Child to Parent Violence: 
Gender Differences, Characteristics, and Prevalence

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Introduction

Child-to-parent violence, formally known as “battered parent syndrome” or “abused parent syndrome” and alternatively known as child-to-parent abuse, is a social and health-related problem and is described as the act of abuse or violence towards a parent or caregiver and includes a wide range of types of abuse, including physical and/or verbal abuse, psychological abuse, financial abuse, legal abuse, and emotional abuse (Cano-Lozano, 2023; Loinaz et al., 2023 & Navas-Martínez; Martínez et al., 2015). Throughout this literature, we will often be referring to child-to-parent violence and abuse as CPV, although it can also be described as CPA or CPVA (O'Connor et al., 2023). Child-to-parent violence often goes under-reported out of fear that the parent will look unfit or inadequate in raising their child, or out of embarrassment that they are being abused by someone much younger than them (Gallego et al., 2019). As opposed to the more well known and well researched “parent-to-child violence”, child-to-parent violence (CPV) is an issue that is slowly gaining traction in today’s research landscape, however it is still very much under researched.

Regardless of the age of the victim and of the abuser, we are bound to see differences between genders of the abusers and well as the victims when it comes to a violent or abusive type of situation. It can be assumed, and rightly so, that statistically women are more likely to be abused by a male perpetrator (Statistics Canada, 2021). Over 4 out of 10 Canadian women (~44%) reported in 2021 that they had personally experienced violence from their partner at some point in their lives as opposed to ~36% of men who reported this type of violence (Statistics Canada, 2021). Following this trend, we would not be unrealistic in assuming that women caregivers are most likely to be abused by their male children, however, as we will see, this is not always the case. In the case of CPV, it can be difficult to determine the prevalence of the issue due to the lack of reporting as well as the lack of research, however, the issue is slowly making its way into the light through education on the issue. Throughout this paper we are going to be discussing multiple studies and reviews that analyze child-to-parent violence using a variety of scales and measures in hopes of gaining a deeper understanding of this devastating topic.
Literature Review

Child-to-parent abuse (CPV), in layman terms, is where a child is abusing their parents (or primary caregivers) by use of psychological, verbal, emotional, financial, or physical means (Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano, 2023). As previously mentioned, the subject of child to parent abuse is under researched compared to the counterpart of parent to child abuse, which is mostly due to the lack of reporting from parents/victims to the proper authorities. This limitation needs to remain in mind when researching the subject, as there are almost certainly a countless number of silent victims who are not included in these samples. Nonetheless, the research that has been conducted on this topic has revealed shocking and eye-opening findings that lead us to look at the issue of CPV in a different light. Child-to-parent violence is a topic that, when researched, has an overwhelming prevalence, especially in today’s landscape which can only be described as “anti-violence”. The research done on this topic has, for the most part, resulted in similar findings, however there are some differences that are mainly attributed to parents under-reporting and underestimating the issue at hand.

Gender Differences in CPV

In contrast with the gender differences found in more commonly known types of abuse, such as intimate partner abuse or child abuse, child to parent abuse is found to be more genderly equal when it comes to the abusers. The types of aggression typically displayed in children who are abusing their parents typically begin with verbal and emotional acts, and lead into more physical acts of aggression once the child has become comfortable with this new dynamic (Hoyo-Bilbao et al., 2018). In a study conducted by Hoyo-Bilbao et al (2018), results found that the most significant gender discrimination in CPV was found when it came to physical assaults acted out towards the perpetrators mother, which was reported to be much higher among girls than boys. Other than this, Hoyo-Bilbao et al., (2018) found no other major discrimination of gender when it came to all other types of aggressive behaviours acted out by the child perpetrators.

Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano (2023) found that there was an upsetting lack of research done on the gender differences of aggressors of CPV, and conducted a study of 1559 CPV aggressors in hopes to bridge the gap in the research. The sample used in this study consisted of known child to parent abusers between the ages of twelve and eighteen, with an almost equal number of female and male perpetrators, 54.6% compared to 45.4%, (Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano, 2023). This study also separated the abusers into specialists (22.4%) and generalists (77.6%), specialists being those that seemingly only abused their parents and generalists being those that also committed acts of abuse against their peers (Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano, 2023). This discrimination between specialist and generalist was found to be profound and important when results of the study were analyzed (Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano, 2023).

It was found that no significant difference was visible between those in the specialist profile (Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano, 2023). However, among those categorized as generalists, it was found that female perpetrators were more likely to abuse their mothers by use of psychological
and control focused violence, whereas male perpetrators were more likely to exert physical violence towards their fathers and received more parental permissiveness (Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano, 2023). Within the category of specialist abusers, the main differences were found when parental permissiveness was contrasted with parental victimization in predicting the type of CPV (Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano, 2023). It was concluded that reactive forms of CPV were predicted by parental victimization, whereas proactive forms of CPV were predicted by parental permissiveness (Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano, 2023). Within the generalist category however, both reactive CPV and proactive CPV were predicted by parental victimization as well as parental permissiveness (Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano, 2023).

In a separate study, Loinaz et al., used a sample of 206 reported cases of CPV from children between the ages of twelve and eighteen to look at the risk factors and gender differences prevalent in child-to-parent violence using the Child to Parent Violence Risk Assessment Tool. This study also separated the perpetrators of CPV into a specialist group and a generalist group, much like the study reviewed previously (Loinaz et al., 2023). This study found that those placed into the generalist category were more likely to be victims of abuse in the home as well as abusers, and were more likely to display an array of problematic behaviours both inside and outside of the home (Loinaz et al., 2023). This study also delved deeper into the contrasts between specialists and generalists, finding that female perpetrators of CPV were less likely to be generalists compared to males (Loinaz et al., 2023). The study also concluded that violence in the home between or from parents could contribute to the issue of female specialists (Loinaz et al., 2023).

**Characteristics of the Perpetrator**

Children who become parental abusers are hypothesized to display an array of problematic behaviours prior to and during the abuse (Ibabe et al., 2013). Within the scope of CPV abusers, we see that children often display a low tolerance for feelings of frustration, as well as aggressive behaviours, oppositional behaviours, and recurring and often unrealistic demands from their parents compared to their non-abusive counterparts (Ibabe et al., 2013). An issue of substance abuse on the part of the child has also been found to be a predictor/contributor to CPV (Ibabe et al., 2013). Predictive associations have been identified between child to father verbal and physical aggression and substance abuse (Ibabe et al., 2013). It has also been found that a child’s abuse of substances also increased the likelihood that their mother will become a victim of CPV (Ibabe et al., 2013). More specifically, it has been found that males are more likely than females to use drugs when it comes to CPV (Ibabe et al., 2013).

Behaviour disorders are possibly the most significant characteristic of children who engage in CPV (Ibabe et al., 2013). These behavioural issues occur virtually everywhere the child spends a significant amount of time, such as at home and at school (Ibabe et al., 2013). It has been suggested that behavioural disorders most commonly predict the occurrence of CPV directed at the mother, but it can also be used as a predictor for any type of CPV (Ibabe et al., 2013). Aside from disorders that mainly affect the behaviour, neurodevelopmental disorders have also been found to be linked to children acting out CPV (Sasaki et al., 2021). Depression being present for
the child can also be used as a predictor for future acts of CPV (Calvete et al., 2012). It has also been found that, in the context of aggression, children displaying proactive types of aggression was a useful predictor of CPV but the use of reactive aggression was not (Calvete et al., 2012). Unfortunately, being a victim of abuse can also lead a child to become a perpetrator of CPV (Sasaki et al., 2021). The preceding abuse can be in the form of physical abuse, as well as psychological and verbal, and it can even include being a witness to abuse or violence between the child’s parents (Sasaki et al., 2021).

**Characteristics of the Victim**

It is important to examine the characteristics of victims when looking into any type of abuse in order to obtain a full understanding as to why this may be occurring. In the case of CPV, it has been found that mothers are most likely to become the victims (Walsh & Krienert, 2008). Made evident in a study conducted by Nock and Kazdin (2002), child-to-parent abuse directed towards the biological mother is the most likely form of CPV (88%), while CPV directed at the biological father is much less common (2.7%) (Nock & Kazdin, 2002; Walsh & Krienert, 2008). However, there have been studies with contrasting results as the one above, the majority of research agrees with these findings. The most common parent-child couple to experience CPV males and their mothers, with the least likely couple being females and their fathers (Walsh & Krienert, 2008). The aforementioned contrasting results of studies when it comes to characteristics of the victims of CPV most likely come from the under-reporting of the incidents (Walsh & Krienert, 2008).

Another review conducted by O’Connor et al., (2023) found similar results when it came to the characteristics of the victims of CPV. This review found that the person most likely to become a victim of child-to-parent violence is the mother (O’Connor et al., 2023). This review also found that mothers were more likely to be the victims of emotional and psychological abuse when compared to fathers, however, it found varied results between studies when looking into physical abuse (O’Connor et al., 2023). This review took a step further than most studies mentioned previously however, and looked at the differences in rates of CPV and single-parent and two-parent households (O’Connor et al., 2023). It was determined that CPVA was most likely to happen in households with only one parent, and even further, most likely if that single-parent was female (O’Connor et al., 2023).

**Prevalence**

The prevalence of CPV is much higher than one may expect, and is hypothesized to be even higher than the calculated amount due to the issue of under-reporting. Another issue that can affect the statistics and prevalence of child-to-parent violence is cultural differences in the home and in child-rearing (Martínez et al., 2015). It has been reported that 68.8% of children have admitted to committing some form of CPV of a physical nature towards their parents on at least one occasion (Hoyo-Bilbao et al., 2018). Looking only at the sample from the study conducted by
Hoyo-Bilbao et al., (2018), the prevalence skyrocketed with 100% of children from the sample admitting to having psychologically abused their mother on at least one occasion. The prevalence of more severe psychological abuse (occurred more than six times over the past year) was found to be a shocking 81.3%, with 77.3% being acted out towards the child’s mother (Hoyo-Bilbao et al., 2018). In the case of severe physical abuse (occurring more than three to five times in the past year) was found to be 39.1% of the sample, with 26.6% directed towards fathers and 24.2% directed towards mothers (Hoyo-Bilbao et al., 2018).

A study conducted by Contreras et al., (2020) used the Child-to-Parent Violence Questionnaire, parents’ version (CPV-Q-P) to further analyze the prevalence of this subject. Using a sample of 1,012 parents who had children between the ages of twelve and seventeen, they were able to assess the prevalence of CPV through multiple different factors, including control, physical violence, psychological violence, and financial abuse (Contreras et al., 2020). The most prevalent type of abuse they saw within this sample was in the form of control, with the second most prevalent being psychological, followed by financial, and the least prevalent being physical (Contreras et al., 2020). A study conducted by students at the University of Ottawa in 2015 also found that the mother was the most likely victim of child-to-parent violence, which was often predicted by higher psychological aggression displayed by the child (Lyons et al., 2015). This study also found that higher amounts of physical aggression/punishment in the household (e.g., spanking, physical violence between parents) predicted more physical aggression displayed toward the mother (Lyons et al., 2015).

**Conclusion**

Child-to-parent violence (CPV), also known as child-to-parent violence and aggression (CPVA), is an issue that many are unaware of, possibly because it is simply talked about less compared to its counterpart, parent-to-child abuse (O'Connor et al., 2023). However, even with the limited amounts of research done on the topic, we can see that this is an extremely prevalent issue that needs to be addressed more often than it has been in the past. The gender differences in the perpetrators as well as in the victims is quite profound when we analyze it between the different categories of CPV that can occur (e.g., physical, psychological, emotional, etc). We have seen after analyzing and interpreting the research that there are differences in who and in how girls and boys abuse their mothers and fathers.

These differences are crucial for researchers and healthcare workers to be mindful of when studying, treating, and helping those who are victims or perpetrators of CPV. It is also integral to look at other environmental or health related issues that may be contributing to the aggression the child is displaying, and to treat these alternative explanations for the abuse promptly and effectively. Nevertheless, we need to remain cautious when accusing those we know and/or love of child-to-parent abuse, as it could be easy to cross the line between typical adolescent inappropriate behaviour caused by puberty and abuse (Martínez et al., 2015). As with most issues, we need to look at the topic of CPV with the lens of the culture that we are taking our sample of.
References


