



## Spotlight 3: Episode 1

### Podcast transcript

[intro music]

Spotlights is a series of online events and publications, focusing on a particular group of victim/survivors who are often hidden from services. As a part of SafeLives Spotlight on domestic abuse and young people, this week my colleague Deidre has come to London to speak to Helen Bonnick about Child to Parent Violence. Helen has worked as a social worker since 1983, but since completing her MA in Parent Abuse in 2004, she has dedicated her career to helping professionals, young people and their parents better understand and respond to child to parent abuse through her website Holes in the Wall. Today we'll be exploring what child to parent violence is, who it affects and what professionals can do to support both parents and young people. We hope you find it both interesting and informative.

**Deidre: Helen, thank you for meeting with me today. Can you start out by telling us what inspired you to work specifically on parent abuse.**

Helen: Hi Deidre, it's lovely to be here today and I want to thank you for inviting me. What my very first experience of this probably was when I was working as a social worker in the early 1980s and a parent came in who was being attacked on a regular basis by her teenage son and, at that time, we really had very little broad understanding of what was going on and we weren't sure how to really help her when it seemed such an intractable problem. And we referred her then to what was the equivalent of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, and the kind of sense that we couldn't really offer her anything proper, or understand it, really stuck with me I kind of got the bit between my teeth, I couldn't put it down, and so I've kept going with it.

**D: So a lot of people listening maybe won't have heard of child to parent violence as a set definition and some may not associate it with domestic abuse, which is usually understood as violence perpetrated by an adult. How would you define child to parent violence, and how is it associated to domestic violence?**

HB: So one of the difficulties we have in talking about this issue is that there is no agreed or official definition, though there are very similar ones in common usage and I counted up once that I came to somewhere between 30 and 40 different phrases and titles that people were using, and so it is very difficult to bring thoughts together and get a consistency in this. In terms of a definition, the most encompassing one that I use is from an academic called Amanda Holt and she's a criminologist and psychologist who wrote the first academic book about child to parent violence, So the description she uses is, "a pattern of behaviour instigated by a child or young person, which involves using verbal, financial, physical, and/or emotional means to practice power and exert

control over a parent,” and later on she says, “the power that is practised is, to some extent, intentional and the control that is exerted over a parent is achieved through fear, such that a parent unhealthily adapts his or her own behaviour to accommodate the child.”

**D: I think a lot of people listening think of teenagers and think of the fact that they're going through a lot hormonally, emotionally, developmentally and that it seems that it's normal that they might lash out at times towards their parents and carers. So what would you say is the line between kind of normal teenager behaviour and actual abuse?**

HB: The thing where lots of people will say, “all teenagers do that, all kids do the same thing, mine were like that, you're just not doing it properly,” and I think it's important to underline that we're not talking here about things like slamming doors, refusing to cooperate, or some choice language every now and again, but we're talking persistent, escalating undermining and vicious behaviour, which may include threats with knives, it might include serious physical assault needing hospital attention, theft of valuables, or really problematic damage to property. For me, the defining issue setting this aside from normal teenage issues, whatever they might be, is the way that parents have to change their own behaviour because of the fear that they feel because of what's going on.

**D: And the next question I have linked to that is, what does it look like?**

HB: So there's obviously going to be a difference in what we see if we talk about very young children and we talk about teenagers because of both the power that they have, by their strength and their size, and also an awareness of what's going on for them. But we're talking about the full range of verbal, physical, emotional, financial and, to a smaller extent, sexual abuse, and there's limited documentation about sexual abuse but it is happening and perhaps less documented because it's more difficult to talk about for parents. But I have spoken with parents who've experienced that from their children. The way a child talk to or about a parent can be very undermining and humiliating. They may start with pushing or kicking, but it might escalate to pushing a parent downstairs, causing broken limbs, black eyes, there might be attacks with weapons and knives seem to be a particular common kind of weapon that's used, in this country it certainly is. Damage property might include really deliberate destruction of a parent's treasured possessions, or it might be random kicking of holes in walls and doors. It might involve wrecking a car, it might involve the theft of money or jewellery. And threats themselves, just on their own, even if they're not carried through, can be really harmful because there's no way of knowing actually what is going to happen. The children, I've talked about making allegations against parents, and that's a real issue of control and retaliation. And so elements of what we now recognise as coercive control will be included in that and we can find parents that are extremely isolated as a result of what's going on in the home. Gradually the child assumes more power, the parents feel as if they have less power in what's going and in determining things. So, at its most extreme, parents might fear for the safety of themselves, for other family members, siblings are a real issue in terms of keeping other children safe, and pets can be really badly injured. The difference is, I guess from adults, would be in terms of strength of the perpetrator but then also the way we go on to understand the need for control and the intent, I think, behind the violence is something that we're just starting to understand and unpack.

**D: I think a lot of people listening are domestic abuse practitioners, so Idva's, Marac co-ordinators, things like that, and they might be used to advising victims of domestic abuse on their options based on leaving the relationship or putting distance between themselves and the perpetrator, so maybe going into a refuge, maybe getting a civil order, or going to the police and pursuing some sort of**

**criminal justice remedy. I'm guessing that's not as straightforward for a parent, especially when they have parental responsibilities and the relationship is completely different. So what are the safety planning options for them? Why is it difficult for them to get away?**

HB: You've already highlighted some of the issues there yourself and there are some big differences, but some of it's going to look quite familiar as well, I guess. So parents will be encouraged to talk to friends and family and other trusted people, so perhaps someone at school, and talk about what's happening and there's something really important in terms of breaking the secrecy because that makes a statement in itself and it helps the parent acknowledge what's going on as a real issue, a real abusive issue. But that can also then lead to a parent having emotional and practical support from these other people. It also means that friends or neighbours or family may be available to step in at a moment's notice so a parent may then more easily be able to phone up a sister, a mother, or someone and say, "I need you to take so and so tonight. Can you come and get them now? Help, I really need someone else in the house with me now to make a stand and make a statement about what's going to happen." And parents themselves will say that's the most valuable thing for them is often to have somebody who understands what's going on, who listens to them, believes them and can come and stand with them and support them in those issues. You mentioned the police and, of course, parents don't really want to criminalise their young people and we don't really have effective criminal justice solutions. There are increasing numbers of young people who are actually being prosecuted now for child to parent violence, rather than it just emerging later on once we start working with the young people. But, generally speaking, parents want to avoid that because they understand that a child who becomes involved in the criminal justice system, there's not always brilliant outcomes, but what a lot of parents have found is that it's really helpful to speak with their local Safer Neighbourhood police officers and, depending where you live, you may know them quite well and if they have information in advance, that can prevent what might sometimes be a less than helpful response in a crisis. So that's two things, and then obviously locking away potential weapons, so if you've got all the kitchen knives in your room and they're locked away, that's going to make life a little bit safer. One of the major differences that you touched on is that parents are not in a position to leave and actually have legal responsibilities for the care of the child who is abusing them and in this country we've kind of moved away from punishing parents through the courts for their own abuse.

**D: And I think domestic abuse practitioners working with adult victims who are experiencing abuse from adult perpetrators often spend a lot of time with their clients talking about the intentional exertion of power and control and that one of the tactics is this idea that they will change. That if they stick with them, they will change, they will get better. It's maybe a childhood experience or something like that that needs to be addressed for them to then get better, and we spend a lot of time saying actually we know from domestic homicide reviews that the abuse gets more severe and more frequent as it goes on and that their behaviour might not change. Is that different with child to parent violence? Is there hope that they can change?**

HB: We do see families who are just gritting their teeth and are holding their breath until the child reaches 18 and they can just say goodbye, and that's really sad. But we also know that there are things coming into play which we need to consider, so first of all a lot of the children themselves aren't happy with what's going on. They acknowledge that this is not the way they want to be behaving and it's not the kind of healthy family relationships that they want. That kind of distortion of power isn't a comfortable experience for them either. They perhaps don't feel safe themselves but they might feel trapped into that pattern of behaviour because of what's going on for them. So we also need to think about children's brains, their behaviour, their understanding of

everything, it's all changing very rapidly at this time of their life, and so there is a real possibility for change if they can have the right support and intervention and that is the key thing I think, that without the right support and intervention perhaps we will just see an inextricable escalation and sad outcomes for the families.

**D: And I think for a lot of people listening, child to parent violence is a very new concept for them. I'm guessing that doesn't mean that it's going to be a problem, it's just now being recognised.**

HB: I think it's certainly come to widespread attention only recently. If we look at academic literature, then there have been people researching and writing about it since the late 70s, but most of the work has taken place in the last five to ten years and over the last couple of years, we've had some serious campaigning which has led to coverage in the local and national media, and some of that has been good and positive and some of it not so, sadly, depending on which media you're picking up. But there have been some really good interviews on local radio stations where parents have been interviewed and then organisations that are supporting them as well. But the way we understand and describe what's happening has certainly changed and the way we interpret what's happening. So it's quite a complicated situation going on and really, it's tempting to say it's increasing, but ultimately the bottom line is we don't know because we don't really know how much there is going on.

**D: One of the experts that we're talking to through the Spotlight has done quite a bit of research on adverse childhood experiences and how that links to a young person either experiencing domestic abuse and being a victim, or being a young person who harms. Do you see any kind of correlation causation between young people who are abusive to their parents and their own exposure to domestic abuse?**

HB: Certainly. There's perhaps about half of the cases we're looking at. Again, if you look up all the data that we can gather and different research projects and see what's going on for families, where researchers have spoken to parents and looked at the profiles, it seems like in about half the cases there will have been previous experience of domestic violence. But of course not all young people that experience domestic violence will go on to abuse. Not all people who are abusive will have experience of that and you mentioned the adverse childhood experiences and there are many other similar experiences that can be influential.

**D: It must be very difficult for parents because, as a parent, you already feel a lot of guilt and responsibility for how your child turns out, but then if your child is exposed to domestic abuse within the home and then they exhibit that behaviour as wee, it must be even more stigmatising for you to come out and talk the abuse that you're now experiencing from your child and not feel to blame for that or responsible for it.**

HB: I think that sense of shame and that sense of blame is really powerful and people will say it's that kind of like, you had one job to raise this child and they are hitting you, they are abusing you, and so you feel a total failure, and so it's very difficult to ask for help. Typically, when people do ask for help, if you go to an agency that doesn't really understand what's going, they will just pile the blame on and say, "Well, go on a parenting course. You're obviously not doing this properly. I must be down to bad parenting. It must be that you're not setting boundaries. It must be that you're not being consistent," so that can be really unhelpful and that will then make that person feel worse and perhaps put them in even more dangerous situation and so they then ,don't tell anybody the next time. So there is a real kind of issue about why people don't talk about it. There's a need to really improve the understanding and awareness and help people come forward to feel comfortable talking about it.

**D: So just talking a bit more about the connection between a young person's exposure to domestic abuse and then going on to cause harm as well, is that as simple as it's a behaviour that they've learnt. They've seen their father do it or their mother do it and then they go on to do it themselves. Is it that simple?**

HB: I think it's actually quite complex and it's going to be different in every case almost and certainly there will be some who have observed a parent being violent or abusive toward the other parent and will have learnt that that's what you do. They will have kind of taken it on board, that's how you treat my mother, my father, my carer. But for some young people they will be active coaching, so perhaps if the parents have split up and they have visits to, let's say, their absent father and parents will tell us their father has told them to do this. Their father is coaching them to be abusive towards me. So there will be that kind of element of very deliberate control of the young person to re-enact that violence. There will be some families where there's just a power vacuum left and the young person just kind of moves into that place and takes on that role, perhaps without anyone really realising what's going on. But there's also going to be issues around either a young person feeling very angry or frustrated with, let's say, their mother for not being able to protect them while the relationship was going on, or perhaps their mother is now really depressed or really unable to cope with the aftermath of separation and is really struggling emotionally and with their mental health, and so there are all sorts of issues there. It's more complex than a straight forward learnt behaviour and it will be very different in lots of different situations, but that past experience of domestic violence seems to be really important. Not exclusively so there will be lots of other situations.

**D: Lovely. So now, considering what we do know about child to parent violence, what would you suggest that practitioners, or commissioners, do to reduce the risk of child to parent violence happening and to support both parents and carers, but also, of course, the young people who are causing harm?**

HB: So, at the moment, families can get very good support, depending on where they live, and one of the issues is that it's a bit of a postcode lottery depending on funding, depending on the awareness, depending on what particular agencies there are in the area, and the support that's available is not exclusive to any one agency. So it depends where you live, what sort of support you get, but that makes it difficult. Group work, I think, can be really supportive, and it's important to offer holistic assessment to look at all the issues and we're finding that you can't deal with one issue and neglect all the others. So, you might be able to provide really good support around domestic abuse, but if there are other issues going off with that young person and they're not also addressed, then you're not necessarily going to get the best solution. There are some bespoke programmes designed specifically for child to parent violence and they run typically between six weeks and twelve weeks, The early evidence is that those are quite helpful, but, of course, we haven't got enough data to say that they're really strongly evidence based or anything. But, that seems to be going well. Going back to what we said earlier that, generally speaking, parents are very loving and want to restore a healthy relationship, that's what we're hoping for ultimately.

**D: Just kind of leading on from that, there might be a professional listening who has a parent come to them and disclose that they're experiencing child to parent violence. What would you say is the ideal response to that parent? What does that parent need? Obviously you don't exactly what each parent needs, but kind of generally, what are some key tips?**

HB: What parents always say is, "I want to be listened to respectfully." They idea of being believed is a real contentious issue, I know, across the field at the moment, but parents want to be listened to and not treated as exaggerating or making it up or attention

seeking or wrong, and often the need to recognise that the parents are the experts in their situation. So just to have someone listen to you can be really empowering in itself because suddenly you're not just on your own in that situation, and then to start unpicking what's going on and to ask these questions. "Are you safe at the moment? What do we need to do to help you feel more safe?" But then ultimately how can we try and restore proper relationships? So that might be about the holistic assessment throws up all sorts of other things and we need to look at all of those as well.

**D: So a lot of people listening, or some people listening, might not be practitioners or professionals in the field. They're just people who are interested and a part of society and our communities. So what can they do to help parents and help young people as well?**

**D: Listen.**

HB: And I think especially for friends or colleagues that's really important because you may feel you have nothing else you can give, but to listen and to be available to a parent, maybe just to sit there with a cup of tea and a box of tissues is so important in that moment, and not to say, "Come on. All children do that." I think it's really tempting. People think I must boost this person, I must say, "Don't worry, they're not all like that all the time. When they come to me they're lovely," and actually that can make it worse. So actually just to listen and to take on that pain.

**D: Which is generally good advice because no one wants to come to somebody with their problems and for them to be down played, which makes a lot of sense. And lastly, a lot of people listening will want to know where to find out more about child to parent violence. So where can they go to?**

HB: I guess the shortest answer to that is to say people are welcome to check out my website, but I only say that, not because I think it's the most wonderful place in the world, but because I try to bring everything together in one place and that is what it's about, is to try and make life easier for everybody else. So the website has a blog page and then it has lots of resources for parents and for practitioners and a reading list and various other events and pages.

**D: Great. And that's Holes In The Wall?**

HB: That's holesinthewall.co.uk, but if you put in Holes In The Wall...I'm always a bit wary of that but most people will find me in the end. Or put in my name and it will come up as well.

**D: I think I did that and you came up at the top, which is great.**

HB: That's the easiest thing to say.

**D: Great. Well thank you very much for joining me today and talking to me about this. It's been very interesting and informative and it's been great talking to you.**

HB: Thank you very much for inviting me and I'm always really pleased to talk to people and to try and raise awareness.

Thank you for listening. If you'd like to find out more from SafeLives Spotlight on young people and domestic abuse, please go to our website [SafeLives.org.uk](http://SafeLives.org.uk), where we will be uploading new content every week-each exploring a different aspect of young people and domestic abuse. If you'd like to participate in the discussion, you can go to our website to sign up for the

webinar on March 3 between 1pm-2pm, and also join in the Twitter Q&A conversation on March 15th between 1pm-2pm-just go to #SafeYoungLives.