

Respect

When your child or adolescent is violent or abusive to you

It's easy for parents to feel guilty and ashamed and people are quick to point the finger, especially at mums. However, research shows that it's incredibly common. About 20% of teenagers are violent to their parents (mostly to mothers) and about 10% seriously so.

Please be reassured that most of these young people have 'good enough' parents. There is no such thing as a 'perfect parent'. Sometimes peer groups, wider society, or the media or an aggressive, undermining, or absent parent will have been much more influential than you. So rather than beat yourself up over worrying how you are part of the problem, it's much more fruitful to think about how you could become part of the solution....

Remember:

Your child or adolescent's "out of control" behaviour and aggression towards you can be serious and frightening. Both you and your child(ren) have a right to live without fear, and at a deep level, will want family life to improve. It's likely to get worse before it can get better, but it can get better with some understanding and planning, clearer limits, and a bit more warmth. Even if your child has a learning difficulty, an Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) or ADD/ADHD it can get better. Even small improvements can make a huge difference to family life.

Be prepared for a backlash if you are suddenly trying to be firm and set boundaries, most children will test your resolve and their behaviour may get worse at first. Under stressful conditions both of you will want to revert to old patterns. As the adult you will have to try to rise above this. You will make mistakes and you will need to face them, learn from them, make repairs, and continue.

Most of all you will have to **stay focused** on your intentions and **hold steady** until the boat stops rocking.

Identify and plan around sore points

It can feel like you argue about anything and everything with your child/adolescent, but usually there are **triggers** or **sore points** which are important to identify.

- What times of day do arguments happen?
- What subjects do you argue about?
- Are there things that each of you do or say which really wind the other up?

Once you have identified your sore points, tell your child/adolescent what you struggle with and explain how you want things to feel differently in the family and why you are concerned. Your child/adolescent needs to feel that you are teaching them because you care.

Ask them about their sore points and name the ones that you see them struggling with. Ask why they find these areas hard and what solutions they can suggest. Listen and ask more – don't shut them down. If they aren't forthcoming, offer a range of options. Consider how to plan differently to avoid these difficult situations altogether. Whether there are some things each of you can simply let go, or whether there are compromises you are both willing to make.

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Stop escalation patterns: How do you push *their* buttons?

All children and adolescents are working against a tide of hormones and you can't expect them to show self-control if you can't set an example by doing so yourself. So, look to stop your own unhelpful patterns, such as:

- Escalating power struggles, showing your own temper, long lectures or unrealistically high standards or expectations.
- Your own use of violence. Smacking them is only likely to make them angrier and more dangerous to you.

Remember that once you're losing your temper, you are very likely to make things worse rather than better, so step away when you feel you want to shout and 'have a go' at them – take a breather and come back to the argument when you're calmer.

Stop escalation patterns: How do they push *your* buttons?

Consider the ways your child pushes your buttons once you are caught in a conflict. Note that kids push our buttons to get a rise out of us, but you can choose how you react when those buttons are pushed. The words may still hurt, but you can choose not to react/retaliate in a way that makes things worse. If you don't respond at all, just stay focussed on the subject, such tactics will simply lose their power.

The parenting relationship

If you have a partner around, then it's likely that your worries about your child and how to deal with them have led to arguments between you. These dynamics tend to make us throw blame around, and children will naturally exploit such divisions, which you should see as adapting to a difficult environment rather than manipulating you.

You'll need to sit down with your partner and figure out how to be mutually supportive. If you have very opposite parenting styles, one of you being stricter and doing most of the discipline, while the other does the warmth, then you can try swapping roles for a few weeks. The strict parent now focusing solely on building warmth with the child, while the other parent does all the disciplining (and no blaming each other for how you do your new jobs!).

Two parents can be a huge help if they support each other. When one needs to take 'time out' to calm down, the other can step and take over. When one has a real sore point over a particular issue, the other can deal with that issue. When one parent needs to offload, the other can simply listen, or offer understanding and encouragement.

Making a family agreement

When things are getting out of hand in your family, try to choose a moment of calm to call a family meeting and make an agreement about what behaviours need to change. Set rewards and consequences to support a positive behaviour change. Sometimes just listening to each other one at a time, taking turns, and if needs be, time yourselves for equal airspace, can help relieve the problems.

You should all be aware that these agreements won't work just like that. Your problems have taken a long time brewing and will take a while to dispel. You will probably need to meet again every few weeks to discuss what is and isn't working in your agreement and to revise it.

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Most important of all, you will need to do your best to hold to your agreement, since the main reason consequences won't work is that they aren't stuck to consistently. Make agreements realistic and choose things within your control and then be prepared to rattle a good atmosphere by levying the consequence even if the young person starts behaving well again.

Step 1 – Setting goals

What EXACTLY are the behaviours you are concerned about? **Prioritise** – which can be ignored for now and which are most important to change? Especially anything that endangers any of you. Ask each member of the family this. There may be some behaviours by others that act as triggers or sore points including name calling or ignoring. You all may want to change things about other family members behaviour especially if this contributes to the violent and abusive behaviour you are experiencing.

Keep goals to a minimum though – one to three for each family member to work on is enough.

Step 2 – Analysing the problem

When does the problem seem to take over? Is there a pattern? What kinds of things do you argue about? Is there a particular time of day? Each person should explain why it's a problem for them.

Step 3 – Explaining a simple anger management technique

Ideally your child/adolescent, and anyone else in the family who is losing their temper, will learn this simple technique. First, they will need to notice their sore points and the signals that they are about to be abusive.

- What sets them off?
- What runs through their head at these times?
- How do they wind themselves up?
- How do they begin to feel physically and emotionally as they do this?

These are signals that some cooling off is needed.

Next time they notice these signals, they need to take some **time out**. They need to go out (but for no more than two hours) or find a place in the house to get away from the rest of the family. They need to find something that will calm them down. Some people listen to music or go for a run to work off the adrenalin. Others talk to someone who they know can calm them. They shouldn't return to the family until they are calm again but should let them know where they are and that they are safe.

Step 4 - Setting consequences:

Each person begins suggesting consequences for themselves: **What consequences and rewards might be enough to motivate you to change this behaviour?** (without them being unrealistically large or ineffectually small). If some consequences rely on a level of cooperation e.g., grounding then have a backup consequence if the person refuses to comply, something that is totally in your control. Try to choose things that can be 'paid off' within 24 hours. You can choose from:

- All the things you pay for including treats or going out and non-vital things for daily life such as sweets, haircuts, non-essential clothes, phone bills.
- All the services you perform such as driving them around, cooking for them (there should be food available for them to get themselves, most teenagers can make a sandwich!!) or washing their clothes and cleaning their room.

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All the privileges you allow them such as going out or having friends over, using computers, TVs, staying up late, sleeping in late, playing their music, using makeup, using phones, taking part in activities and so on.

Example consequences:

Every time they break something in anger or is violent...they will be fined £2 from their £5 pocket money. If they have lost all their pocket money for a week, they will have their bike removed for a day. If the parent swears at them in arguments, they will put £1 into the consequence box. (fines will be saved up for family outings to reward the family for good weeks)

Step 5 - What if?

It is an important part of setting 'Consequences' to decide what to do if they aren't followed. Try to maintain consistency in the Reward and Consequence systems, even where they don't seem to work right away. **Importantly**, you don't need to mention the consequence during the argument at all if things are already heated, it will escalate the argument and anyway, and they are unlikely to care but this doesn't mean that the consequences won't work in the long run.

Example 'what if's'

If you implement a fining consequence but your child/adolescent continues to smash up things- You should exit from the situation to avoid escalation. Deduct money as per usual - do not keep saying 'That's another fine.' as this will wind the young person up further. If they say 'I don't care'- ignore this, simply do not respond. If they feel that you have sworn at them repeatedly, while you insist you didn't, because saying 'shit' doesn't count-You should pay the fine this time and next time be clearer about the rule. If they get money from elsewhere, e.g., friends- this should be ignored –they probably won't get money consistently and will still want the reward. If they escalate their behaviour when you put in a consequence-you will need to evoke the safety plan (see below) and fine as usual.

You should also always make a **safety plan** for what cannot be ignored. This should cover what to do if all else fails and family members are at physical risk.

Step 6 - Safety planning

When will you know it's not safe? What can you do at that point to keep safe? Your safety plan should no longer be aimed at changing each other's behaviour but should revert simply to staying safe at all costs.

Example safety plan:

If your child/adolescent simply hits or kicks and then stops-the family agreement is followed, but consequences need not be mentioned at the time. Do not get into an argument or ask why or lecture. Exit from the situation if need be to avoid escalation. If they starts to smash things or follow you around spitting, hitting etc-you need to exit the room for 10 minutes so that everybody can calm down. If the young person follows-they will be asked to go to their bedroom to have some time out. If they do not calm down-lock yourself and other siblings into a safe room. You will need to put locks on more than one of your internal doors to ensure you have a sanctuary. Most local domestic abuse services can direct you to your local 'sanctuary scheme' who can advise and even pay for this. Call a family member or the police to come and help.

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Getting support

Familylives helpline – 0808 800 2222

Respect – advice for young people using abuse in close relationships – 0808 802 4040

Women's aid – for women and children experiencing domestic violence – 0808 2000247

Men's Advice Line - advice line for male victims - tel. 0808 801 0327

Victim support (you don't need to have reported a crime) - 0845 3030900

Samaritans – 0845 7909090

Childline – 0800 1111

Stick at it. Good luck.