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When the Child becomes the Abuser

Breaking the silence on Child-to-Parent Abuse in the UK



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About the Author

Pulchérie is an expert in governance, public protection, and safeguarding, with extensive experience in multi-agency collaboration and regulatory compliance. She serves as an Independent Parole Board Member and volunteers as an Independent Advisor for Thames Valley Police, supporting vulnerable and underrepresented communities.

With a background in the Metropolitan Police, Pulchérie has led high-risk safeguarding initiatives, conducted complex case audits, and developed strategic, outcome-focused protection plans. Her work focuses on continuous improvement, accountability, and strategic planning to enhance service delivery for vulnerable individuals.

Pulchérie's expertise lies at the intersection of strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, auditing, and safeguarding, making her a strong advocate for public protection and family wellbeing.

What is Child-to-Parent Violence and Abuse?

Child-to-parent abuse (CPA) is a hidden problem in the UK. It occurs when children use repeated physical, verbal, emotional, or financial aggression against their parents. Unlike normal teenage moodiness, CPA is about control, intimidation, and fear. Many parents suffer in silence because they feel ashamed or guilty, while support services often don't know how to respond. This report explores what CPA is, why it happens, how it affects families, and what can be done in the UK to support parents and children.

Why it matters?

CPA is not just a family issue—it is a serious public protection concern. When left unaddressed, parents may suffer from stress, anxiety, depression, or even physical harm. Family relationships can break down, and children may miss out on the help they need for underlying issues such as trauma or mental health challenges. In some cases, abuse can escalate into serious violence or criminal behaviour. For example, Sophie, a mother of a 15-year-old, experienced constant shouting, threats, and property damage from her son. Over time, she felt trapped and began avoiding her own home because she didn't know where to turn for help. Early recognition, understanding, and practical support are essential to prevent situations like these from reaching crisis point.

Case for Change

Child-to-Parent Abuse (CPA) is a growing but largely hidden issue in the UK, and the need for action is urgent. Despite increasing recognition among academics, charities, and practitioners, systemic gaps persist that leave both parents and children vulnerable.

1. Rising Prevalence and Hidden Suffering

Research and sector reports indicate that up to 10% of families experience some form of CPA, yet most cases go unreported due to shame, stigma, or fear of criminalising the child. Parents often suffer in silence, experiencing fear, anxiety, and depression, while children's underlying needs—mental health issues, trauma, or exposure to violence—remain unaddressed. This hidden suffering demonstrates the need for proactive identification and support.

2. Fragmented Services and Inconsistent Responses

UK services for CPA are inconsistent, with few specialist programmes, uneven local provision, and limited guidance for professionals. Multi-agency collaboration is often ad hoc, and frontline staff may lack training on assessing risk or providing trauma-informed responses. Without coordinated pathways, parents may turn to the criminal justice system, which addresses the behaviour but rarely resolves the underlying family dynamics.

3. Gaps in Data and Policy

National prevalence data on CPA are sparse, with inconsistent recording across police, social services, and health systems. Policy frameworks, including the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, recognise family abuse but are not explicitly designed to address children as perpetrators. This leaves a gap in guidance, funding, and monitoring, preventing the development of evidence-based interventions and long-term solutions.

4. Long-Term Costs to Families and Society

Unchecked CPA can escalate into serious physical harm, family breakdown, and youth criminalisation. It also places psychological and financial strain on families and can perpetuate cycles of violence across generations. Investing in early identification, family-centred interventions, and support services not only protects parents and children but also reduces long-term societal costs related to healthcare, social services, and criminal justice involvement.

5. Moral and Ethical Imperative

Parents have a fundamental right to safety in their own homes. Children, meanwhile, deserve supportive interventions rather than punitive responses when their behaviour stems from trauma, neglect, or unmet needs. A holistic approach to CPA ensures both parental protection and child welfare, fulfilling moral, ethical, and legal responsibilities.

In summary, CPA is a serious, complex, and under-recognised problem in the UK. Action is needed to:

- Increase awareness and reduce stigma,
- Improve data collection and national monitoring,
- Strengthen multi-agency collaboration,
- Expand access to evidence-based family support,
- Protect parental safety while addressing children's needs.

Understanding Child-to-Parent Abuse

Child-to-Parent Abuse (CPA), Child-to-parent abuse can take many forms. It may be physical, including hitting, kicking, or throwing objects, or verbal and emotional, such as shouting, making threats, or manipulating the parent. Financial abuse can involve stealing money or damaging property, while coercive control may manifest as intimidation, monitoring, or dictating household rules. CPA is usually repetitive and escalating, rather than a one-off argument. Children engaging in abusive behaviour are often attempting to gain control or power over their parents, leaving many parents feeling helpless, anxious, and isolated. For example, Sophie's son refused to follow household rules and shouted threats daily. Over time, Sophie began "walking on eggshells" in her own home, illustrating the coercive nature of CPA.

The Hidden Reality in the UK

Child-to-Parent Abuse (CPA) remains one of the least recognised and least reported forms of domestic violence in the United Kingdom. Despite growing awareness of domestic abuse more broadly, the voices of parents who experience abuse from their children are often absent from national conversations, policy frameworks, and data collection. The phenomenon exists at the

intersection of family conflict, safeguarding, and criminal justice—yet frequently falls through the cracks of all three systems.

Underreporting and the Culture of Silence

Parents subjected to abuse by their children often face intense shame, guilt, and fear of judgement. Many worry that seeking help will result in blame or social services involvement, particularly when the child is a minor. This fear of being seen as a “failed parent” discourages open disclosure. As a result, CPA remains largely invisible to professionals unless it escalates to a crisis.

Research by Condry and Miles (2014) found that many parents delay reporting CPA until violence becomes severe or unmanageable, often after years of hidden suffering. Similarly, a 2019 study by the Home Office noted that parents are less likely to contact police compared to other forms of domestic abuse, fearing repercussions for their child.

Case Example: *“Helen,” a mother in Manchester, endured verbal threats, intimidation, and physical assaults from her teenage daughter for over three years. When she finally sought help, she was told by professionals that it was “a parenting issue” rather than domestic abuse. By the time police were involved, the situation had escalated to serious violence. Helen described feeling “invisible and disbelieved,” a sentiment shared by many UK parents experiencing CPA.*

The Data Deficit: A Hidden Epidemic

The true scale of CPA in the UK is unknown due to inconsistent data collection and the absence of a unified definition across services. Police forces may record incidents as “domestic disputes” or “assault,” without specifying the parent-child dynamic. In 2021, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) acknowledged that Child-to-Parent Abuse remains underrepresented in domestic abuse datasets, despite growing evidence of its prevalence.

Studies suggest that up to 10% of families may experience some form of CPA, though this figure is likely conservative. The Home Office’s “Adolescent to Parent Violence and Abuse (APVA) Guidance” (2015) recognised CPA as an emerging safeguarding concern but admitted that reporting mechanisms are inadequate. This data gap makes it difficult for local authorities and policymakers to plan appropriate interventions or allocate funding.

Case Example: *A review by a London borough’s Youth Justice Service in 2022 found that over one-third of young offenders had a recorded history of aggression towards parents. However, these cases were not coded as domestic abuse within official statistics, demonstrating a systemic failure to capture the reality of CPA.*

Intersection with Social, Economic, and Cultural Factors

CPA affects families across socioeconomic backgrounds, but structural inequalities can intensify vulnerability.

- In low-income households, financial stress and limited access to services can escalate family tensions.
- In cultural minority communities, stigma and fear of institutional misunderstanding may prevent disclosure.

- Families raising children with special educational needs (SEN) or neurodevelopmental conditions often struggle to access specialist behavioural support, leaving parents isolated and overwhelmed.

Case Example: *A single father in Birmingham caring for his son with autism reported years of aggression and property damage. Despite repeated requests, he struggled to access mental health and social care support due to service fragmentation. The family only received intervention after a serious assault, highlighting the lack of early, joined-up responses.*

Professional Blind Spots and Systemic Gaps

Frontline professionals—including police officers, social workers, and teachers—often lack training or clear guidance on how to recognise and respond to CPA. In many cases, professionals may unintentionally minimise the issue or categorise it under general “family conflict.”

A 2020 review by the Centre for Justice Innovation noted that CPA cases frequently fall into “grey areas” between child protection and domestic abuse frameworks. Social workers may prioritise the child’s welfare, while police focus on enforcement, resulting in fragmented and inconsistent responses. Parents can feel unsupported by systems designed to protect them.

Case Example: *In a case reviewed by a UK Safeguarding Adults Board, a mother repeatedly called police about her son’s violent outbursts. Officers attended multiple incidents but failed to record them as domestic abuse, citing the child’s age and vulnerability. The mother’s pleas for help were recorded as “parenting advice” calls, leaving her without protection until the situation reached crisis point.*

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Rising Incidents

The COVID-19 lockdowns amplified CPA across the UK. Families confined in close quarters, coupled with school closures and mental health strain, saw a rise in violent or controlling behaviours by adolescents towards parents. Services such as Pegasus (Hampshire) and Break4Change (Brighton) reported sharp increases in referrals during 2020–2021. Remote learning also blurred parental authority and increased tension, especially in households managing special educational needs or economic hardship. Despite this surge, CPA remained largely absent from national domestic abuse strategies, overshadowed by partner-to-partner violence.

Breaking the Silence

The invisibility of CPA in the UK underscores the urgent need for systemic recognition and coordinated response. Parents cannot seek help for what society refuses to name. As one participant in a 2021 study by Respect UK stated “You can’t get help for Child-to-Parent Abuse if no one believes it exists.”

Breaking the silence means reframing CPA as a legitimate form of domestic abuse, integrating it into safeguarding and criminal justice frameworks, and ensuring parents are not treated as failures but as victims in need of support.

The hidden reality of CPA in the UK reveals a complex web of silence, stigma, and systemic oversight. Underreporting, lack of consistent data, and limited professional awareness have

rendered many parents invisible within existing safeguarding systems. To address this, the UK must acknowledge CPA as a public protection issue, supported by clearer definitions, better data, and trauma-informed services for both parents and children.

Why Does it Happen?

CPA is rarely caused by bad parenting or “bad kids.” It usually results from a complex mix of factors. Children who witness domestic violence may copy aggressive behaviours they have seen at home, while trauma or attachment difficulties can make it harder for children to regulate emotions and respect boundaries. Mental health or neurodevelopmental conditions, such as ADHD, autism, conduct disorders, anxiety, or depression, can increase the risk of aggression if not supported. Substance misuse, whether alcohol or drugs, can exacerbate violent behaviour, and family dynamics such as inconsistent rules or parental fear of conflict may inadvertently reinforce controlling behaviour. Stressful environments, including financial hardship, overcrowding, or unstable housing, can also make conflict worse. Real-life examples demonstrate this complexity: Ahmed’s teenage son acted aggressively following past trauma and insecurity, while Rachel’s daughter with ADHD displayed verbal threats that were successfully addressed through specialist interventions.

Impact on Parents and families

The impact of CPA on parents and families is profound. Emotionally, parents often experience fear, shame, anxiety, and depression. Physically, repeated stress or direct assaults can lead to injuries or health problems. Socially, parents may withdraw from friends, family, or community activities due to embarrassment or fear. Financially, property damage, theft, and missed work can place a strain on household resources. Family relationships, including those between siblings or partners, can deteriorate under the stress of CPA. Linda’s daughter withdrew from family interactions because of her brother’s aggression, and Mark, a parent, stopped attending community events out of embarrassment. These examples illustrate the pervasive and long-lasting effects of CPA, highlighting the urgent need for effective support and intervention.

Challenges and Gaps in the UK

Despite its seriousness, CPA faces many challenges in the UK. There is no consistent definition, which makes it difficult to record incidents, collect data, and develop policy. Frontline professionals, including police, social workers, and teachers, often lack specific training and guidance, leading to inconsistent or ineffective responses. Services for CPA are fragmented, underfunded, and unevenly distributed, meaning some families may struggle to access specialist support for crisis intervention, mental health, or behavioural therapy. Balancing the safety of parents with safeguarding children can create ethical and operational dilemmas, as statutory frameworks often prioritise child welfare. Socioeconomic and cultural factors, such as poverty, minority status, or caring for children with special needs, can further limit access to help. Policy gaps remain, with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 not explicitly recognising child-perpetrated abuse. COVID-19 added additional pressures, increasing family stress and incidents of CPA, while restricting access to external support. Real-life cases, such as Ahmed initially receiving only

general parenting advice, and Rachel struggling to find local support for her daughter's ADHD-related aggression, highlight these gaps in practice and service provision.

Towards Better Responses: What the UK can Do?

Effective responses require a coordinated, multi-agency, and trauma-informed approach. Raising awareness and reducing stigma is key, helping parents recognise abuse and seek support without shame. Improving data collection and establishing standardised definitions across police, schools, and social services ensures incidents are properly recorded and addressed. Professionals need targeted training to understand CPA, respond safely, and coordinate interventions effectively. Expanding specialist services, including Non-Violent Resistance programmes, multi-systemic therapy, and crisis support, provides families with practical tools to manage aggression. Supporting whole-family recovery through family therapy, counselling, and multi-agency collaboration helps rebuild trust and communication. Safety planning, including personalised emergency strategies, can protect parents and children in high-risk situations. Real-life examples show these approaches work: Sophie felt empowered after attending a parent support group, Ahmed's social worker created effective safety plans after training, Rachel's daughter improved after NVR intervention, and David's family rebuilt trust through family therapy. Early intervention and coordinated support can protect parents, help children, and repair family relationships.

Conclusion

Child-to-Parent Abuse is serious, complex, and often hidden. It affects parents' emotional and physical wellbeing, disrupts family life, and leaves children without the support they need. CPA is not caused by bad parenting or "bad kids" but arises from trauma, mental health challenges, exposure to violence, and family stress. In the UK, it faces gaps in data, fragmented services, and limited policy recognition, leaving many parents unsupported. Families need awareness, practical guidance, professional training, specialist services, and coordinated multi-agency support. By recognising CPA as a serious form of domestic abuse and investing in prevention and early intervention, the UK can protect parents, support children's needs, reduce long-term harm, and create safer, healthier, and more resilient families. With the right approach, homes can become safe, nurturing, and supportive places for both parents and children.

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