listed occupational status, low income and low educational level as “consistent risk markers” for IPV. Dating violence has similarly been found to be consistently related to lower SES (e.g. Magdol et al. 1998).

The association between family violence and SES is not so overwhelming that we should be surprised by occasional null results (though rare for IPV, Hotaling and Sugarman 1986), especially considering that measures of SES are far from perfect and that some samples are drawn from quite narrow social groups (e.g. students or refuge users), but we would be surprised at a study finding a reversal, with greater IPV in higher SES families (none of the fore-mentioned reviews cite such a finding). This is in sharp contrast to the research on CPV which find either little or no effect of SES or that rates are elevated in higher SES groups.

With regard to racial differences, the findings on CPV also consistently show a dramatic reversal of the usual relationship found in the USA between minority status and violence. There is a very strong relationship in the U.S.A. between race and poverty, with three times as many African-American children born into poverty as Anglo children (Donzinger 1996). For example in the Cazenave and Straus (1979) study, blacks reported 3 times
more severe violence to wives but this difference was largely accounted for by difference in income levels. It is impossible to completely separate race and class in current Western societies.

Children from families characterised by social disadvantage are also found to consistently have more conduct problems and aggressive behaviour generally (Loeber et al. 1991; Luthar 1999; Maughan 2001) and of course they are highly over-represented in delinquency (Glueck & Glueck 1950). In fact the criminological literature has been “consistent” in describing the typical violent offender as male, young, disproportionately non-white, poor, and educationally disadvantaged (Fagan & Wexler 1987). Nonetheless some studies of self-reported delinquency (which includes non-violent crime) have failed to find a correlation with social class in sharp contrast to the evidence of convicted delinquency (Braithewaite 1981). It has been suggested that these failures “can be attributed to the relatively less serious offences included in the questionnaires or scales” (Clark & Wenninger 1962: 833). Such a conclusion could well be relevant to the quantitative studies of CPV quoted above, which generally show little or no relationship between CPV and social class. Including minor misdemeanours may minimise any SES effect (as it does gender effects). Thus the qualitative surveys which show no SES differences could be masking real differences, in either direction, in more serious CPV.

The possibility that CPV actually reverses the trend for violence to be associated with disadvantage is surprising enough in itself. It is more surprising given that CPV is associated with sole parenting (which is much higher in low SES families and higher still in black American families) and also with past IPV (see chapter 8), which is consistently correlated with low SES. Since no study to date has separated such factors as sole parent
status and past IPV it is possible that the effect of SES to increase CPV is actually underestimated by the studies cited above.

If CPV is often reciprocal violence, or a reaction to authoritarian parenting, then we would certainly expect this form of family violence to be greater in families of low SES and particularly in those living in poverty. However, as we shall see, there is no good evidence that CPV is in fact associated with authoritarian parenting and some evidence (as we shall see in the next chapter) that it is in fact less likely when custodial parents are authoritarian or abusive.

Why would children in families with higher socio-economic status be more likely to be violent to parents? This seems to go against the common association of violence with frustration and stress and may even suggest that role-modelling (and the associated inter-generational transmission of violence and abuse) is not as dominant a factor as many writers suggest.

8.3 Parenting and SES, a tentative explanation

There is ample evidence showing a link between low SES and authoritarian parenting and between parents’ higher education levels and less controlling, more democratic parenting practices, sometimes referred to as “modernity” in parenting practices (Campbell & Gilmore 2004; Fergusson & Lynskey 1997; Holden 1995; Schaefer 1990). Engfer & Schneewind (1982: 136) claim that SES is a powerful predictor for rigid authoritarian parenting and an emphasis on conformity and subordination in children. Their study concluded that “rigid power assertion” correlates even higher with maternal educational level than does the use of physical punishment (Engfer & Schneewind 1982: 137).
Similarly:

“… poor adults experience more negative life events and chronic conditions than non-poor adults [and] negative life events increase punitive, harsh, and inconsistent parenting behaviour…” (McLoyd 1998: 202)

A review of the literature on changing childrearing practices concluded that:

“One of the most striking findings appearing in the above research studies of social-cultural change in childrearing attitudes and practices, is the relationship between parents' level of education and authoritative, democratic approaches to childrearing.” (Walker et al. 2004: 5)

More specifically to CPV (though referring to pre-school children):

“The lower-class mothers were more restrictive and punitive… reflecting less permissiveness of aggression both toward the parents and toward other children. They were more severe in their punishment of aggression directed toward themselves.” (Sears et al. 1957: 254)

The belief that violence breeds violence, although true in general terms, has become dogma to the extent that it neglects another fundamental fact of violence: aggression may effectively inhibit others’ direct aggression. There has been very little exploration of this disquieting fact although Patterson, et al. (1967) did report that between school-age children counterattacks inhibited further attacks 68% of the time. A bullying, authoritarian father may make his children more aggressive overall but the children may be far less likely to be directly aggressive towards him. Although parents (mothers and fathers) of aggressive boys are more likely on average to encourage their son’s
aggressiveness, they do not tolerate aggression toward themselves (Bandura & Walters 1959; Maccoby 1998a: 132). In Cornell and Gelles’ (1982) survey of parents, not one child was violent towards a father who had perpetrated IPV.

It is quite clear that a number of writers expected to find that children were violent towards abusive or authoritarian parents (as we discussed in section 2.4).

“Rather than an increase in demandingness being a predictor of [child to parent] domestic violence as expected, results demonstrated that as the level of parental demandingness decreased, odds of assaulting a caregiver increased.” (Levy 1999: 89)

Other authors have commented on an association between permissiveness and CPV (Cottrell 2005: 1074; Gallagher 2004a; Harbin & Madden 1979; Kumagai 1981: 341; Laurent & Derry 1999; Levy 1999; Ney & Mulvihill 1982; Paulson et al 1990; Robinson et al. 2004; Wells 1987).

Indulgent parents (high on involvement but low on control), who are over-represented among the educated middle-classes (and the helping professions), probably have children who are less aggressive overall. However, they certainly do produce some aggressive children and it seems likely that when they do so they are more likely to be victimised by their own children than are harsh, disciplinarian parents. The next chapter, on the effect of past IPV on CPV, will provide further evidence for this somewhat distasteful idea.

The American findings on race also make sense given evidence that Anglo-American families are found to be more permissive in their parenting styles than are African-American families (e.g. McCloyd et al. 2000).
8.4 Delinquency and high SES

Although our review has uncovered no studies in the field of family violence where the expected relationship with social class is reversed, other than in the case of CPV, there is an interesting parallel in the field of delinquency. Although it is usually taken for granted that delinquency is strongly related to SES, Wright et al. (1999) point out that when delinquent behaviour is measured by self-reports rather than official statistics, there are a number of studies failing to find the expected relationship and a few even suggesting that both high and low SES may result in increased delinquency. Wright et al suggest, as have others, that high SES can have some effect in encouraging delinquency which may in some samples mask the very real effects of low SES and low education. It has been suggested that confident, high SES, youth may be higher in risk taking (Hagan et al. 1985) and less conventional (Kohn 1969) than others. In Wright et al.’s (1999) research, although they found no overall relationship between SES and self-reports of delinquency, they found that several factors were specifically associated with crime in high status youth, namely “a greater taste for risk taking, more social potency, and fewer conventional values” (Wright et al. 1999: 184). They describe those youth who were high in “social potency” as being “forceful and decisive in social situations and were fond of influencing others and of leadership roles” (Wright et al. 1999: 183).

This may relate to ideas of high “entitlement”, the belief that one has rights and privileges without concomitant responsibilities, which has been related to IPV (Jenkins 1990). Bancroft and Silverman (2002: 7) have in fact argued that this is the “overarching attitudinal characteristic of batterers...” and suggest that “entitlement may be the single most critical concept in understanding the battering mentality”. Gallagher (2004a) has argued that this concept is of relevance to understanding CPV. This could help explain
the power imbalances that are obvious in many families where there is CPV. Such an idea goes against the common assumption that violent individuals have low self-esteem and are likely to be reacting to environmental stresses. It has however, been argued that abusers may sometimes have high self-esteem and be reacting to “threatened egotism” (Baumeister et al. 1996; Bancroft 2002).

It is important that any consideration of parenting is taken in conjunction with an understanding of temperament and other social factors. Within a fairly wide (non-abusive) range, parenting styles are not deterministic of how individual children develop or behave (even statistical correlations are low) and what may be the optimal child-rearing environment for many children may be detrimental to children with particular temperaments.
Chapter 9  The Effects of past Intimate Partner Violence on Child

Parent Violence

“He smacked me the other day, and I said, ‘That’s naughty.’ He said, ‘Daddy did.’ He’s not even three yet!” (in Mullender et al 2002: 113)

In this chapter the connection between exposure to IPV and CPV is explored, first from the literature on children’s exposure to IPV and then from the CPV literature. Some implications for modelling theory are discussed.

In his clinical sample Gallagher (2004a) identified past IPV as very common in sole parents suffering CPV, representing just over half of his overall sample and almost three-quarters of sole mothers. This makes intuitive sense and is supported by a number of writers on the topic. However, several surveys have found either small or insignificant correlations between IPV and CPV, and occasionally IPV even appears to decrease the incidence of CPV. The explanation for this may be partly in terms of the problems with the CTS and similar surveys of family violence as discussed in previous chapters. In addition, however, there is an explanation which is simple but ideologically unpalatable and hence overlooked (as suggested in the previous chapter) namely exposure to violence may not only increase violence but may also have an immediate inhibitory effect on other’s aggression. We shall first consider the research on the effects of IPV on children, then look at the research specifically on CPV before trying to make sense of the contradictory findings.
9.1 Research on the effects of IPV on children

There are methodological limitations with much of the research on the effects of IPV on children. Most of this research:

1. Has used convenience samples from refuges. This strongly biases the sample not only towards the most serious examples of IPV but also towards women lacking other supports (Berk et al. 1986). In addition it confounds the effects of IPV with recent marital separation and a major disruption in the lives of both mother and children.

2. Relies solely on mothers’ perceptions of their children, which as we have seen are open to systematic response biases, probably confounded by the crisis situation.

3. Is focussed almost exclusively on younger children.

4. Looks at families where separation has taken place in the previous year or two.

Despite these limitations a consistent result is that IPV increases the risk of children’s externalising problems such as aggression, argumentativeness, defiance, and hyperactivity (Christopoulos et al. 1987; Davis & Carlson 1987; Fantuzzo & Lindquist 1989; Hershorn & Rosenbaum 1985; Jaffe et al. 1986b; Mathias et al. 1995; Pfouts et al. 1982; Wolfe et al. 1986). However, it should be stressed that increased externalising problems are not an inevitable outcome of exposure to IPV, with almost as many children developing internalising problems while others appear to be quite resilient. Nor is CPV, of course, an inevitable consequence of increased aggression in children.

A study of preschoolers by Graham-Berman and Levendosky (1997) showed that the effects of IPV are apparent in many three to five-year-olds who had “many more behavioural problems, exhibited significantly more negative affect, responded less
appropriately to situations, were more aggressive with peers, and had more ambivalent relationships with caregivers than those from non-violent families. Their aggression also took the form of bullying and insulting others” (Graham-Berman 1998: 35).

There are a few specific mentions of CPV in this literature. Descriptions of male children in a Canadian shelter (Sopp-Gibson 1980) suggested that following a settling-in period “they begin to mimic male role models by becoming aggressive toward mothers, female staff, and peers. They rebel against the limits set by mother and staff, which often leads to yelling, screaming, threatening, and hitting.” In contrast, girls in this setting were described as being quiet and withdrawn.

McGee (2000: 82) and Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (2000: 90) observed that following IPV some children (McGee says usually boys) imitate the aggressor and become aggressive and violent to their mothers. Johnston and Campbell (1993) found that adolescent males who had been exposed to IPV were sometimes violent towards mothers, who they described as responding in a passive and ineffectual manner. Dutton (1993: 30) mentions women who experience IPV also being abused in other relationships, including adolescent or adult children. In a study of the effects of separation and divorce, Dowling and Gorell Barnes (2000: 59) identified 20 children (of a UK sample of 50) who had experienced IPV. They noted that the boys’ behaviour included “surliness and rudeness to their mother, verbal abuse and hitting or attacking their mother...” They do not mention if any of the seven girls in the sample showed similar behaviour.

“Mother’s suffering is part of the daily routine, and teens may depersonalise her and blame her for the family problems. Sadly, both boys and girls have been
known to participate in the beating of their mother after having witnessed such behaviour over many years” (Jaffe et al. 1990: 40).

Children may be highly ambivalent about violent fathers (Hughes 1982). “They may admire a powerful father but also fear him, or love and worry about a victimised mother but feel angry at her for appearing weak” (Jasinski & Williams 1998:88).

Thus despite a lack of longitudinal studies and very few studies of adolescents, the research on the effects of IPV on children does suggest that violence to mothers may be a sequel to exposure to IPV, though how common a sequel is not known.

9.2 Research on CPV and past IPV

The effect of IPV on children is a fairly recent topic of interest. Survey research on CPV has not always asked about past IPV and a number of clinical studies have made no comment on the issue. As the IPV may have been many years in the past, it will be missed by surveys asking about the previous year (the standard for the CTS). Nevertheless, a number of authors have suggested an increased incidence of CPV following exposure to IPV (Bobic 2002; Bonnick 2006; Carlson 1990; Cottrell 2005; Downey 1997; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg 1988; Gallagher 2004a; Gordon 2003; Hotaling et al. 1989; Kratcoski 1985; Levy 1999; Libon 1989; Livingston 1986; McInnes 1995; Monk 1997; Rybski 1999). The idea is readily accepted by professionals: “Youth, parents, and service providers revealed that a history of violence against women was often a contributing factor in parent abuse…” (Cottrell 2005: 1082).
Qualitative research using self-selected samples may underestimate the amount of IPV as sole mothers, especially those who have experienced IPV, may be less likely to contact researchers than intact middle-class families. Thus a recent Australian study found little evidence of exposure to IPV in a large self-selected sample (McKenna 2006) and another Australian study (Jackson 2003) found past IPV in one of six families. The fact that self-selection may create systematic bias is suggested by the fact that in McKenna’s (2007) sample 36% of parent respondents had a degree, although as we discussed in the previous chapter this is unlikely to be entirely an artefact of sampling (McKenna 2007).

Other studies have noted a close connection between CPV and past IPV:

“Beaten wives we interviewed told us that their children began threatening them after seeing their fathers become violent… Our survey uncovered many women battered by both their husbands and their teen-age children.” (Straus et al. 1980: 104)

Evans and Warren-Sohlberg (1988) reported that 52% of families with CPV had a history of IPV. Rybski (1999) ran groups for 49 families including a number where mothers had experienced violence and abuse from their children; of these mothers, 83% had experienced past IPV.

Hotaling et al. (1989) suggested that CPV (as defined by any of the CTS acts of violence) was twice as likely if there was also violence between the parents. It may be that such CTS surveys underestimate the contribution of past IPV by overestimating rates of all
forms of violence as well as by generally excluding all but recent or current IPV. As we shall see, current IPV may be dramatically different in its effects on CPV than is past IPV.

Carlson (1990) in a study of adolescent runaways in the U.S. (relying on self-reports) also found boys who reported having observed IPV were twice as likely to admit being violent to a parent as those not exposed to IPV. However, many of these young people had been victims of child abuse and no doubt some would have been running away from homes where a violent father was still living with the family, this may then be a smaller apparent effect of IPV than would be found in a general population sample.

Levy (1999) report that 38 of the 135 youth in their study of CPV had experienced past IPV (28%). Interestingly, half of the girls (17 of 35) reported having experienced past IPV, compared to only one-fifth (21 of 100) of the boys. While this may largely reflect response biases it does suggest that the effect of IPV can as large on girls as on boys.

Libon (1989) using self-reports of a sample of delinquent youngsters (aged 13 to 18) found that those who had been violent to parents reported higher, but not significantly higher, rates of witnessing IPV. Earlier in this study (see 7.4) the reliance on self-reports of these young people is questioned and it is suggested that the results need to take a large amount of impression management into account.

McCloskey and Lichter (2003: 405) found that CPV was only related to IPV for children over 18 (whether fathers were still living with the families in this sample is not clear).

In contrast, Langhinrichsen-Rohling and Neidig (1995) reported that, quite contrary to their predictions, there was a trend for witnessing parental aggression to be negatively
related to youth reporting violence towards their parents. This is similar to results in other studies regarding violence to fathers:

“Both sons and daughters are more likely to use severe violence towards mothers if their mothers have been abused. Interestingly, in homes where wives are abused neither sons nor daughters used any form of violence against their fathers!” (Cornell & Gelles 1982: 13)

Kolko et al. (1996: 162) also found that the level of violence initiated by children was significantly related to the level of mother-to-father violence but unrelated to that of father-to-mother violence (which is, of course, what most of the writers mean by IPV). A similar finding was reported by Ulman and Straus (2003: 56), reporting on a survey of two-parent families: “violence between the parents was almost unrelated to the rate of violence against fathers by children” although they found that IPV was strongly related to children hitting mothers. It is interesting that these authors do not mention the similarity to the Cornell and Gelles (1982) finding (especially since Straus and Gelles have been collaborators and there are such a small number of relevant studies). They call these findings “disturbing and puzzling” (Ulman & Straus 2003: 56).

Although initially puzzling, these results make perfect sense if violent fathers in intact families inhibit violence towards themselves and to a lesser extent, also inhibit child violence towards their partners (abusive men are often authoritarian in their parenting and are frequently protective and possessive towards their partners). This is in sharp contrast to the situation when the abusive father no longer lives with the children, when they often indirectly, and sometimes actively, encourage violence towards the child’s mother. Cottrell (2005: 50) reports: “I rarely hear of cases where teens use aggression against an
abusive adult male in an effort to protect the mother. Instead, they focus their retaliation on their non-abusive parent, so the victims of spousal abuse may also be victimized by their children.”

The literature on abusive men supports the idea that violence towards mothers occurs after she separates from an abusive husband, for example, “children's violence against their battered mothers appears to arise most frequently in cases where the parents have separated and one child begins to assume the batterer’s role” (Bancroft & Silverman 2002: 71).

More generally, Eckstein (2002: 84), based on her qualitative research, suggested that the main reason mothers were more often victims than fathers was that they did not fight back whereas fathers “more frequently defended themselves when physically attacked by their adolescents. For some of these participants, fathers’ successful physical defence of themselves against their teens’ attacks seemed to serve as an effective deterrent against further physical abuse against them” (Eckstein 2002: 85). Cottrell makes a similar point, “fathers were typically seen by youth as being strong and intimidating, which decreased the possibility of abuse against them,” (Cottrell 2005: 1082).

Levy (1999) found that the rate of CPV increased as the parent’s level of demands on the child decreased, contrary to prediction. He suggested that CPV was less likely to be aimed at “a punitive caregiver who may not hesitate to respond to the child’s assault in a more aggressive manner” (Levy 1999: 90).

This can be seen to relate to the findings on gender of parent victim and also may be of relevance in understanding the results for SES and level of parents’ education. Fathers
(and mothers in some cases) who are more likely to respond with outright violence, are less likely to be the victims of their children’s violence. “According to statements from adolescents, it appears that fathers (when present in the family) were viewed as more threatening and powerful than mothers; e.g. *My mom I wasn’t scared of. My dad I was scared of, but I wasn’t violent towards him*” (Monk 1997: 56).

Such an inhibitory effect of violence would explain why some studies fail to find the expected relationship between exposure to IPV and CPV and others have actually found less CPV, especially to fathers (as some violent fathers are at home). It is also likely that violent mothers similarly inhibit their children’s violence, at least up to mid-teens. However, as the CTS includes a great deal of expressive and defensive violence by women, as well as their abusive violence, an effect in this direction may be unlikely to be revealed in such surveys.

It remains a possibility, however, that existing research evidence underestimates how common is abuse of mothers by their children when abusive fathers are still at home. The violence of these children is likely to be overshadowed by the more controlling and dangerous violence of the father, who may also greatly inhibit both referral to helping agencies and participation in research.

It also remains a possibility that we are underestimating how often adolescents are violent towards violent fathers. However, such violence may be defensive or protective, quite different in many ways to the more common CPV and may only occur once or twice when the teenager is physically strong enough to challenge the father rather than being an ongoing pattern of behaviour (see accounts of patricide: Heide 1993; Mones 1991).
9.3 Intimate Partner Violence, gender of child and modelling

It is sometimes assumed that the modelling process is quite different for boys than girls and that girls who experience IPV are more likely to develop internalising problems rather than aggressive or other externalising behaviour problems (Carlson 1991). For example, Yates et al. (2003) found that, after statistically controlling for physical abuse of the child, stress, SES, etc., the effect of exposure to IPV was to increase externalising behaviour problems in boys but to increase internalising problems in girls.

Although several studies have found that boys exposed to IPV have more conduct problems than girls (Jaffe & O’Leary 1980; Wolfe et al. 1985; Wolfe et al. 1986) other studies have found no difference between boys and girls in the effect of IPV on aggressiveness and behaviour problems (Davis & Carlson 1994; Fantuzzo et al. 1991; Jouriles & LeCompte 1991; O’Keefe 1994).

Even if boys exposed to marital conflict and violence do have a greater propensity for developing externalising problems, some girls certainly do react to marital conflict and IPV with increased aggression (Spaccarelli et al 1994).

The usual explanation for the effect of past IPV is that of modelling the violent parent’s behaviour:

“[A]mong the most common complaints from partners of our clients regarding the batterer’s impact on the family is that the children mimic the batterer’s precise treatment of her.” (Bancroft & Silverman, 2003: 34)

However, this is certainly not the complete story as a number of other significant factors come into play including the emotionally abusive impact on the child, changes in the
mother’s behaviour, disruption of attachments, family disruptions, changes in siblings
behaviour, father’s undermining of mother, irresponsible and inconsistent fathering, etc.

The effect of being a victim of IPV is hardly likely to leave the mother untouched in her
emotions, attitudes and behaviour:

“battered women may fail to protect themselves or to use appropriate limit setting
when their children are physically or verbally aggressive toward them. They may
give in to the child’s demands in order to forestall the child’s aggression. This
maternal helplessness has the effect of confirming the child’s perception that
‘aggression works’, reinforcing aggressive action toward the mother.” (Lieberman
& Van Horn 2005: 71)

Unfortunately the relevant research on mothering after IPV, which we do not have space
to go into here, tends to be either highly blaming of mothers or, in complete contrast,
overly careful not to criticise them for ideological reasons.

Another very important factor in the effect of IPV on CPV is the on-going influence of the
abusive access-father on the child and the mother. Gallagher (2004a) suggests that this is
as significant in many cases as exposure to IPV. Bancroft and Silverman (2002) state that
the risk of continued undermining of the mother’s parenting and the mother-child
relationship is a major factor to be considered when IPV perpetrators have continued
access to children following separation.

There are a number of problems with simplistic modelling explanations, one being that it
is often not clear exactly what is being modelled. When a child sees one parent hit another
there are a large number of possibilities depending on whether the child identifies with the aggressor or victim and whether attitudes, controlling behaviour, appeasing and defensive behaviour, abusive behaviour, general aggressiveness or passivity, or specific forms of hitting are copied. As the possibilities are almost endless, there is a real danger that, since any outcome can be “explained” nothing is actually explained. In the research literature (and in clinical practice) it is generally assumed that children model the behaviour primarily, and attitudes secondarily, of the same sex parent. This does not explain why girls are more likely to be aggressive following IPV by fathers or that boys abused by mothers are just as likely to be aggressive as boys abused by fathers. Such factors as temperament, attachment, identification, amount of contact, others’ reactions to the behaviour, and consequences of the behaviour may all be important in determining what is actually modelled by a particular child.

It is unfortunate that some theorists and many practitioners see intergenerational transmission as the principal explanation of violence, as this can create an expectation that parents of aggressive children must have been abusive, or the dangerous, and statistically unwarranted (Kaufman & Zigler (1987), belief that children who are abused or exposed to IPV are doomed to repeat the cycle. The illogicality of the idea that the vast majority of victims will inevitably become abusers is easily shown if we consider how few generations it would take until the entire population were abusers, given that most abusers have several victims.

Some possible mechanisms of transmission of violence across generations are (roughly following Delsol and Margolin (2004):

- Modelling behaviours
• Attitudes to the legitimacy of violence
• Disruption of attachments
• General family disruption
• Heritability of personality factors which increase the probability of aggression and violence

Even this belies the possible complexity as some of these can increase violence in children not only directly, but indirectly by factors such as siblings’ behaviour (also a potent source of modelling), social settings, future partner choice, marriage stability, etc.
Chapter 10 Child abuse, physical punishment and Child Parent Violence

In this chapter the sparse evidence that CPV is directly associated with child abuse is critically examined and found to be either inconclusive or actually counter-indicated.

We noted that a number of authors have assumed that children who are violent to parents are reacting directly to parental violence or harsh parenting (2.4). It is not surprising that many researchers should have initially approached the topic of CPV with such expectations, as discussed in Chapter Two, parent blaming, victim blaming, the assumption that children are victims and the idea that abuse is invariably associated with structural power, all point to such a conclusion. In addition, the intergenerational transmission of violence (both in delinquency and in family violence) is a well-accepted phenomenon. There are also many studies showing that abused children tend to be more aggressive and violent: “it is not surprising to find that the behavioural effect most well documented by both direct observation and parent and teacher ratings is that abused children are more aggressive, showing more hostile, externalising and negative social behaviour” (Salzinger et al 1991: 74). That several of the survey studies of CPV suggested a correlation between CPV and parents’ violence to the child came as no surprise to those without direct experience of families where there was CPV, thus the methodological problems of these studies were generally overlooked.

Surveys using the CTS (or asking questions such as “How often do your parents actually slap you?” as did Brezina 1999) cannot easily differentiate between normative corporal punishment and child abuse. The first, and most frequently quoted, survey of CPV found a correlation between parents’ violence towards the child (including both normative
punishment and abusive violence) and CPV: “The more often the parents hit the child the higher the probability that the child has hit the parent” (Straus et al. 1980: 120). In this survey parents were asked about violence by children down to age three. Several surveys of youth reported similar findings (Agnew & Huguley 1989; Brezina 1999; Brown & Hamilton 1998; Pagelow 1984) although Paulson et al. (1990) found no relation in their survey between CPV and parental punishment of the child.

There are a number of reasons why we should be cautious in interpreting such results:

1. As discussed (4.4 to 4.10), surveys of family violence, and especially self-reports by violent perpetrators, are subject to such systematic error due to response biases and method variance, that correlations could easily be artefacts. Both parents and youth may use violence by the other as an excuse for their own violence.

2. Correlations in actual amount of violence by different family members are likely to be influenced by a number of common social, familial or genetic factors making correlations likely, but difficult to interpret.

3. As instruments such as the CTS include a great deal of minor, expressive and defensive violence, they may not be measuring either CPV or child abuse in a way that allows comparison with clinical and other data. The relationships found could even be valid for expressive and other forms of violence without being valid for abusive violence.

4. Correlations are equally compatible with the explanation that violent children affect the behaviour of their parents rather than the reverse (discussed below).

5. Some studies do not differentiate between parents by gender or violent behaviour. Thus a family in which a father has been violent to the mother and also to a child but where the child has also been violent to the mother will produce a correlation between CPV and parental violence to the child, quite spuriously suggesting reciprocal or defensive violence.
Ulman and Straus (2003: 47, using same data as Straus et al. 1980) suggest that the
difference their survey shows in gender of victimised parent (though quite small) is
explained by amount of corporal punishment: “because they do more childcare, mothers
are likely to administer corporal punishment and therefore also more likely to be victims
of CPV.” Although it may be true that mothers deal out more minor physical punishment
than fathers to younger children, physical abuse of adolescents is more often perpetrated
by fathers (see 6.6.8). The survey figures quoted by Ulman and Straus also suggest that
although there is an increased incidence of CPV with more frequent physical punishment,
there is only a small further increase in the risk of CPV between those using conventional
(for the 1970s) physical discipline and those whose violence to children was more severe
and abusive (Ulman and Straus 2003: 54). Thus if their explanation of CPV as being
largely “reciprocal coercion” is accepted, then normative physical punishment must be
almost as coercive as child abuse and this does not fit with their “puzzling and disturbing”
finding that there was less CPV directed at men who were violent to their wives.

Browne and Hamilton (1998: 74) found that, according to youth self-reports, “severe
violence toward the father is less likely to be reciprocal than towards the mother”. Since it
is not surprising that “fathers more frequently defend themselves when physically attacked
by their adolescents” (Eckstein 2002: 85) it is difficult to explain Browne and Hamilton’s
finding in terms of reciprocal violence but it makes sense in terms of image management
as youth who admit assaulting mothers have a greater need to justify this than those who
claim to have hit fathers.

As the use of corporal punishment has declined dramatically since the 1970s it would be a
reasonable hypothesis, for those believing CPV is reciprocal, that CPV should be
declining also. None of the reviewed literature has suggested any decrease in CPV. It is also of note that while the use of physical punishment by parents is strongly related to SES, CPV is unrelated or inversely related to SES (as discussed in Chapter 8). Though we have no hard evidence, anecdotal (anthropological and historical) evidence suggests that physical punishment of children appears to be more common in most other societies than in present day Western societies yet CPV seems to be rarer.

Those writing about survey data often make the admission that correlations do not prove causation, then go on to assume that they do so. The assumption is also generally made that parents are the active causal agents and children are passive recipients of influence (Ambert 2001; Thorne 1987). This tendency is no doubt reinforced when violence is involved by an understandable reluctance to see any aggression from parent to child as defensive or even reactive. Certainly in moral terms, parents are far more responsible and accountable than are children but this should not be allowed to cloud our interpretation of empirical evidence.

It is just as logical (and more parsimonious an explanation) to conclude that parents will use physical punishment more on difficult and aggressive children as it is to assume that the child is responding to parents’ aggression (Baumrind et al. 2002; Larzelere 1985; Muller 1996). This has occasionally been acknowledged, for example, “as these are cross-sectional data, a good deal of caution should be used in drawing any causal connections from these data. Obviously, it is just as plausible to assert that violence towards an adolescent led to the adolescent striking the parent as it is to state that adolescents’ attacks lead to a retaliation by the victimized parent” (Cornell & Gelles 1982: 11).
In fact the two explanations are not mutually exclusive and in reality the process within a family system is likely to be circular. For our argument, as stated in the previous chapter, it can certainly be accepted that aggressive parents produce more aggressive children (and genetic, familial and wider social processes may all be involved in addition to parental behaviour) and this argument should certainly not be taken as questioning the harmful effects of corporal punishment. However, we are here specifically considering CPV and there is good reason to suspect from the available evidence, as discussed in the previous two chapters, that the child’s aggression will not routinely be directed against aggressive parents themselves.

Although it is a reasonable expectation that some parents will respond to their child’s aggression with more frequent punishment and increased parental aggression, we cannot be confident that the survey data are valid and are actually demonstrating such a result in families where there is CPV. The survey results suggesting that parents who experience CPV are more violent to the child could be explained either by response biases or by the fact that aggressive children are more often punished by parents.

Although some parents may respond to CPV with increased punishment and aggression, many others back off or give in, in an attempt to “keep the peace”. Patterson, Reid and Dishion (1992: 49) claimed that coercive boys targeted mothers more than fathers partly because mothers are more likely to reinforce coercive attacks by children by soothing or trying to calm them, rather than by retaliating or punishing. Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber (1986: 110) state that: “Some children ultimately ‘win’ when they perform in such a way as to stop virtually all parental behaviours aimed at changing the misbehaviour”. In her in-depth qualitative analysis of CPV incidents, Eckstein (2004: 380) similarly reported
that once children became abusive towards their parents “the power and authority of parents in the relationship began a downward slide...” Levy (1999: 89) noted that parental “demandingness” was lower in families where there was CPV (the reverse of their prediction), this could either indicate that permissive parents are more at risk of CPV and/or that some parents reduce their demands when faced with a violent young person.

10.1 Evidence that child abuse is rare in CPV

Significantly, the assumption that children who are violent to parents have been abused by the parent-victims is very rarely encountered in researchers or clinicians who have had contact with a number of these families. Thus all of the researchers who have conducted qualitative research (Cottrell 2005; Eckstein 2002; Jackson 2003; McKenna 2006; Monk 1997) are clearly sympathetic to the parents (as well as the children) and certainly do not view them as abusers. This is similar to the attitude of almost all clinicians who have written on work with these families (Charles 1986; Gallagher 2004a; Harbin & Maddin 1979; Howard 1995; Micucci 1995; Omer 2000; Paterson et al. 2002; Price 1996).

Several clinical and qualitative researchers have specifically claimed that child abuse (as opposed to the emotional abuse accompanying IPV) appears to be rare as a direct contributor to CPV (Eckstein 2002: 35; Harbin & Madden 1979; Gallagher 2004a; McKenna 2006; Price 1996). There are a few exceptions to this with Wells (1997) being the only clinician who suggests that child abuse may be a common causal factor in CPV, though the basis for this observation is unclear. Monk (1997), although his qualitative research is quite sympathetic to the parents, suggests that child abuse may be a cause,
though it is not clear if he is basing this on interviews with workers (which could reflect common biases) or on the previous survey research.

The arguments of the previous two chapters would tend to support the idea that abuse of the child will be rare by those experiencing CPV. However, proving that something does not occur is virtually impossible and it is always possible that we are missing some well-hidden abuse.

The viewpoint of most clinicians and qualitative researchers is captured by the following quote:

“I hear people say that parents who are abused are not only permissive, they don’t care about their children. This is simply nonsense. I have yet to meet an abused parent who doesn’t care.” (Cottrell 2004: 44)

The unfairness of the assumption that parents suffering CPV have been abusive or harsh is poignantly caught by the following quote:

“It could happen to any one of us… and when it does you quickly understand how grotesquely unfair it is to be held solely responsible for the abuse you are suffering from the child you brought into the world.” (Alibhai-Brown 2003: 25)

Brown and Hamilton (1997), summarizing their own and other survey findings on CPV, concluded that lax discipline combined with parental hostility gives rise to CPV, stating that, “Parents tend to demonstrate their hostile attitudes by being unaccepting and disapproving of their children” (Browne & Hamilton 1997: 201). Consider the equivalent statement being made about victims of IPV: “Wives tend to demonstrate their hostile
attitudes to their husbands by being unaccepting and disapproving of them.” The unfairness of such a statement, and the illogicality of attributing a causal process to such correlations, becomes glaringly obvious.

10.2 Reasons for expecting a link between past child abuse and CPV

A large number of studies have shown a link between IPV and direct violence to children, with a median concurrence rate of 40% (Appel & Holden 1998). Given the preponderance of refuge samples, and the fact that only one family member (i.e. the mother) usually gives information on both measures, it is quite possible this is an over-estimation but there seems little doubt that the link is a real one. In those families where there is CPV following IPV we would thus expect a higher than average amount of past (but not necessarily recent) child abuse.

Such a link between past child abuse and CPV would not apply to those families (predominantly two-parent) where there is no past IPV. On the contrary, if our speculations about indulgent, child-centred parenting are correct and the inhibitory effect of a violent parent is taken into account, it is likely that the rates of both child abuse and physical punishment will be lower in these families than in the general population.

Whether past child abuse shows up or not in various studies may then crucially depend on such factors as the number of sole parent families included and also if research methods utilised are capable of uncovering events which occurred a number of years in the past. (& who inflicted the abuse?)
10.3 Conclusion

The relation between child abuse and CPV is a particularly difficult area to study. When surveying youth involved in CPV we are relying on the reports of self-confessed perpetrators of violence but also when surveying their parents we are hoping for honest responses from perpetrators of violence to children. While the quantitative surveys rely on youth reports, the qualitative research to date has relied almost entirely on parents’ reports which could reduce the amount of self-reported violence to children by both sampling and reporting effects (although Cottrell 2005 :1083 found that a few parents did acknowledge past abusive behaviour towards their children).

Given the association between CPV and past IPV it would be surprising if rates of past child abuse were not higher than average overall for children who are violent to parents. However, this has not been clearly demonstrated by any of the research to date and if it is demonstrated it is likely that, rather than showing that CPV is often defensive, or reciprocal, it is the norm that the victim of IPV, not the perpetrator, is also the victim of CPV.
Chapter 11 Implications

“Our current systems for providing safety to child and adult victims of family violence are fragmented and often working at cross-purposes. Systems are badly needed that work for the safety of all victimized family members. We need systems that hold the violent person accountable and do not place unfair burdens on victims, regardless of their age.” (Edelson 1998: 297)

This final chapter explores some of the gaps in the evidence and posits some implications for clinical practice.

We “discovered” child physical abuse in the sixties; IPV in the seventies; elder abuse in the eighties and emotional abuse in the nineties. All of these forms of abuse undoubtedly occurred just as often before discovery as after. Despite the popular press (and the occasional professional) proclaiming “epidemics” of one form of abuse or other, our awareness of these forms of abuse could coincide with a decrease rather than an increase in prevalence, as they become more visible precisely because they are less socially accepted (Frizzell 1998). However, although it is likely that the apparent increase in violence towards parents is at least partly due to increased awareness, there is enough anecdotal evidence for us to be concerned that we may be seeing a real increase in this phenomenon.

The phenomenon of CPV is a highly complex one (as is true of any form of family violence) and the physical act may be a sign of a number of interpersonal situations with very different meanings, causes, outcomes, seriousness and implications for practice.
Failure to recognise this complexity and the use of simple quantitative measures which confound these different situations is one reason for the confused nature of the field.

11.1 Violence to parents: a tentative categorisation

Children may hit parents in several very different situations:

1. Some violence within families occurs in a playful context and as any parent knows this can at times lead to accidents, misunderstanding and escalation.

2. An act of violence which is a one-off event is generally quite different in its psychological and social implications than is repeated behaviour.

3. Very young children quite frequently hit parents “every mother in our group had had to cope with angry outbursts or quarrelling at one time or another, and 95% of them reported instances of strong aggression that had been directed at the parents themselves.” (Sears et al. 1957: 265).

4. Older children may also occasionally lash out during a temper tantrum or emotional outburst (expressive violence).

5. Some severely disabled children or young people hit carers, including their parents.

6. A few young people suffering from mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or severe depression can be violent to parents (this is more often young adults in their 20’s and 30’s than adolescents, Nordstrom & Gunnar 2003).

7. Abused or neglected children with attachment problems may be violent to carers (Briggs & Broadhurst 2005; Stanley & Goddard 2002) which may include parents in a few cases.
8. Some abused children will try to defend themselves against their abuser when they reach adolescence. There appears to be little or no literature specific to this and it may be quite rare.

9. Some children try to prevent intimate partner violence towards their mothers and may, when older, be violent towards fathers or step-fathers while defending their mothers (Roy 1988).

10. There are a few chaotic, multi-problem families where violence of all sorts is the norm (usually also involving both child abuse and exposure to IPV) and distinctions between abuse, defence and mutual combat may sometimes be blurred.

11. Drug-affected or drug-abusing young people may be violent towards parents (Banks & Randolph 1999; Pelletier & Coutu 1992).

12. Some young people become increasingly violent as they become immersed in a delinquent, violent life-style (Kethineni et al. 2004).

13. Children of sole parents who have been exposed to IPV may later be violent to the victimised parent (see chapter 9).

14. Some children have such high feelings of entitlement, or low regard for others, that they attempt to bully a parent, or parents, to get their own way (Cottrell & Finlayson 1996; Gallagher 2004a, 2004b; Harbin & Maddin 1979).

Looking at this tentative list (based on Gallagher 2004a) it should be obvious that there can be no one explanation for all situations where children are violent towards parents. If our interest is in situations, or relationships, where children are “abusive” towards parents then the first nine categories listed above are only of peripheral interest. Children in categories 8, 9 and 10 are likely to be acting defensively and/or engaging in mutual combat with fathers and using the term “abusive” for their behaviour may be a great
injustice. The final two categories make up the vast majority of the families Gallagher (2004a & 2004b) has encountered clinically and anecdotally where children are violent to parents. Unfortunately most research to date has not given any indication of which of these categories are relevant and quantitative surveys may include any or all of the above categories; nor do we have any good evidence about the relative incidence of these categories, making meaningful generalisations problematic.

We might assume that the two main categories in most samples are either: a) indulgent parents of over-entitled children (mainly two-parent families), or b) children exposed to past IPV (in sole-mother or step-families). Speculatively, the following table suggests some possible differences between these two groups.

11.1.1.1 Table 9 Comparison of “Indulgent” and Past IPV families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Indulgent</th>
<th>Past IPV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family type</td>
<td>Mainly two-parent</td>
<td>Sole or step-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims</td>
<td>Mothers + 50% of fathers</td>
<td>Mothers + a few step-fathers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Higher than average</td>
<td>Lower than average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incidence of past abuse</td>
<td>Lower than average</td>
<td>Higher than average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incidence of past corporal punishment</td>
<td>Lower than average</td>
<td>Higher than average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other children in family</td>
<td>Few with serious problems</td>
<td>Problems are common</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It seems likely that samples will vary in the proportions of these two types of family. Qualitative samples may have a bias for more middle-class indulgent families. Within clinical samples, welfare agencies may have a disproportionate number of past IPV while child psychiatric studies may have a disproportionate number of the “indulgent” two-parent families. Such differences may further confuse some of the findings on CPV.

Speculatively, an increase in CPV in society could be due to two factors, ironically both of which are on the whole positive:

a) an increase in indulgent, child-focussed parenting, and

b) more women leaving abusive men.

11.2 Further research

All of the categories in the list above represent neglected areas of research. In fact this topic is so much in its infancy there is no aspect that does not require further research. We certainly need more qualitative research to help understand the behaviour, experiences and motivations of the various family members involved. There are very few accounts of the young person’s point of view (Cottrell & Finlayson 1996; Monk 1997) and studies which compare more than one family member’s account would be enlightening. No one has looked specifically at the experiences of abused fathers, or of siblings, in families where there is CPV. No one has followed up these families or done retrospective interviews after the abuse has ended. We also need reliable quantitative research which takes a more critical look at the validity of measures and the veracity of self-reports, this must be in the context of meaningful definitions of terms such as “violence” and “abuse”. It is not acceptable ethically or scientifically to ignore the context of violent acts and lump
together the behaviour of those trying to hurt or control others with those who are expressing their feelings or acting in self-defence.

A few elements of CPV that particularly need further exploration are:

- The complexities of gender in CPV, of both perpetrators and victims, remain unclear and the research is full of contradictions. There seems no doubt that boys are more often the aggressors but the proportion of boys to girls is still unclear and whether this is changing is not known.

- There is also little doubt that mothers are more often the victims of CPV but how often, and under what circumstances, fathers are victims is unclear.

- Our speculative distinction between those families where there has been past IPV and the parents are indulgent requires elaboration and confirmation.

- Whether the incidence of CPV is truly higher where parents have higher SES needs confirmation and deserves further exploration with the variable of past IPV taken into account.

- The conventional understanding of power within families is questioned by the fact that parents can be so thoroughly disempowered by the behaviour of irresponsible youth. We need to refine our understanding of interpersonal power in order to understand abuse of parents. The unpalatable fact that being irresponsible gives short-term power
in intimate relationships has relevance to other forms of family violence and to male-female relationships generally.

- The commonalities and differences, between the behaviour and attitudes of abusive men and abusive teenagers have not been explored by research, theoretically, or clinically.

- The complexities of processes such as modelling and the adoption of pro-violent attitudes warrant further study and theoretical exploration.

- Our exploration of the effects of IPV on children is still in its infancy and we have little understanding of the issues of resilience and temperament.

- Despite a somewhat naive reliance on youth survey results, the voices of these violent youth are largely missing from the literature.

11.3 Social Work with families where there is CPV

There is very little literature dealing with the social work or counselling treatment of families where there is CPV. Of the few books directly relevant to the subject (Omer 2000; Price 1996; Sells 2001), none are specifically about CPV, and only one (Sells) is by a social worker. The literature specifically on CPV contains only a few isolated comments on working with these families\(^2\).

\(^2\) Iironically the paucity of information is shown by a recent psychology review of CPV (Kennair & Mellor 2007) which quotes not only my articles but extensively quotes from my web-site on the subject of working with families where there is CPV.
Our understanding of the issue of CPV is in such a confusing and underdeveloped state that few conclusions can be drawn from the literature that have direct relevance to work with these families other than, hopefully, weakening some of the victim-blaming myths when the literature is examined critically. We have attempted to show that the common assumption (though becoming less common) that these parent-victims are usually abusers, or over-controlling authoritarians, is not based on any reliable evidence and that a lack of control is far more likely than over-control.

“Many therapists… accepted the modern idea that these destructive situations occur because the rights of young people are being violated and their self-determination is being denied them.” (Price 1996: 1)

This assumption may have grave implications for those attempting to advise abused parents and may explain why the evidence suggests that these families are generally dissatisfied with the help offered.

- Parents have horror stories to tell about mental health professionals’ unhelpful attitudes” (Cottrell 2005: 107).
- “Parents tried on average nine different counsellors, including psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and probation officers… Though all of these participants actively sought outside help, very few of them believed it had any long-term positive effects on the abusive situations.” (Eckstein 2002: 210)
- “I believe that parents have often been treated unkindly by the helping professions… The upshot of the professional encounter is that the parents are left feeling even more incompetent, weak, and guilty.” (Omer 2000: x/xi)
“It seems that professionals generally meet reports of parent abuse with condescension and implications [of] ineffective or bad parenting.” (Regalado 2004: 5)

“When the abused parents do give up their anonymity and come forward they often find the brutality from their children mirrored by indifference from the courts.” (Smart 1984: 305)

Similar observations have been expressed by a number of other writers (Gallagher 2004; Price 1996; Wells 1987) and those who have interviewed parents report that “the system” (whether in Australia, the USA, Canada or the UK) has often been more hindrance than help to these families (Bonnick 2006; Cottrell & Monk 2004; Cottrell 2005; Eckstein 2002; Jackson 2003; McKenna 2006; Monk 1997: 49).

Families where IPV is followed by CPV may have contact with child protection agencies that regard the child as a victim and may automatically regard the mother as guilty, at the very least, of passive abuse through failure to protect. The same family may also have contact with agencies focussed on protecting women from IPV who may see the child as a proxy wife-basher. Although both of these polarised positions may occasionally be justified, they can both work against assertive parenting and may both discourage reconciliation between mother and child. Thus, well-meaning workers in both systems, for radically different reasons, may facilitate family break-up and thus increase the risk to the young person.

The approach of workers and services to teenage abusers is often dramatically different to their approach to adult abusers. For example, no one would consider it reasonable to
refuse help to an abused woman because her husband did not want counselling and we would be appalled if an abused child or teenager was refused help because their abuser did not wish to cooperate. However, many youth work and some mental health agencies insist that the violent young person must be willing to cooperate or no service is offered to the family. It is common practice not to see couples together if there is current physical violence but normal practice to see (or attempt to see) parent and violent child together.

On the other hand, there are real and significant differences between teenage abusers and adult abusers and domestic violence services may not be the ideal agencies to fill the gaps in family and children services. A mixture of both approaches is needed so that violent youth can be regarded as both “victim” and “abuser” at the same time without the need to polarise these views. A constructivist approach allows us to hold these two views in mind simultaneously (without succumbing to the radical constructivist absurdity of dismissing such ideas as completely arbitrary).

Only a few comments are made in the literature about treatment and these are sometimes contradictory (perhaps because parents are assumed to have been both permissive and over-controlling). There is obvious relevance in the literature on the treatment of physically abusive men and in the treatment of children with conduct disorders and delinquent behaviour. However, all of these sources are rather thin in both theory and practical advice to practitioners and not generally very hopeful about outcomes, e.g.: “Currently, the prognosis for aggressive children is poor. Services provided by mental health, education, and juvenile justice agencies often have little impact on the downward trajectory of aggressive children” (Cavell 2000: 23).
Although the parent education approach is certainly relevant, much parenting advice assumes that better communication and giving children choices are enough to solve any problem and techniques suggested (such as time-out) often assume cooperation. In addition there is an almost universal acceptance that parents of teenagers need to be less controlling and need to distance themselves from the adolescent, which may be counter-productive advice in many cases of CPV where parents have already reacted by withdrawing in fear and impotence.

Groupwork for parents has a great deal of promise in this area (Paterson, Luntz et al. 2002; Howard & Weir 2004) as just bringing parents together can be empowering and reduce shame and guilt: “For many of these victims, the realisation that other parents shared the same painful experiences and struggles was a first step toward self-empowerment, self-regulation and understanding” (Eckstein 2002: 254).

It seems that the time is ripe for the welfare field to “discover” this form of family violence and much further research is needed before we can begin to make sense of the many issues involved. Such research-guided practice promises to help ease the emotional, not to mention physical, pain of these parents and also directly aid some highly at-risk young people. This is not only worthwhile in the short term but may be a significant preventative measure for future IPV and child abuse. In addition, understanding of this form of family violence will advance our still primitive understanding of family violence generally.
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