



## Parental violence. Gender differences.

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### Summary

Child-to-parent violence (CPV) is a complex phenomenon of growing interest in the fields of psychology, education and social intervention. In recent decades, the increase in reports, greater media visibility and the development of specific research have highlighted the need for an in-depth analysis of the factors associated with this type of domestic violence. Studies conducted with community samples of adolescents show that, unlike the results obtained in judicial or child protection contexts, girls have a higher prevalence of aggressive behaviour towards their parents, especially of a psychological nature and of an occasional nature. In relation to the parent receiving the aggression, the prevalence is similar between fathers and mothers, although a higher percentage of frequent aggression is directed towards mothers. This greater maternal victimisation could be explained by their predominant role in enforcing educational norms and caregiving functions. These findings highlight the importance of the sample context and family dynamics in the study of VFP.

**Keywords:** Child-to-parent violence; adolescence; gender differences; psychological aggression; family context.

### Abstract

Child-to-parent violence (CPV) is a complex phenomenon of increasing relevance in the fields of psychology, education, and social intervention. In recent decades, the rise in reported cases, greater media visibility, and growing scientific interest have highlighted the need to thoroughly examine the factors associated with this specific form of intrafamilial violence. Studies conducted with community samples of adolescents show that, unlike findings from judicial or child protection contexts, girls display a higher prevalence of aggressive behaviours toward parents, particularly psychological and occasional forms of aggression. Regarding the parent targeted, prevalence rates are similar for fathers and mothers, although a higher proportion of frequent aggression is directed toward mothers. This greater maternal victimisation may be explained by mothers' predominant role in rule enforcement and caregiving responsibilities within the family context. Overall, these findings emphasise the importance of considering sample context and family dynamics when analysing child-to-parent violence.

*Keywords:* child-to-parent violence; adolescence; psychological aggression; sex differences; family context.

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### 1. Introduction

Child-to-parent violence (CPV) is a form of violence that is a major concern in society, given that the number of reported cases is increasing (Loinaz and De Sousa, 2019). However, the incidence of this problem in our society exceeds the number of reported cases, and it is estimated that there are a very high number of unreported VFP situations (Loinaz and De Sousa, 2019). In fact, VFP is also perpetrated by adolescents who are enrolled in secondary schools and who have no previous reports for this reason. In this regard, there are some previous studies that have analysed the prevalence of PFV in school-aged

adolescents, which have found high percentages of aggression, especially verbal, towards parents (Calvete, Orue and González-Cabrera, 2014; Ibabe, 2019).

Adolescence is a stage of development marked by profound biological, cognitive, emotional and social changes. During this period, adolescents experience a progressive search for autonomy, a redefinition of family ties and greater influence from their peer group. These processes, although normative, can generate conflicts in the family context which, in certain cases, lead to dysfunctional relational dynamics.

In this context, child-to-parent violence has emerged as an issue that challenges traditional conceptions of domestic violence. For years, research focused mainly on violence perpetrated by adults against minors, relegating to the background those situations in which children engage in violent behaviour towards their parents. However, recent studies have shown that VFP is not an isolated or exceptional phenomenon, but a reality present in various sociocultural contexts.

The relevance of studying child-to-parent violence lies not only in its immediate impact on family dynamics and the well-being of parents, but also in its long-term implications for the psychosocial development of adolescents. CPV has been associated with antisocial behaviour, emotional adjustment difficulties and a greater likelihood of violence in other relational contexts.

The purpose of this article is to delve deeper into the analysis of the prevalence of child-to-parent violence in the adolescent population and to identify predictive variables that allow us to understand its emergence and maintenance, as well as its relationship with other forms of violence.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. Definition of child-to-parent violence**

Child-to-parent violence has been defined by various authors as a set of repeated acts of physical, psychological or economic violence perpetrated by children, usually adolescents, against their parents or parental figures, with the aim of exercising control, power or domination over them (Cottrell, 2001; Pereira, 2017). In 1979, researchers in the field of family violence, Harbin and Madden (cited in Jackson, 2013), first identified "battered parent syndrome" as a subtype of family violence. These authors described it as "actual physical assaults or verbal and non-verbal threats of physical harm by children towards their parents" (Jackson 2013, p. 4). However, despite the fact that this initial description was made almost half a century ago, it is in the last two decades that research on this type of violence has increased considerably (Hoyo, Gámez and Calvete, 2018; Gallego, Novo, Farina and Arce, 2019; Ibabe, Arnosó and Elgorriaga, 2018).

Aroca, Bellver and Alba (2013) point out that VFP is characterised by its intentionality, its instrumental nature and its repetition over time, thus differing from the occasional episodes of aggression typical of developmental evolution. From this perspective, VFP should be understood as a specific form of domestic violence, with its own dynamics and risk factors. The hidden nature of the phenomenon makes it difficult to determine its frequency and severity with certainty, and makes it impossible to know the actual number of incidents of child-to-parent abuse that exist (Lyons, Bell, Fréchette, and Romano 2015). Mothers and fathers show a strong tendency to deny the severity of the aggressive attacks they suffer in order to perpetuate the myth of family harmony (Calvete, Orue and González, 2017). Protecting and keeping the family situation secret is a way of protecting their own image as parents (Routt and Anderson, 2015). Parents' shame, fear of blame and society's judgement of their parenting skills are also factors that contribute to parents keeping the secret. Feelings of loneliness and lack of social support, as well as the belief that they have failed as parents, are common among these parents. Furthermore, these factors increase stress within the family and worsen the situation (Holt, 2016).

Ecological explanatory models, inspired by Bronfenbrenner's proposal, emphasise that child-to-parent violence is the result of the interaction between multiple systems: the individual, the family, the school context and, , the community. This approach makes it possible to overcome reductionist views that attribute responsibility exclusively to the adolescent or the family.

## 2.2. Types of child-to-parent violence

The scientific literature distinguishes between different types of child-to-parent violence depending on the nature of the behaviour:

**Psychological violence:** includes insults, threats, humiliation, shouting, emotional blackmail, verbal intimidation, and controlling behaviour. It is the most common form of child-to-parent violence and is often a precursor to more serious manifestations.

**Physical violence:** includes pushing, hitting, kicking, throwing objects and any behaviour that involves direct physical harm to parents.

**Economic violence:** refers to the theft of money, destruction of material goods, misuse of cards or family financial resources.

Various studies have pointed out that these types of violence do not usually occur in isolation, but rather coexist and can progressively escalate in intensity and frequency. In terms of prevalence, studies from the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia have produced relatively consistent results. Large-scale self-report studies using community samples have found that between 6.5% and 10.8% of young people have hit their parents at least once (Agnew and Huguley, 2014). A Canadian survey, which triangulated reports from parents and young people, found prevalence rates of 12% for physical aggression and 60% for verbal aggression towards parents in the last 6 months (Pagani, Tremblay, Nagyn, Zoccolillo, Vitaro, & McDuff, 2009).

Estévez and Góngora (2019) point out that there are three key indicators in middle childhood related to subsequent violent behaviour in adolescence:

1. The child shows an inability to develop moral emotions such as empathy, compassion, or love, and has great difficulty showing feelings of guilt.
2. The child also shows an inability to learn from mistakes and punishments, and pursues their own interests through behaviours based on remarkable egocentricity; and
3. The child often uses lies, threats and cruel acts against siblings and friends.

In addition, these same authors report that in adolescence, a third of them also display violent behaviour at school. Therefore, most studies indicate that the profile of adolescents who behave aggressively towards their parents shows a cold personality, the main characteristics of which are presented in Table 1 below.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• They engage in aggressive behaviour prior to puberty (6-11 years old).</li><li>• They have great difficulty expressing their emotions, mainly compassion and love.</li><li>• They show a notable lack of social skills such as empathy.</li><li>• They do not show feelings of guilt for their aggressive actions.</li><li>• Their social interactions are based on self-centred interests.</li><li>• They tend to defy, lie, and behave cruelly towards others.</li><li>• Their parents typically display an overly permissive parenting style.</li></ul>
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**Table 1. Characteristics of adolescents with violent behaviour**

Source: Estévez and Góngora (2019)

Most studies conclude that there are no significant differences in the frequency of aggression towards parents in adolescence based on the sex of the child (Ibabe, 2015). However, differences have been found in the type of aggression, as sons are more likely to use physical violence and daughters are more likely to emotionally abuse their parents (Calvete, Gámez Guadix and Orue 2014; Ibabe, 2015; Pagani, Tremblay, Nagyn, Zoccolillo, Vitaro and McDuff, 2009; WHO, 2002; Ulman and Straus, 2003). With regard to age, a study conducted in Canada (cited in Estévez and Góngora, 2019) suggests that aggression usually begins at 12-14 years of age. Statistics in the United States indicate that the age at which the highest incidence of parental aggression occurs is 15 to 17 years (Evans and Warren-Sohlberg, 2018) and that this aggression decreases after the age of 17 (Agnew and Huguley, 2014). In Spain, too, adolescents who abuse their parents are mainly between 14 and 17 years old (Calvete, Gámez-Guadix and García, 2015). In France, the average age has been established at 14 years (Laurent and Derry, 2013).

Some studies have pointed out that the main victims of abusive children are mothers, although these differences have not been observed in all research. In the study conducted by Laurent and Derry (2013), the results indicated that 45.5% of violence committed by adolescents involved only the mother, 9% only the father, and 45.5% both parents. Mothers and caregivers often suffer physical abuse from their children (Almagro, Cutillas, Sánchez, & Sola, 2019; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 2018), as well as other types of violence, such as emotional, psychological, and financial abuse (Paulson, Coombs, & Landsverk, 2016). According to Lyons, Bell, Fréchette, and Romano (2015), the fact that mothers suffer VFP more frequently than fathers could be explained in part by the fact that in daily life, mothers are more involved in setting limits and supervision, making them more likely targets of adolescent frustration than fathers. Lyons, Bell, Fréchette, and Romano (2015) also add several reasons:

- Mothers tend to be physically weaker than fathers.
- Mothers seem to be less likely to retaliate.
- Women are much more likely to be single parents (single-parent families) and spend more time with their children.
- Mothers are victims of spousal abuse more often than fathers.
- Sexist attitudes allow men (including sons) to feel superior to women/mothers.
- Mothers often feel guilty about their children's misbehaviour, trapping them in the relationship and making them less likely to be assertive.

In families where domestic violence occurs, certain characteristics have also been observed, such as a focus on family relationships towards violence, the separation of some members from others, the frequent social isolation of the family from friends and other relatives, the labelling of adolescents as problematic, biased perceptions of family members towards each other; and a significant lack of family communication, which makes it more difficult for them to resolve problems and conflicts (Calvete and Orue, 2016).

While it is true that violence and abuse by adolescents towards their parents has always been a problem for some families, both researchers and professionals are now focusing more attention on this issue (Holt and Retford, 2013). Over the last ten years, professionals working in the fields of mental health, parental support, victim support, youth justice, youth services or family support (or very often working in a multi-agency context) have begun to develop specific ways of working with regard to VFP. Sometimes these new ways of working appear as 'programmes', other times they are presented as strategies, techniques or 'good practices'. In this regard, there is now a small but significant collection of experiences (see Newman, Fagan and Webb, 2014) and many of the more formal programmes are in the process of being independently analysed and evaluated. However, an analysis of outcome data on their effectiveness is not yet feasible.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional and correlational design was used, aimed at analysing the prevalence of child-to-parent violence and identifying predictive variables. The analysis of the extracted data was carried out using the statistical programme SPSS Statistics, version 24.

#### 3.2. Participants

The sample consisted of 672 adolescents aged between 12 and 19 years (boys (49.6%) and girls (50.4%)) attending secondary schools in the Valencian Community.

#### 3.3. Procedure

Data collection was carried out with the prior authorisation of the schools and services involved, as well as the informed consent of the families. The questionnaires were administered anonymously and voluntarily.

#### 3.4. Instruments

- Calvete, Gámez-Guadix and Orue's (2013) Child-to-Parent Violence Questionnaire (CPV), which assesses psychological, physical and economic violence towards parents (Cronbach's alpha: .86; .88)

### 4. Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

- ✓ To analyse the prevalence of child-to-parent violence among adolescents attending school in the Valencian Community.
- ✓ To determine whether there are significant differences between genders and the different types of child-to-parent violence in terms of and frequency.

### 5. Results

#### 5.1. Overall prevalence of child-to-parent violence

First, the overall prevalence of child-to-parent violence perpetrated by the participating adolescents was analysed, considering the different types of violence (psychological, physical and economic) and differentiating between violence directed towards the mother and towards the father. Table 1 shows the percentages of adolescents involved in each type of violence, distinguishing between absence of violence, occasional violence and frequent violence.

**Table 2 Overall prevalence of child-to-parent violence towards the mother and father (%)**

Type of violence	Never Mother	Occasional Mother	Frequent Mother	Never Father	Occasional Father	Frequent Father
Psychological	28.2	57.6	14.2	31.4	55.9	12.7
Physics	73.9	18.6	7.5	78.4	15.2	6.4
Economy	62.8	26.4	10.8	66.1	23.7	10.2

The results show that psychological violence is the most prevalent form of child-to-parent violence, both towards the mother and the father, with occasional violence clearly predominating. Physical and economic violence have lower, although not negligible, percentages, especially in their occasional form.

#### 5.2. Prevalence of child-to-parent violence by gender

Next, the prevalence of child-to-parent violence was analysed according to the sex of the adolescent. Table 2 shows the percentages of involvement in the different types of violence, differentiating between boys and girls.

**Table 3 Prevalence of child-to-parent violence towards the mother and father according to the adolescent's gender (%)**

Type of violence	Gender	Never Mother	Occasional Mother	Frequent Mother	Never Father	Occasional Father	Frequent Father
Psychological	Boys	25.4	58.9	15.7	28.1	57.2	14.7
	Girls	31.0	56.2	12.8	34.6	54.7	10.7
Physics	Boys	70.8	20.6	8.6	75.1	17.8	7.1
	Girls	77.1	16.6	6.3	81.6	12.6	5.8
Economy	Boys	59.7	27.9	12.4	63.2	25.1	11.7
	Girls	65.9	24.9	9.2	69.0	22.4	8.6

In general terms, boys show higher percentages of involvement in frequent forms of child-to-parent violence, especially psychological and economic violence, while girls show higher percentages in the category of absence of violence. These differences, although moderate, point to the existence of differential patterns of involvement based on gender.

These data confirm that the least visible and most normalised forms of violence constitute the predominant manifestation of VFP.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

The main objective of this study was to analyse the prevalence of child-to-parent violence and determine whether there are significant differences between boys and girls in the type of violence perpetrated and which parent receives more violence.

The **prevalence** of child-to-parent violence in community samples of adolescents is considerably high in the case of occasional psychological violence. On the other hand, although physical violence has much lower prevalence rates, the data are worrying since more than 4% of adolescents admit to occasionally physically assaulting one of their parents (4.4% their mother and 4.3% their father). These physical assaults, such as pushing or hitting, not only have negative consequences for the parents who suffer this behaviour, but also cause serious deterioration in family functioning.

If we look at the **differences in the prevalence of VFP according to gender**, the data obtained show some differences in the percentages between boys and girls, depending on the type of violence perpetrated. Thus, in the case of psychological aggression, girls have higher percentages of VFP. Specifically, the data indicate that occasional psychological aggression towards the mother is committed by 31% of girls compared to 26.9% of boys, and towards the father, 31.9% of girls compared to 25.5% of boys. The same is true in the case of frequent psychological aggression: 8.9% of girls commit this type of violent act towards their mother, while this percentage is 5% among boys. In the case of the father, the prevalence of frequent aggression by girls is 6.9%, while among boys it is 4.6%. In terms of economic violence, we find that occasional aggression is more common among girls, while frequent aggression is more common among boys (7.7% of girls commit occasional economic violence against their mothers, compared to 6.1% of boys). Finally, in terms of physical violence, occasional assaults against the mother are more frequent among boys (2.8%) than girls (1.6%); however, boys and girls show similar

percentages in occasional physical violence against the father: 2% of boys and 2.3% of girls. Frequent physical violence towards the mother is perpetrated by 2.7% of girls and 1.6% of boys, and towards the father by 1.6% of girls and 1.8% of boys. These results are in line with some previous studies that have pointed to a greater involvement of girls in psychological aggression (Calvete et al., 2014), although the greater involvement of boys in physical violence, also noted in previous studies (Calvete et al., 2014; Ibabe, 2015; Pagani et al., 2004, 2009; Ulman and Straus, 2003), is only confirmed by our data in the case of occasional violence towards the mother.

In summary, the results obtained allow us, on the one hand, to confirm the higher prevalence in community samples of school-going adolescents of psychological PVD, exercised occasionally, compared to physical and economic violence. However, on the other hand, and in relation to gender differences, some differences are observed between boys and girls according to the type of PVD and the parent. In line with some previous studies (Calvete et al., 2014), it is observed that in community samples of adolescents (unlike the results obtained in studies with samples of adolescents in juvenile centres and/or with reports from parents), it is girls who commit the most assaults, especially psychological and occasional ones. With regard to the parent, the prevalence is quite similar, although the percentage of frequent aggression directed towards the mother is slightly higher. In this regard, previous studies such as those by Calvete et al. (2015) have highlighted that violence directed towards the mother could be higher as a result of her generally being responsible for enforcing educational rules and being the primary caregiver.

The main limitations of the study are its cross-sectional design, which prevents causal relationships from being established, and the exclusive use of self-reports. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs and multiple informants.

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