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Date Aug 5/97
**ABSTRACT**

Adolescent physical assault of parents is a serious form of violence which has been given only minimal attention by researchers, social service providers, and the general public. The majority of knowledge about this topic comes from quantitative forms of research which focus on broad-based information regarding families in which such abuse occurs. In contrast, the aim of this study was to provide detailed qualitative descriptions of adolescent-to-parent violence from the perceptions of 3 groups of participants; youth, parents, and counsellors. Information from adolescents (2 male, 3 female) who have been physically violent toward their parents was gathered through the use of a semi-structured interview format. A similar process was used to obtain information from parents (6 female, 1 male) who have been assaulted by their adolescent children. Family counsellors (10 male, 11 female) from 3 separate service agencies were asked to share their knowledge and experience during semi-structured focus group interview sessions. The information gathered from these interviews was categorized through a qualitative form of content analysis which was guided by a critical constructivist perspective. Findings suggest that youth violence against parents can be viewed in terms of 1) contributing factors, 2) reinforcing factors, and 3) change factors. The contributing factors of violence toward parents include; socialization of male power, escalation of power struggles (intrafamilial and extrafamilial), abusive parenting, and organic conditions. Factors which reinforce this type of violence involve a variety of youth dynamics (lack of control, lack of remorse), parent dynamics (maintaining secrecy, excessive tolerance, blaming youth), and community responses (lack of legal, social service, and medical support). Finally, those factors which appear to decrease adolescent violence against parents focus around the youth (self-care, communication skills, sense of remorse, future thinking), the family (sensitivity, intimacy, clear consequences, social support), and the community (legal, social service, and medical interventions, meaningful connections).
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Review</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Findings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Seven</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counsellor Interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Eight</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendixes</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Research Hypothesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Research Findings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**LIST OF TABLES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>Research Overview</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Contributing Factors</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>Reinforcing Factors</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4</td>
<td>Change Factors</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Overview and Rationale

The existence of violence within families has been noted throughout the history of most Western societies. While change has been slow to occur, wide-spread concern for the welfare of women and children was perhaps first expressed during the late 19th century, and this led to a series of social and legal reforms (Falconer & Swift, 1983; Frankel-Howard, 1992). During the 1960’s, the effects of child physical abuse began to be documented in research literature, and the women’s movement of the 1970’s exposed the extent to which wife assault and sexual abuse occurs within North-American families. Most recently, researchers have revealed that siblings and the elderly are also subjected to various forms of abuse (Adelson, 1972; Gelles & Cornell, 1985; Goodwin & Roscoe, 1990; Mangold & Koski, 1990; Steinmetz, 1978).

While considerable attention is focused on types of family violence in which children, women, and the elderly are victimized, only limited information exists regarding adolescent physical violence toward parents. This lack of knowledge among researchers, social service providers, and the general public relates to a number of factors. First, parents who are assaulted by their children tend to deny and minimize the abuse they are experiencing, and this serves to reinforce the societal belief that such violence is uncommon (Agnew & Huguley, 1989). Second, the dynamics of adolescent-to-parent assault contradict contemporary theories of violence which describe the abuser as being more powerful than the victim (Cornell & Gelles, 1982). As a result, theorists and practitioners may assume that this type of violence is infrequent, non-severe, and therefore not a research priority. Finally, it should be noted that the collection of Canadian statistics regarding adolescent-to-parent violence is problematic, as police data fail to specify the relationship between victims and perpetrators, and the Young Offenders Act (Y.O.A.) prevents access to detailed information regarding minors (Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996).
An improved understanding of adolescent-to-parent violence may offer a number of benefits for society. First, a greater knowledge of possible contributing factors could lead to the development of prevention and intervention strategies for individuals, families, and communities. Second, our present knowledge of wife assault and child abuse may be enhanced significantly through the study of adolescent-to-parent violence, as it has been suggested that “violence toward parents is the ‘missing link’ in the study of the intergenerational transmission of violence” (Cornell & Gelles, 1982, p. 154). Finally, increased public and professional recognition of the extent and severity to which adolescent-to-parent assault occurs may help generate the support that is needed to create various social and political reforms.

The issue of adolescent-to-parent physical violence is particularly relevant to the social work profession in terms of both research and practice. The Canadian Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics advocates for “the development and disciplined use of scientific knowledge regarding human and societal behaviours; the development of resources to meet individual, group, national and international needs and aspirations; and to the achievement of social justice for all” (1994, p. 7). More specifically, British Columbia’s Child, Family and Community Service Act (CF&CS) outlines that social workers and communities are responsible for providing services “to support and assist a family to care for a child” (section 5). And while the physical abuse of parents by their adolescent children represents a unique context in which intervention does not necessarily involve child protection, the creation of a safe environment for all family members is crucial to the well-being of society.

Focus of Study

Although it is recognized that family violence may involve a variety of physical, sexual, psychological, and economic control tactics (Deltufo, 1995; Yllo, 1993), this study focuses

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1 While there are no specific provisions in the CF&CS Act that deal with parents who are in physical danger from their children, section 6 allows for child protection workers to provide “voluntary care agreements” when parents are “temporarily unable to look after the child in the home.” In addition, section 7 outlines “special needs agreements” which can be made with “a parent who has custody of a child with special needs.”
primarily on forms of abuse in which adolescents use physical force against others. In general terms, physical violence can be described as “all aggressive acts by the perpetrator against the body of the victim” (Frankel-Howard, 1992, p. 12). More specifically, the Criminal Code of Canada states that assault against an adult\(^2\) occurs when a person without the consent of another “applies force intentionally to that other person, directly or indirectly; [and/or] attempts or threatens, by an act or a gesture, to apply force to another person, if he [sic] has, or causes that other person to believe upon reasonable grounds that he has, present ability to effect his purpose” (section 265). From this definition, physical assault may include such actions as pushing, slapping, punching, kicking, biting, throwing and/or using various objects, or threatening to use force in any way. Throughout this study, the parameters outlined in the Criminal Code serve as a general guideline, and it should be noted that the terms violence, abuse, and assault are used interchangeably in reference to actions which are physically assaultive.

The main focus of this study relates to adolescent physical violence toward parents and step-parents, and the majority of previous research on this topic maintains a similar emphasis. Nevertheless, it is recognized that assaultive behaviour from youth may also be directed against grandparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, relatives, and other types of caregivers. While acts of violence within these various types of family relationships are likely to have a number of commonalities, it is important to acknowledge that certain distinctions may be present. For instance, Kirschner (1992) notes that adolescent violence toward adoptive parents may be particularly related to factors such as identity confusion and shallow attachment. In a description of elder abuse, Steinmetz (1978) outlines that violence against grandparents often occurs within the context of their extreme dependency and vulnerability. Because of these differences, the results of this study cannot necessarily be applied to assaultive relationships which exist outside

\(^2\)It is important to note that this criminal definition of assault applies only to adults. Section 43 of the Criminal Code outlines that “a parent is justified in using force by way of correction ... if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstances.” In contrast, section 13(1)(a) of the CF&CS Act specifies that a child needs protection “if the child has been, or is likely to be, physically harmed by the child’s parent”. To date, this contradiction has not been adequately addressed.
of the parent/youth or step-parent/youth context. It should also be noted that throughout this study, both parents and step-parents are referred to as parents.

This study maintains a primary focus on young persons who were between 10 to 18 years of age when they engaged in physical violence against their parents. Admittedly, this particular criterion may be somewhat problematic, as the Canadian Y.O.A. provides distinct legislation for “young persons” who are between the ages of 12 and 17 whereas British Columbia’s CF&CS Act defines a “youth” as someone who is 16 to 18 years of age. Nevertheless, the 10 to 18 year age span has been chosen because research indicates that a significant number of physical assaults toward parents are committed by youth who are as young as 10 years of age (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Livingston, 1986; Paulson, Coombs, & Landsverk, 1990).

Throughout the process of qualitative research, it is important for practitioners to be aware of the personal assumptions and biases which may influence the presentation of a particular set of findings (Lincoln, 1995; Maxwell, 1996). It should therefore be noted that this study incorporates a critical constructivist philosophy with respect to both research design and data analysis, and a detailed description of this approach is provided in chapter 3. Within this framework, a wide range of theory and data are used to support a feminist/political conceptualization of the factors which contribute to the formation and perpetuation of adolescent physical violence against parents. This theoretical bias is outlined in chapter 2, and is further discussed within chapter 8 in terms of policy and practice implications.

**Personal Experience**

I have worked for a number of years in both child protection and family counselling capacities, and during this time I was in contact with many families who were struggling with “parent-teen conflict” situations. From this work it became apparent to me that a significant number of adults were being physically abused by their adolescent children, and these incidents appeared to be characterized by three predominant themes. First, I noticed that the most common
form of abuse involved adolescent male violence against mothers—although daughters also
engaged in similar behaviours. Second, I learned that a number of assaultive youth had witnessed
and/or directly experienced abuse within the family. In these situations, the violence from youth
seemed motivated by a sense of retribution (toward the abusive parent), self-protection, or by a
process of modelling in which the assaults were directed toward mothers who had been abused
by their adult male partners. Finally, I found that adolescents often used abusive behaviours to
force parents into compliance, as they had learned through previous attempts that certain needs or
goals could be met by utilizing this particular control tactic.

In terms of intervention, it has been my experience that community professionals often
have limited knowledge with respect to the dynamics involved in adolescent-to-parent violence.
In addition, I have noticed that justice personnel, social workers, and counsellors often express
competing philosophies regarding the ways in which they believe families of assaultive youth
should be supported. For instance, I have been involved in situations where the police have taken
a clear perspective that youth who are violent toward their parents should be charged with assault
and removed from the home. At the same time, child protection social workers have usually been
resistant to do so because these situations were not necessarily viewed as “child protection”
matters. Finally, I have had numerous conversations with counsellors in which we struggled with
a variety of practice dilemmas. From one perspective, we recognized that conjoint relationship
counselling between violent youth and their parents can be helpful in some instances. However,
we were also concerned that therapeutic work within the context of physical violence was in
many ways unsafe and inappropriate--and therefore unethical.

As a result of my professional involvement with individuals and families, I have become
increasingly committed to the goal of addressing adolescent-to-parent violence on individual,
familial, and political levels. I have also found that while considerable research focus is directed
toward understanding and intervening in situations of wife assault and child abuse, similar forms
of violence from youth toward parents are often overlooked. From this, my hope is to contribute
knowledge to an area of research that I believe is of increasing concern for society. To achieve this aim, the focus of my study was to gather information from youth, parents, and counsellors in order to address two primary research questions; 1) What are the factors that contribute to adolescent physical violence toward parents? 2) What contributing factors are noted in cases where adolescent physical violence toward parents has decreased?
CHAPTER 1 - HISTORICAL REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the changes to social welfare, family violence, and juvenile justice legislation that have occurred throughout various time periods within Canada, Britain, and the United States. Particular focus is directed toward those aspects of legislation which were designed to address wife assault and parent assault, as the historical development of state response to these issues provides a framework from which violence toward parents can presently be conceptualized. From this review, conclusions are drawn with respect to the relationship between policy development and adolescent-to-parent violence.

Old-World Narratives

Our understanding of contemporary social problems can often be enhanced by exploring ancient myths in an effort to determine how certain issues were previously addressed. A review of old-world narratives reveals that violence toward parents has been a concern throughout much of history, and various myths exist in which young male characters exhibit some form of brutality toward a mother-goddess. For instance, Babylonian mythology includes a story in which Marduk kills his mother Tiamet and uses her body parts from which to form the universe (Green, 1981). A similar theme is noted in an African legend that tells a story of how Iriti struck his mother Pukwi on the head, thereby killing her and creating the sea and the sky (French, 1985). While such images appear to represent symbolic acts of matricide, the intended message they were meant to convey is somewhat unclear. Perhaps the most likely explanation for these myths relates to the idea that a fundamental change in social order was occurring at the time these stories were being developed. According to Campbell (1970), most creation mythologies include a specific stage in which female goddesses were destroyed, and this theme likely represents a literal shift in these societies whereby male dominance over women was being established.
A review of mythology also illustrates certain relationships among the gods which symbolize acts of patricide. In an Olympian creation story, a tale is told whereby Cronus overcomes his tyrannical father Uranus by castrating him (Green, 1981). The blood which falls from this attack is then transformed into the Furies, and the role of these entities is to cause insanity among mortals who murder their parents. In part, this myth is similar to a number of stories which describe a series of generational power struggles between male gods. However, a message of warning is also evident, as the existence of these Furies indicates a clear intent to inform the populace that acts of patricide would result in severe punishment.

One of the most common themes regarding violence toward parents appears in the widespread myth of the Hero (Phoebus, 1975). In most versions of this story, an infant male is abandoned by his parents in their efforts to avoid a prophecy which tells that he will grow to become a threat to them. Although left to die, this child is saved by a wild animal or shepherd, and subsequently raised by a kind and nurturing woman. When he has reached maturity, this character becomes involved in a series of dangerous but rewarding adventures. He later succeeds in finding his parents in order to avenge himself on them, and from this point is recognized as having surpassed the human condition—thereby becoming semi-divine.

Drawing simple conclusions from the Hero myth is difficult, as a variety of messages appear to be embedded within this narrative. For instance, the predominance of male violence that occurs within the story most likely reflects traditional distinctions regarding gender roles. The Hero myth also provides a clear message about the inescapable nature of divine fate, as the parents’ efforts to avoid this prophecy simply brings them closer to their destiny. But most importantly, it could be suggested that this narrative provides a clear warning to society regarding the tragic consequences of actions such as infanticide and patricide.

Parents, Children, and the State

Prior to the 14th century, European society viewed the concept of “childhood” as a brief stage in life that was characterized by extreme dependency (Aries, 1962; Falconer & Swift, 1983;
Hunt, 1970; Mackie, 1990). Children were expected to be integrated into most aspects of adult life by age seven, and limited knowledge appeared to exist regarding their specific developmental and emotional needs. During this historical period, many institutionalized practices were established whereby “young adults” were sent away from the home to work as servants and apprentices, or to be sold as property in order to pay off family debts.

From the 14th to 17th centuries, a new concept of childhood began to emerge throughout Europe as a distinct middle-class phenomenon—especially among boys (Aries, 1962; Mackie, 1990; Teitelbaum & Harris, 1977). Detailed parenting manuals became available, and children were perceived to some extent as a source of amusement and relaxation for their parents. At the same time, this period of change was influenced by the Christian belief that children were born with “original sin,” and therefore parents had a moral duty to “mould” their offspring into “right” ways of living through methods of severe physical punishment.

During the 18th century, a number of health care improvements began to reduce rates of child mortality, and this change served to increase the level of emotional attachment that parents allowed themselves to feel toward their children (Falconer & Swift, 1983; Mackie, 1990). Formal methods of education were introduced as a method of training young males from the wealthy class, and “moderate” forms of physical punishment were emphasized within schools. A crucial change in social philosophy was also occurring at this time, as the growth of rationalism gave rise to the view that human nature was intrinsically good, and that “evil” actions were therefore a result of the environment. From this, new approaches to social intervention attempted to ensure that “[w]hen children went wrong, the causes of corruption were sought in the conditions in which they were raised” (Teitelbaum & Harris, 1977, p. 15).

The rise of industrial capitalism that developed throughout Europe and North America during the mid 19th century created conditions in which children were routinely exploited for their labour potential (Falconer & Swift, 1983; Mackie, 1990). Equally oppressive conditions were present in late 19th century Canada, as some 70,000 homeless children were brought from England to be employed as servants, apprentices, and labourers. At the same time, religious
organizations had begun the process of forced assimilation among Native peoples in Canada, and generations of children were removed from their homes, taught to reject their culture, and indoctrinated into a system of Christian beliefs and values (Chrisjohn & Young, 1993; Haig-Brown, 1988; Martens, 1988). In contrast, children of the European bourgeoisie were increasingly idealized, and parents made conscious attempts to train and guide their offspring according to the new “scientific orientation” (Mackie, 1990, p. 123).

In response to the changes brought on by industrialism, a number of reformers and advocates sought to improve social conditions by enacting child labour laws, and advocating for women to leave the work force so they could “assume” primary responsibility for child-rearing. Along with these social and legal developments, a significant increase in public concern began to be expressed regarding the “ability” of the poor to care for their children. As a result of this increased focus on “child welfare” issues (and a failure to address the contributing social and economic factors), a number of government-supported schools, child care institutions, and private foster homes were developed (Abbott, 1938; Nett, 1988).

With the various changes that occurred during the 19th century in terms of family structure, children’s rights, and social economy, the concept of “adolescence” began to be recognized as a distinct developmental life stage (Mackie, 1990). Increasing numbers of youth remained at home during their educational and training years, and this prolonged period of dependency became the norm throughout European and North American families. Social scientists developed various theories for this “new” stage of development, and the psychological construct of “storm and stress” became widely accepted as a means to explain the “defiant” behaviours associated with adolescence (Santrock & Bartlett, 1986).

At present, a number of changes to national and international legislation have signalled improvements in the way that parent-child relations are conceptualized. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child outlines clear guidelines regarding children’s rights, and the majority of child welfare legislation in North America reflects the philosophy that state intervention should focus on maintaining family unity through the provision of various support services (Falconer &
Swift, 1983). Nevertheless, there also appears to be a return toward the residual model of service whereby government assistance to “problem families” is given only when other forms of familial or community support have failed (McQuaig, 1993; Nett, 1988).

In summary, various social developments have occurred throughout Western/European history with the result that parent-child relations have evolved significantly. Although little is known about the prevalence of adolescent-to-parent assault during previous time periods, some tentative conclusions can be drawn with regard to working-class white families. First, it should be understood that acts of physical violence in Medieval society were “part of the generalized social cruelty of the times” (Mackie, 1990, p. 120). Within this social context, it can be assumed that many acts of violence in the family were condoned—especially in terms of male brutality toward women and children (Deltufo, 1995). And because the modern concept of adolescence did not yet exist during this time, violent behaviour toward parents by young males would likely have been viewed as an “acceptable” form of “adult” behaviour.

A second conclusion that can be made with respect to the historical prevalence of adolescent-to-parent assault relates to the family structures that were common during previous time periods. As outlined, children were often sent away from their homes to work as servants or apprentices prior to the 19th century. From this, it is reasonable to assume that “young adults” from the working-class would usually be living apart from their parents in semi-autonomous labour roles. It is therefore unlikely that violence toward parents was common within these families simply because they would seldom be living in the same household.

Third, it should be noted that by the late 19th century, levels of state intervention had increased to the point where adolescents could be removed from their homes for a variety of reasons which included neglect, abuse, and “delinquency.” As a result, many youth who displayed defiance toward their parents would be placed in institutions—often for indeterminate periods of time—which were aimed at correcting such behaviours (Bala, 1994; Giles, 1991). With this approach, adolescent-to-parent violence would likely have been dealt with by separating youth from their families in an effort to “correct” these violent tendencies.
Finally, it should be noted that previous forms of state intervention contrast sharply with recent developments in child welfare philosophy which emphasize the importance of "family preservation." It can therefore be concluded that during the past few decades, violent and aggressive behaviour from youth has been increasingly conceptualized as a problem that should be addressed within the family. This approach is clearly valuable in the sense that it acknowledges the importance of family unity, and perceives individual behaviour problems from a systemic perspective. However, a resultant consequence of these preservation strategies is that parents who are being assaulted by their children are expected to resolve such problems while continuing to provide appropriate levels of care and support.

Family Violence and the State

Throughout much of Western/European history, it has been considered a man's "right" to dominate the women and children in his family through various forms of physical, economic, and emotional control (Propper, 1990). This right began to be questioned during the late 17th century when efforts were made in Massachusetts to enact the first laws in North America against wife-beating and cruelty to children (Pleck, 1989). While these changes signalled some progress, state enforcement was sporadic, and assault laws continued to go through certain periods of de-criminalization. Overall, family violence during this time period was treated as a private matter, although periods of increased intervention did occur—primarily in response to the public concern that such violence was becoming a threat to the "social order."

By the late 19th century, the act of wife-beating was declared illegal throughout most of North America, and this coincided with the development of various policies which sought to decrease physical and emotional cruelty toward children (Propper, 1990). From 1909 to 1960, the Canadian Criminal Code recognized wife battering as a specific offence, although the victim had to demonstrate that she had suffered more severe injuries than would be required for a charge of "common assault" (Dunaway, 1990). An important development occurred in 1968 when women were given the right to divorce their husbands on the basis of physical cruelty, and by the early
1970's, advocacy groups had established emergency shelters and counselling services throughout North America for female victims of violence (Deltufo, 1995; Quong, 1991).

An international tribunal was held in Belgium during 1976 to discuss the issue of *Crimes Against Women*, and this resulted in a 1982 report to the House of Commons regarding the prevalence of wife battering in Canada (Light & Rivkin, 1996). Various changes to the Canadian legal system were subsequently developed, and in 1984 the *Wife Assault* policy was initiated in British Columbia (Dunaway, 1990). This policy mandated police officers to lay reports against offenders if there was any evidence of wife assault, whereas it was previously considered the victim’s responsibility to initiate such proceedings. In addition, Crown Counsel was expected to pursue all reports which showed sufficient evidence of abuse, and victims were no longer given the power to withdraw criminal charges. Finally, justice personnel were given clear directives to ensure that inter-agency cooperation was promoted. In summary, this new policy reflected the philosophy that wife assault is a public crime that should be treated as such.

By 1985, all provinces in Canada had developed specific legislation which addressed the protection needs of abused women (Light & Rivkin, 1996). In 1993, the *Violence Against Women in Relationships (VAWIR)* policy was introduced in British Columbia with the aim to improve agency cooperation, and increase commitment to legal intervention. This policy also recognized a wider range of abuses which included violence against partners in same-sex relationships, and violence toward husbands. Most recently, the *VAWIR* policy has provided explicit recognition of child witnesses to violence, as the 1996 revision adds that “[a]ny child who is present at the time a violent offence is committed should be treated in a sensitive manner [as] witnessing violence in the family has a proven traumatic effect on children” (Part 1, D19).

From this historical review, it appears that three primary intervention strategies have been used to address violence within the family (Zimring, 1989). Traditionally, society has taken a *privatization* approach whereby the legal system routinely condoned violence against women and children by providing minimal consequences to abusive men. A *contingent intervention* strategy was also used in early legal statutes regarding wife assault, and in these cases protective action
was taken only if a formal complaint was initiated by the victim. At present, a *compulsory intervention* approach has been developed throughout North America with the aim to prevent “family privilege” from inhibiting the legal enforcement of violent behaviour. This perspective recognizes the terror and coercion that abused women experience, and more forceful efforts are made to ensure that offenders are arrested, charged, and prosecuted.\(^3\)

While considerable debate exists regarding the most effective method of addressing violence against women, the success of compulsory intervention approaches has been noted in various research findings. In 1981, an Ontario police force participated in a pilot project in which officers were trained about the dynamics of wife assault, and were given clear guidelines to ensure that legal proceedings were initiated against violent men (Burris & Jaffe, 1983). An evaluation of this project revealed that from 1979 to 1983, the number of charges laid in response to family violence incidents rose from 3 to 67 percent (Jaffe, Wolfe, Telford & Austin, 1986). Most importantly, this approach did not decrease victims’ requests for future police assistance, and women who were interviewed during the study reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction regarding the support they received. Similar studies in the United States indicate that clear policy directives which are combined with an integrated community response result in increased arrest rates and higher victim satisfaction (Bourg & Stock, 1994; Edleson & Frank, 1991). Finally, research suggests that when adult male batterers are charged and convicted, they are 40 to 70 percent less likely to repeat an offence (Dunaway, 1990).

In summary, it is clear that the historical development of wife assault legislation has been reflective of various changes to social philosophy. The gradual shift from privatization to limited intervention indicated a growing recognition of family violence as a *public concern*. More recently, the enactment of compulsory intervention strategies has denoted an awareness that women who are being physically abused often lack the *capacity* and/or *resources* to free themselves from such situations. Finally, the comprehensive nature of present policy directives

\(^3\)Regardless of these improvements, it should nevertheless be noted that police agency and justice system interventions continue to provide inadequate protection for many victims of wife assault.
reflects a perspective that goes beyond blaming individual victims and abusers, and instead recognizes the social and political nature of violence against women.

**History of Legal Response to Youth**

While the problem of adolescent-to-parent violence has been given only minimal attention by the criminal justice system, an historical review of legal interventions provides some indication of the ways in which these crimes were previously addressed. From the Old Testament biblical perspective, it appears that any form of defiance toward parents was to be dealt with harshly, as it is outlined that “anyone who curses his [sic] father or his mother ... shall surely be put to death ... his bloodguiltiness is upon him” (Leviticus 20: 9). In 1648, a law of the Puritans in Massachusetts expanded on this holy decree by stating that:

> If any Childe or Children above sixteen years old and of sufficient understanding, shall Curse or smite their natural father or mother, hee or they shall be put to death; unless it can bee sufficiently testified that the parents have been very unchristianly negligent in the education of such children, or so provoke them by extreme, and cruel, correction that they have beene forced thereunto to preserve themselves from death, maiming (cited in Arrigo, 1982, p. 785).

This Puritan legislation was likely symbolic as there is no evidence that it was ever used, but it nevertheless gives some indication of the way that children’s rights were perceived in 17th century society. It should also be noted that an additional ordinance of the time allowed for children who were “rude, stubborn and unruly” to be sent out of the home to work as apprentices (Teitelbaum & Harris, 1977, p. 12). With such laws, it can be assumed that violent children were dealt with either through legalized abandonment, or by state intervention in cases where caregivers were deemed to have been “unchristianly” in their child-rearing duties.

While it appears unlikely that children who assaulted their parents were dealt with through capital punishment, this threat was certainly real in early Western/European societies. Prior to the 19th century, English criminal law applied to all citizens with very little distinction on the basis of age (Abbott, 1938). The rationale for this approach related primarily to the assumption that “children of fourteen years and over were by law presumed to possess complete
capacity of discerning between good and evil, and could consequently be subjected to capital punishment” (Radzinowicz, 1948, p. 12). Indeed, this belief in doli capaces was even extended to lower ages, as numerous examples exist in British case law where children from seven years of age and up were executed (usually by hanging) for a range of offences.

During the 19th century, a number of enactments began to reflect the view that children who were violent toward their parents should be dealt with through various forms of state punishment which emphasized a “corrective” component. To illustrate, an 1819 act in Illinois included a section on Punishment of the Disobedient Child which declared that “if any child or servant shall, contrary to his [sic] bounden duty, presume to assault or strike his parent or master, upon complaint or conviction thereof before two or more justices of the peace, the offender shall be whipped not exceeding ten stripes” (cited in Abbott, 1938, p. 343).

Perhaps the earliest recorded legal decision regarding adolescent-to-parent assault was determined in 1838 at a Pennsylvania court. In this particular case, a girl who assaulted her mother was taken into state care “by reason of [her] vicious conduct [that] rendered her control beyond the power of the said complainant” (cited in Arrigo, 1982, pp. 785-86). This state custody approach was also noted in mid 19th century Upper Canada, as an increased “recognition” of juvenile delinquency led to the establishment of prisons, institutions, and apprenticeship programs for youth charged with various crimes (Falconer & Swift, 1983).

In 1908, the Juvenile Delinquents Act was created in Canada with the aim to provide a legal response for youth who were between 7 and 18 years of age (Bala, 1994). This act reflected a clear child welfare philosophy, as it outlined that “every juvenile delinquent shall be treated, not as criminal, but as a misdirected and misguided child, and one needing aid, encouragement, help and assistance” (section 38). Regardless of the intent of this legislation, little emphasis was placed on the legal rights of youth, and therefore police officers, probation workers, and judges exercised considerable discretion with regard to charging and sentencing procedures. As a result, interventions were often more punitive than welfare oriented, and youth were likely to serve time until it was decided that “rehabilitation” had been achieved (Bala; Giles, 1991).
Similar to the Canadian approach, the use of extended state incarceration as treatment for juvenile offenders was also evident in Britain during the early 20th century. To illustrate, the *Children and Young Persons Act* of 1933 declared that:

Where the parent or guardian of a child or young person proves to a juvenile court that he [sic] is unable to control the child or young person, the court, if satisfied . . . may order the child or young person to be sent to an approved school, or may order him [sic] to be placed for a specific period, not exceeding three years, under the supervision of a probation officer or of some other person appointed for the purpose by the court (cited in Abbott, 1938, p. 454).

This type of response to delinquent behaviour was also extremely common throughout the United States, and by the late 1960’s roughly one million American youth—almost half of whom had been charged with minor “status offences” such as truancy, curfew violations, and parental defiance—were detained each year in jails and detention facilities (Chavkin, 1978).

Until the late 1970’s, state treatment and guardianship of youth was the primary response to juvenile offences, and this certainly applied to cases of parent assault. In California, a common method for dealing with adolescents who assaulted their parents was to label them as “incorrigible” under section 601 of the *Welfare and Institutions Code* (Arrigo, 1982). From this approach, youth could be secured in detention without the need for parents to testify against them in court. In 1977, legal reform prohibited the incarceration of youth through this procedure, and communities were encouraged to produce alternative programs whereby offenders were “housed” on a temporary basis. Not surprisingly, limited government funding for this new approach to intervention produced few realistic options, and the use of 601 petitions subsequently diminished because they were perceived as being increasingly ineffective.

As an alternative to the incorrigibility petition, youth who assaulted their parents could also be charged under section 602 of California’s legal code. With this procedure, the court would order various sentences which ranged from home supervision to incarceration. However, such “adversarial” methods were often rejected as being contradictory to the justice system’s goal of fostering family unity. To illustrate, a 1979 Supreme court ruling expressed concern that
“[p]utting the parents and child as adversaries often will be at odds with the presumption that parents act in the best interests of the child” (cited in Arrigo, 1982, p. 790).

The enactment of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 made reform of the juvenile justice system inevitable. The Young Offenders Act (Y.O.A.) came into force in 1984, and this new legislation defined an age range of 12 to 18 years, provided for determinate sentencing guidelines, and gave young persons equality of protection under the law (Bala, 1994). Overall, the Y.O.A. seeks to achieve a balance which involves meeting the treatment needs of young offenders while ensuring public safety (Giles, 1991; Sas, Jaffe, & Reddon, 1985). This new act also recognizes the value of holistic approaches to treatment, stating in section 3(1)(a) that justice response “requires addressing the underlying causes of crime by young persons and developing multi-disciplinary approaches to identifying and effectively responding to children and young persons at risk of committing offending behaviour in the future”.

Shortly after the enactment of the Y.O.A., it was noted that the overall number of young offenders receiving custody dispositions had increased—causing a subsequent reduction in the need for community resources (Bala, 1994; Giles, 1991). To avoid this trend, a 1986 amendment to section 24(1) stipulated that courts should avoid the use of custody unless this option is “necessary for the protection of society . . . having regard to the needs and circumstances of the young person”. Further changes occurred in 1995 when Bill C-37 was enacted to respond to various concerns, most notably that the Y.O.A. did little to rehabilitate young offenders. In response, section 24(1.1)(a) was added to stipulate that “custody shall not be used as a substitute for appropriate child protection, health and other social measures”.

An additional criticism of the Y.O.A. prior to Bill C-37 related to sections 20(1)(i) and 22, which outlined that the court could order a young person to be detained for treatment only if the youth, parents, and treatment facility consented (Bala, 1994; Leschied & Hyatt, 1986). While these sections were intended to ensure children’s rights, the actual result was that few treatment orders were being made because the majority of youth refused to participate. It was also noted that allowing youth to refuse treatment was contradictory to section 3(1)(c), which stated that
“because of their state of dependency and level of development and maturity, [young persons] have special needs and require guidance and assistance”. In response, sections 20(1)(i) and 22 were repealed, and amendments to 13 and 14(2)(d) were made so that medical, psychological, and/or psychiatric reports could be ordered without consent of the youth.

One of the most critical aspects of the Y.O.A. relates to section 4(1), which stipulates that if a youth gives consent, “[a]lternative measures may be used to deal with a young person alleged to have committed an offence instead of judicial proceedings”. Some concern regarding this form of diversion relates to the procedural definition that is outlined in section 4(1)(c), as it is questionable whether a young person “fully and freely consents to participate” in a process whereby legal action is perceived as the only other option. Nevertheless, the potential benefit of these alternative measures relates to the idea that communities, victims, and offenders are encouraged to take a more active role in methods of treatment and rehabilitation that differ from traditional forms of custody and punishment (O’Brien, 1984).

The role of adult caregivers in relation to the Y.O.A. is outlined in section 3(1)(h), which states that “parents have responsibility for the care and supervision of their children, and, for that reason, young persons should be removed from parental supervision either partly or entirely only when measures that provide for continuing parental supervision are inappropriate.” A court’s determination regarding the “appropriateness” of parents also depends to a large extent on the pre-disposition report. As stated in section 14(1)(c)(vi), the presentation of this document should include information about “the relationship between the young person and the young person’s parents and the degree of control and influence of the parents over the young person”. In some instances, the court may attempt to increase the “control and influence” that parents have by releasing youth into their care under section 7(1)(2)(b), whereby “the young person undertakes in writing to comply with the arrangement” that is specified by the court.

A review of the Y.O.A. indicates that a number of legal options may be used to address adolescent-to-parent violence. Although such response is unlikely, an offending youth may be arrested by the police and “detained in a place of temporary detention” under section 7(1)(b).
any point during subsequent proceedings, the court may also make an order under section 13 stipulating that the youth be detained in an appropriate facility so assessments can be made. If the youth is charged and convicted of assault under the *Criminal Code*, the court may then make an order of "secure" or "open" custody under section 24.1 of the *Y.O.A.* with various probation conditions as outlined in section 23. Examples of "open" custody include community residential centres, group homes, child care institutions, and wilderness camps.

If the legal system is used in situations of adolescent-to-parent assault, the court will most likely choose "alternative measures" as a means to respond. This diversion process can only be utilized if the youth consents, and all criminal charges may later be dismissed under section 4(4) when the court is satisfied that the youth has "complied with the terms and conditions of the alternative measures". Depending on available funding within the youth’s community, a variety of programs may be considered applicable to the diversion process such as individual and family counselling, anger management, victim restitution, and community work hours.

Throughout the range of options that are provided by the justice system in situations of adolescent-to-parent violence, it is also important to be aware of the inherent limitations and realities. First, it should be recognized that when an assault is reported against a youth, the police will use a variety of responses which may range significantly in relation to the personal style or approach of the attending officer. The most likely scenario in situations of adolescent-to-parent assault generally includes a "warning" from an officer, and a referral to the appropriate child protection agency. In cases where police involvement includes the arrest of a young person, subsequent court action may include a number of outcomes such as absolute discharge, diversion, or conviction. Lengthy court delays are common during this process, and treatment orders are often ineffective as a result of inadequate or non-existence program funding. These systemic problems generally result in frustration from parents, and a perception among youth that their assaultive behaviour only results in minimal consequence.

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4The following “reality based” conclusions are drawn from my experience as a court worker, counsellor, and child protection social worker.
Perhaps the most informative study regarding legal interventions with assaultive youth involved a review of cases in a Washington state police department (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988). For this research, a total of 73 files were analyzed in order to determine how police responded to "the actual or threatened use of force" toward parents by youth who were 12 to 18 years of age (p. 203). The study noted that 76 percent of requests for police assistance were initiated by parents, and it was also found that actual assaults had occurred in 56 percent of these situations. Further analysis revealed that police responded to these incidents through a variety of interventions; 7 percent of the youth were placed in state care, 9 percent were taken to the home of a friend, 19 percent received "crisis counselling" by the officer, and 34 percent were arrested. Of those youth who were arrested, most were released in 4 hours with probation monitoring and an order to attend 2 hours of anger management counselling.

Interviews with the officers who participated in the Evans and Warren-Sohlberg (1988) study revealed a reluctance to intervene in cases of adolescent-to-parent violence, as it was expected that parents should handle such family matters themselves. Further, there seemed to be a perception among the police that youth violence is a natural outcome of oppositional behaviour that is common during adolescent development. Overall, the authors noted that "police discretion seems to figure strongly in the resolution of cases involving adolescents who assault their parents" (p. 202). The clinical experience of Price (1996) supports this conclusion, as he states that police response varies with each community, and adds that the court system rarely applies serious legal consequences to youth who assault their parents.

In summary, a number of changes to the juvenile justice system have occurred throughout Western/European history, and these developments have in turn influenced the nature of state response to youth who assault their parents. A review of these legal statutes suggests that until the late 18th century, disobedience from children was dealt with by extreme physical punishment, or through legalized forms of abandonment such as apprenticeship or servitude. Implicit in this approach was the somewhat paradoxical view that while children were to be submissive toward their parents, they could also be convicted as adults under the law. During the 19th century, a
gradual shift occurred whereby the punishment of youth was used primarily as a "corrective" measure rather than a retributive justice response. At the same time, new forms of legislation were created which allowed the state to assume increasing levels of responsibility for the care of children and youth who could not be "controlled" by their parents.

By the early 20th century, the perception of juvenile offenders had shifted toward a child welfare philosophy which advocated that these "misguided" youth should be dealt with through a supportive treatment approach. This recognition of the environmental influence on behaviour also meant that parents were often seen as the "cause" of delinquency. Regardless of these important conceptual changes, interventions remained relatively unchanged since treatment programs received inadequate funding, and youth continued to be removed from their families in order to be placed in foster homes and detention facilities.

Most recently, the juvenile justice system has been increasingly resistant to involve parents and youth in an adversarial court process as this approach is seen to "undermine" family relationships. Current legislation also supports a strong treatment philosophy, and the state removal of children is generally discouraged except for those situations in which ongoing parental care is clearly inappropriate. Overall, these developments signal a number of potential improvements to the way that parent-youth conflicts are perceived. However, the present emphasis on "family unity" can also appear unsupportive of parents who are being assaulted by their children, as the immediate removal of violent adolescents is sometimes the only method by which these parents can receive adequate physical protection.
Introduction

This chapter provides a critical overview of research findings which pertain to adolescent physical violence against parents. Information regarding the prevalence of these types of assaults is outlined, and various defining characteristics of victimized parents and offending youth are discussed. Three primary theoretical perspectives (psychological, sociological, feminist) are then presented in terms of their relevance to certain findings. Finally, the integrated model which served as a working hypothesis for this study is described.

Prevalence

Studies which focus on adolescent-to-parent assault have emerged primarily since the 1980’s. From a national sample of 2,143 two-parent American families, Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) concluded that approximately 3 percent (Gelles & Straus, 1988) of parents had been “severely” abused by their 11 to 17 year old children during the previous year. From the same representative sample, Cornell and Gelles (1982) applied a broader definition of physical assault to 608 families with 10 to 17 year old youth. As a result, the findings of Straus et al. were reinterpreted to suggest that 9 percent of parents had been assaulted by their children at least once in the past year. It was also found that 3 percent of these assaults were “severe” (kicking, punching, biting, hitting with objects, using knives/guns), and that mothers were approximately 30 percent more likely to be physically abused than fathers.

While results from these two studies provide useful information regarding families of assaultive youth, several methodological concerns should be noted. First, the Straus et al. (1980) survey collected information only from two-parent families, and therefore the findings may not accurately reflect the experience of single parents. Second, only one member from each couple
was interviewed (random selection process), so rates of violence may have been lower than if information had come from both parents. Finally, these studies measured violence by using the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS), and this method of analysis has been questioned regarding its reliability and validity\(^5\) (Johnson & Sacco, 1995; Propper, 1990; Yllo, 1993).

Peek, Fischer, and Kidwell (1985) utilized data from the Youth in Transition project (Bachman, O’Malley, & Johnston, 1978) to determine rates of violence among 1,545 high school aged white male adolescents. This study revealed that 7 to 11 percent of youth acknowledged “hitting” one or both parents at least once during the previous 3 years. In addition, and it was found that overall rates of violence decreased with age, and that fathers of senior year adolescents were approximately twice as likely to be assaulted than mothers. It should further be noted that results from this study relate to both single and two-parent families.

Conclusions drawn from the Peek et al. (1985) study are limited since data regarding injuries were not obtained, and interviews were conducted solely with white male youth. In addition, the self-report information which was collected may reflect biased results due to minimization from participants. Finally, this research study is compromised to the extent that youth were only asked how often they had “hit” their mothers or fathers. This semantic distinction is important, as a number of violent actions (pushing, slapping, kicking, threatening) would likely have been excluded from measurement—an omission which may explain the lower rates of violence that were found to be directed toward mothers.

Similar research to Peek et al. (1985) was conducted by Agnew and Huguley (1989) in their analysis of the 1972 National Survey of Youth. In this study, 1,395 male and female adolescents from 11 to 18 years of age were asked how often they had “hit” their parents, and information regarding the details of these incidents was also obtained. Results indicated that 9.2

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\(^5\)See Propper (1990) for a detailed critique of CTS methodology. Some of the main concerns regarding this approach are: 1) certain violent and/or threatening actions are omitted from measurement categories, 2) violent actions are analyzed in a way which ignores the physical power held by the person committing an assault, 3) information regarding injuries is not obtained, 4) acts of physical assault and attempts at self-protection are both scaled identically, 5) no consideration is given to the possibility that women may exaggerate their participation in “domestic violence” whereas men might tend to under-report their involvement.
percent of respondents acknowledged being violent in the past 3 years, and it was found that 7.6 percent of these assaults resulted in injury (bruises, welts, cuts, broken bones). Finally, the study noted that mothers were abused at approximately twice the rate of fathers.

The Agnew and Huguley (1989) study is valuable in the sense that data were collected with regard to rates of violence, injuries sustained, and reasons given for the assaults. In addition, the validity of this structured interview approach was likely strengthened by the use of certain follow-up questions with the participants. Nevertheless, a methodological concern still exists in terms of the accuracy with which youth self-report their assaultive behaviours. Further, the research focus on determining only whether youth “hit” their parents would likely have excluded important findings regarding other forms of physical violence.

In a more recent study, Paulson et al. (1990) analyzed responses from structured interviews with 445 male and female adolescents. While information was not obtained regarding frequency or severity, 13.7 percent of 9 to 17 year old youth acknowledged “hitting” their parents at least once during the previous 5 year period. Of these cases, 21 percent had assaulted both parents, 31 percent hit fathers, and 48 percent hit mothers. While efforts were made to improve reliability by having “street wise” interviewers meet with youth in various natural settings, the accuracy of self-report data is again an issue with these findings. And as noted in previously outlined studies (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Peek et al., 1985), the use of a limited measurement parameter such as “hitting” may have resulted in uncollected data.

The extent to which women are particularly vulnerable to abuse from their children was addressed in Livingston’s (1986) study of 151 single mothers. Results from this questionnaire survey (using a modified CTS) indicated that 29 percent of mothers reported being physically assaulted by their children, with 41 percent of these violent incidents resulting in some form of injury. Further analysis revealed that a variety of tactics were used against mothers; 80 percent were pushed, 59 percent were slapped, 66 percent were punched, kicked, or hit with objects, and 9 percent were hospitalized. Clearly, the high rates of assault noted in this study relate in part to
the wide age range (1-19 years) used, but it nevertheless appears that sole-parent females are at
greater risk of physical violence from their children.

It is interesting to note that the 41 percent injury rate found by Livingston (1986) is
significantly greater than the 7.6 percent finding from Agnew and Huguley’s (1989) study. Such
discrepancy may be the result of response bias, as adolescent participants in the latter study likely
minimized the extent of their abusive actions. Low rates of injury were also assumed in Cornell
and Gelles’ (1982) analysis of parent interviews, as only 3 percent of assaults were rated as
“severe” on the CTS6 whereas the other 6 percent were categorized as “minor.” However, it
should be noted that while various forms of abuse are categorized as “minor” within the CTS, the
injuries caused by these violent actions may indeed be serious.

In a retrospective study conducted by Pagelow (1989), 473 male and female college
students were asked to describe their abusive behaviours during adolescence (age 12 and older)
through the completion of a modified CTS questionnaire. Findings indicated that 13 percent of
respondents had used some form of physical violence against adult family members. In addition,
it was noted that 60 percent of the victims in these physical assaults were mothers, while the
other 40 percent were comprised of fathers and step-fathers. Although information regarding
injuries was not obtained, these incidents involved various tactics such as pushing, grabbing, or
shoving (57 percent), slapping and biting (31 percent), kicking and punching (26 percent),
beating up (2 percent), and threatening with a knife or gun (3 percent).

The results noted by Pagelow (1989) clearly indicate that the majority of these assaults
fall within the “minor” category (pushed, grabbed, shoved, slapped) of the CTS whereas more
“severe” actions (kicking, punching, beating up, using weapons) account for roughly 31 percent
of violent incidents. While this finding is significantly higher than the 3 percent rate of “severe”

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6See Straus (1979) for a full description. The CTS defines 8 items which refer to specific acts of violence, and places them into “minor” or
“severe” categories. Actions such as 1) throwing something, 2) pushing, grabbing, or shoving, and 3) slapping or spanking are considered minor.
Actions such as 4) kicking, biting, or hitting with a fist, 5) hitting or trying to hit with something, 6) beating up, 7) threatening with a knife or
gun, and 8) using a knife or gun are placed in the severe category. The primary concern with this approach is that “minor” behaviours may
sometimes cause as much or more injury than those actions which are considered “severe.”
violence noted by Cornell and Gelles (1982), comparisons are complicated by the fact that Pagelow's study used a modified CTS which contained more specific acts of violence within its definition. Further, this study questioned respondents about violence they had committed at any time over age 12 whereas Cornell and Gelles restricted their data to violent acts that had occurred against parents during the past year. Regardless of these differences, the results do reiterate that "hitting" represents only one type of violence, and therefore studies which measure rates of parent assault solely within this semantic criterion (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Paulson et al., 1990; Peek et al., 1985) likely underestimate rates of occurrence.

**Defining Characteristics**

Research reveals somewhat contradictory findings regarding sex differences among youth who assault their parents. For instance, studies which measured the self-reports of adolescents suggest that daughters and sons have approximately equal rates of assaultiveness (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Paulson et al., 1990). Conversely, data obtained from parents (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Straus et al., 1980), clinical populations (Charles, 1986; Kumagai, 1981; Inoff-Germain, Nottelmann, Arnold, & Susman, 1988), and police reports (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988) indicate that adolescent males are the most frequent abusers.

While the highest rates of female-perpetrated violence were found primarily among those studies which relied on adolescents' *self-report* information, some exceptions to this trend should be noted. For example, Livingston's (1986) study of single mothers indicated that 56 percent of all assaults are committed by daughters. Similarly, Cottrell and Finlayson's (1996) qualitative interviews with 45 parents (primarily mothers) revealed that daughters and sons are equally assaultive. Finally, Carlson's (1990) research involving interviews with 101 youth in residential and treatment centres found extremely high rates of violence from daughters. Indeed, this study suggested that 52 percent of the females interviewed acknowledged "hitting" their parents as opposed to a 20 percent response rate from adolescent males.
Although parent responses in the Livingston (1986) and Cottrell and Finlayson (1996) studies suggest that daughters and sons are equally assaultive, it should be noted that these findings relate primarily to adolescent violence against mothers. This distinction is important, for while research that measures the abuse of male and female parents shows sons and daughters to have somewhat comparable rates of violence toward mothers, it seems clear that son-to-father violence occurs at a higher rate than daughter-to-father assault (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988). It could therefore be suggested that part of the reason for equal rates of son/daughter violence found by Livingston and Cottrell and Finlayson relates to the absence of data collected on adolescent-to-father assault.

The extremely high rates of youth violence noted by Carlson (1990) are likely related to various methodological factors. First, this study gathered information from youth who were residing in treatment centres and shelters, and this selective sample may have reflected higher rates of youth assaultiveness because of corresponding family problems. Indeed, the majority of these youth had experienced various forms of abuse and/or neglect, and 55 percent of the sample had witnessed family violence. Second, the high rate of female-perpetrated violence may have been related to “other factors in the homes of these girls, such as incest” (p. 296). Finally, the previously outlined concerns regarding adolescents’ self-reports should again be noted, and this study is also limited by its use of “hitting” as a measurement criterion.

While the suggestion that offenders’ self-report data produce gender-biased conclusions is certainly speculative to some degree, support for this explanation is available from studies of violent behaviour among adults. For instance, research has consistently revealed that physically abusive men will deny or minimize their violent behaviours (Coleman, 1980; Gondolf, 1985; Hastings & Hamberger, 1988) whereas women will tend to exaggerate and over-report the extent of their abusiveness (Finkelhor, Gelles, Hotaling, & Straus, 1983; Propper, 1990; Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1994). If these dynamics are similar among violent youth, then it could be assumed that self-reports are biased in the sense that both males and females will provide
conflicting information. From this, a more accurate perspective of violence rates is likely obtained from parents, professionals, and law enforcement agencies.

Among those studies which have found higher rates of violence among adolescent males, females are still shown to commit between 20 to 40 percent of all assaults (Charles, 1986; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Kumagai, 1981). This finding is significant as it contradicts popular assumptions regarding gender roles, and raises important questions about the intergenerational transmission of violence. However, it should be noted that the 40 percent ratio cited by Cornell and Gelles was obtained by using the CTS to measure parents’ reports of victimization. As outlined, this scale has been criticized as it “ignores the gendered power imbalances that exist . . . and excludes crucial details about motives, intentions, and consequences” (Johnson & Sacco, 1995, p. 291). If such detailed information is not accounted for during assessments, violent behaviours may be exaggerated or minimized, and youth who are defending themselves may even be misinterpreted as being abusive. To illustrate, a 12 year old daughter who bites her father’s hand in self-defense would be rated as more violent on the CTS than a 17 year old son who injures his mother by pushing her against a wall. Clearly, this example shows that results from the CTS are questionable, as this measurement scale serves to de-contextualize acts of violence from the social reality in which they occur.

Not surprisingly, the age and physical size of an adolescent has been positively correlated with increased assaultive behaviour, especially among males (Charles, 1986; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Harbin & Madden, 1979; Kumagai, 1981; Wells, 1987). Findings regarding daughters are less consistent, as some researchers note an increase in violence during mid-adolescence (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Paulson et al., 1990) whereas others conclude that rates decrease during this age period (Charles; Cornell & Gelles; Peek et al., 1985). Overall, the data suggest that violence against parents tends to increase as youth gain the physical strength to carry out such actions. With respect to female violence, the conflicting results may be interpreted from two perspectives. Daughters who initially become assaultive may indeed be acting on a greater ability to use
physical force against their parents. However, a decrease in violence during mid-adolescence may be related to social role ascription, as female-initiated aggression is less normalized within society than similar behaviour from males (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988).

A number of studies indicate that elderly parents may be especially vulnerable to youth violence (Harbin & Madden, 1979; Wells, 1987), and those families who are characterized by single-mother/absent-father constellations also experience high rates of victimization (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Kumagai, 1981; Livingston, 1986; Wells). The influence of birth order and sibling number is inconclusive, as the data regarding these family characteristics are conflicting (Kumagai; Livingston; Peek et al., 1985). The relationship between violence and socio-economic status is also unclear, since some studies show rates to be higher among middle and upper-class families (Agnew & Huguley; Charles, 1986; Paulson et al., 1990) whereas other results show no difference in social class (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996).

When adolescent-to-parent violence is measured in terms of race/ethnicity, some studies have found no difference in prevalence (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996). Conversely, a review by Charles (1986) of 50 inpatient/outpatient cases revealed that white families were more characteristic of youth violence than non-white populations. Similar results were found by Agnew and Huguley (1989) and Paulson et al. (1990), as their research revealed that youth from white families were approximately twice as likely to be violent toward their parents than Black or Hispanic respondents. To explain these differences, Charles offered the somewhat ethnocentric suggestion that “White families with perhaps more psychological sophistication tended to look at themselves with unending discussions and explorations as to why the abuse occurred but provided no interventions [whereas] Black parents . . . saw the behavior immediately as clearly unacceptable and directly put a stop to it” (p. 353). Paulson et al. support this premise by stating that “[t]he Hispanic parenting style with its emphasis on religiously sanctioned parental authority . . . effectively decreases assault on parents” (p. 130).
To summarize, results from a number of nationally representative samples indicate that from 9 to 14 percent of American families are affected by adolescent-to-parent physical violence. It appears that violence against mothers is the most common dynamic, and rates of assault tend to increase significantly in single-mother/absent-father households. Although studies have produced divergent findings regarding rates of violence from youth, the data reveal that between 50 to 80 percent of violence toward parents is committed by adolescent males. In more specific terms, daughters appear to be assaultive primarily toward their mothers whereas sons are abusive to both mothers and fathers. Finally, overall findings suggest that age and physical size are positively correlated with youth assaultiveness while the influence of race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, birth order, and sibling number is somewhat unclear.

In an effort to facilitate comparison between studies, a Research Overview (Table 1) is presented on the following page. This table provides data in the form of five columns: 1) overall findings, 2) sampling and methodology, 3) violence ratio and sex of parents/youth, 4) rates of violence and age/size of youth, and 5) violence in terms of injury/severity. The information from this overview reveals that different research methods often produce conflicting results.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Findings</th>
<th>Sampling and Methodology</th>
<th>Violence Ratio and Sex of Parents/Youth</th>
<th>Rates of Violence and Age/Size of Youth</th>
<th>Violence in Terms of Injury/Severity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cornell &amp; Gelles (1982).</td>
<td>- 608 two-parent families. - various racial groupings. - parent interviews (CTS). - relates to m/f youth (10-17).</td>
<td>- 34% son-to-mother. - 25% son-to-father. - 28% dtr-to-mother. - 13% dtr-to-father.</td>
<td>- severe violence from sons increases from age 10-17. - severe violence from dtrs decreases from age 13-17.</td>
<td>- 45% of violence to mothers was &quot;severe&quot;. - 14% of violence to fathers was &quot;severe&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peck, Fischer, &amp; Kidwell, (1985).</td>
<td>- 1,545 white male youth. - structured interviews. - asked about &quot;hitting&quot; parents. - pertains to high school years.</td>
<td>- 57% son-to-father. - 43% son-to-mother.</td>
<td>overall violence decreases during high school years, but ratio of son-to-father violence increases.</td>
<td>no data collected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paulson, Coombs, &amp; Landsverk (1990).</td>
<td>- 445 m/f/youth (9-17). - 47% Anglo, 53% Hispanic. - structured interviews. - asked about &quot;hitting&quot; parents.</td>
<td>- 44% from sons. - 56% from dtrs. - 48% to mother. - 31% to father. - 21% to mother/father.</td>
<td>- 7% rate from age 9-11. - 17% rate from age 12-14. - 16% rate from age 15-17. - the rate in column 1 is an average of these rates.</td>
<td>no data collected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlson (1990).</td>
<td>- 101 m/f/youth (13-18) in residential/treatment centres. - 76% white, 15% Black, 9% &quot;other&quot; (primarily Hispanic). - structured interviews. - asked about &quot;hitting&quot; parents.</td>
<td>- sons who witnessed violence were 2x more likely to assault mothers. - sons/dtrs who witnessed violence were more likely to assault fathers.</td>
<td>- no data collected.</td>
<td>no data collected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles (1986).</td>
<td>- 300 inpatient/outpatient case reviews revealing 50 cases. - no age range defined. - various racial groupings.</td>
<td>- 66% from sons. - 33% from dtrs.</td>
<td>- rates of m/f violence are equal in pre-adolescence. - male violence 2x rate of females in adolescence.</td>
<td>- dislocated shoulder. - head injuries. - pushed, punched. - used weapons. - broken bones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pageelow (1989).</td>
<td>- 473 m/f college students. - 80% white, 3% Black, 11% Hispanic, 6% Oriental. - modified CTS questionnaire. - pertains to age 12+.</td>
<td>- 60% to mothers. - 40% to fathers or step-fathers.</td>
<td>- no data collected.</td>
<td>- 57% pushed, grabbed. - 31% slapped, bit. - 26% kick, punched. - 2% beat up. - 3% threatened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evans &amp; Warren-Sohlberg (1988).</td>
<td>- 73 police report reviews. - analyzed cases of &quot;actual or threatened use of force&quot; by m/f youth (12-17).</td>
<td>- 49% son-to-mother. - 16% son-to-father. - 33% dtr-to-mother. - 2% dtr-to-father.</td>
<td>- majority of violence occurs from age 15-17.</td>
<td>- 56% classified as actual assaults. - 16% involved use of weapon. - verbal assaults usually committed by dtrs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table provides an outline of various research studies and their respective data. Column #1 (overall findings) refers to the average rates at which adolescent-to-parent assault is found to occur. Column #3 (violence ratio and sex of parents/youth) rates are presented as a percentage of the rates in column #1. Column #5 (violence in terms of injury/severity) rates are also expressed as a percentage of rates in column #1.
Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical explanations of family violence are generally categorized into three main frameworks or perspectives (Frankel-Howard, 1992; Gelles & Loseke, 1993). The *psychological* perspective attempts to identify certain personality traits or innate potentials among violent individuals. From this focus, it is implied that abusive behaviour is to some extent derived from psychological pathology. Within the *sociological* framework, acts of violence are seen to be influenced through various social structures and institutions, and this view has led to a “complex formulation for the varied phenomena of violence and abuse between intimates” (Gelles, 1993, p. 43). Finally, the *feminist* perspective makes the explicit claim that violence must be understood in terms of the gender and power relations that exist in society. From this, violence in the family is described as a manifestation of political, institutional, and ideological structures that perpetuate male dominance over women and children (Kurz, 1993; Yllo, 1993).

Psychological Theories

In the early development of *psychoanalytic* theory, Freud (1933) proposed that human aggression originates from a “death instinct” (Thanatos) which is projected onto others in an unconscious effort to avoid harming the self. A similar perspective was outlined in *ethological* theory (Lorenz, 1966), which states that violence stems from a “fighting instinct” which creates a build-up of aggressive energy that must be released. These theories gained minimal support from the research community because they could not be verified, nor did they recognize the influence of external forces on the formation of aggressive behaviour.

In a departure from the view that violent behaviour is controlled by instinct, the theory of *frustration-aggression* states that “interference with goal-directed activity induces an aggressive drive which, in turn, motivates behavior designed to injure” (Bandura, 1973, p. 31). This theory further suggests that such responses are socially reinforced, since acts of violence which are successful in overcoming certain frustrations will be repeated more frequently. In support of
these claims, various studies have revealed that youth who obtain desired “outcomes” from assaulting their parents are more likely to continue with this behaviour (Charles, 1986; Harbin & Madden, 1979; Ney & Mulvihill, 1982). However, it should be noted that findings from cross-cultural studies of family violence challenge the view that aggression is a universal response to frustration (Campbell, 1992; Levinson, 1988). Further, the over-representation of male violence toward parents is inadequately explained by the view that such behaviour derives solely from a response to the “interference” of goal-directed activity.

The influence of biological disorders has been proposed as a partial explanation for adolescent-to-parent assault, as head injuries and organic brain dysfunctions are related to violent behaviours among both youth (Allan, Nairne, & Majcher, 1996; Davis & Boster, 1992; Wells, 1987) and assaultive men (Hamberger, 1994; Warnken, Rosenbaum, Fletcher, Hoge, & Adelman, 1994). Adolescent violence has also been explained in terms of psychopathology (Charles, 1986), and support for this view is drawn from various studies of adult males which suggest that batterers can consistently be categorized into distinct subgroups of deviant pathology (Dutton, 1995; Gondolf, 1985; Hastings & Hamberger, 1988; Murphy, Meyer, & O’Leary, 1993). From these findings, it appears that violent behaviour among youth may be influenced by various organic factors. However, researchers add that violence is by no means limited to the mentally ill (Gelles, 1983), and that theories of individual pathology fail to explain why the majority of assaults in families are committed by males (Frankel-Howard, 1992).

The concept of attachment is described as “the relation between two individuals in which each person feels strongly about the other and does a number of things to ensure the continuation of the relationship” (Santrock & Bartlett, 1986, p. 294). While the formation of these strong interpersonal bonds is certainly seen as a healthy human function, it is suggested that some individuals may develop dysfunctional patterns of attachment (dismissing, fearful, preoccupied) which increase the potential for violent behaviour (Dutton, 1995). This theory is reinforced by various findings which indicate that assaultive youth report low levels of closeness/attachment to
their parents (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Libon, 1989; Paulson et al., 1990; Peek et al., 1985). Similarly, studies of young offenders show that high levels of violence correlate with an inability to empathize with or feel close to others (Davis & Boster, 1992; Federn, 1990).

While theories of attachment present the idea that violent behaviour relates to a lack of intimacy with others, this concept does not adequately explain why women are the primary targets of family violence, or why males “appear” to be more often labelled with attachment disorders. A partial answer relates to the suggestion that dominant social messages encourage males to value the qualities of separateness and individuation—a process which results in the development of rigid psychological boundaries (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982). From this conceptualization, it follows that males’ relationships with others are generally characterized by power, dominance, distance, and control (Dienhart & Meyers Avis, 1990).

The influence of alcohol/drugs has often been related to violent behaviour, as these substances serve to decrease inhibitions, disturb perception, and produce irritability (Ray & Ksir, 1990). In Evans & Warren-Sohlberg’s (1988) review of police files, substance misuse was found to be a direct influence in 19 percent of cases involving adolescent-to-parent assault. In addition, the findings of Cottrell and Finlayson (1996) revealed that drug/alcohol use was a presenting factor in roughly 50 percent of parents’ descriptions of assaultive youth. Nevertheless, theorists generally caution against the assumption of a direct causal relationship between substance misuse and family violence, and instead suggest that addictive substances are used by abusers to excuse or facilitate their behaviours (Frankel-Howard, 1992). Indeed, Pelletier & Coutu (1992) suggest that while youth are rarely intoxicated during an assault, a large percentage of these incidents are precipitated by a verbal argument with parents over issues of substance misuse. It is also significant to note that approximately 70 percent of adolescents who attend drug/alcohol treatment centres have been exposed to family violence.

The existence of biological sex differences has been proposed as an explanation for the high incidence of male violence in society, and studies have noted low levels of adrenaline and
high levels of testosterone among some violent male youth (Linden, 1992). However, these factors are not necessarily causal, nor do they explain all instances in which violence occurs. It should further be stressed that theories of violence often equate sex differences with gender role, an approach which has “failed to call into question the structural features of . . . society and the gendered nature of the roles of men and women” (Linden, p. 152).

In a study of 60 male and female youth aged 9 to 14 years, researchers concluded that “increased expression of assertive forms of aggression is a developmental phenomenon for boys” (Inoff-Germain et al., 1988, p. 17). Although these findings may indeed be true in a purely rational or objectivist sense, it has been argued that developmental theories often fail to recognize the influence of social construction with regard to various aspects of human behaviour. (Germain, 1990; Gilligan, 1982). From a constructivist view, the “existence” of distinct life stages is acknowledged, but these changes are also explored further by examining how “childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age are shaped by our economic, political, religious, educational and family lives” (Radar, 1979, p. 645). In this way, violence among adolescent males is seen not so much as a fixed developmental phenomenon, but more as a constructed form of behaviour that has been developed in response to a series of social messages.

Sociological Theories

Hirschi’s (1969) social control theory assumes that criminal and delinquent behaviours are an intrinsic part of human nature, and therefore it is suggested that questions regarding the causes of such actions are largely irrelevant. From this particular viewpoint, it follows that researchers should focus their attention toward an exploration of those factors which serve to prevent crime and delinquency. In response, social control theory outlines that 1) attachment to others, 2) commitment to conventional goals, 3) involvement in productive activities, and 4) belief in traditional laws and values effectively constrain criminal behaviour.
To a certain extent, the validity of social control theory is confirmed by studies of adolescent-to-parent violence. For instance, youth who report low levels of attachment with parents appear more likely to be assaultive toward them (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Libon, 1989; Paulson et al., 1990; Peek et al., 1985). The importance of traditional beliefs has also been noted in various research findings, as adolescents who are the least violent toward parents score highest in terms of religiosity (Boone, 1991; Libon; Paulson et al.; Peek et al.). While these results are informative, social control theory has been criticized for its deterministic view of human nature, and for its inability to recognize the extent to which structural and political factors create discrepancies in crime rates among various social groups (Linden, 1992).

The basic premise of exchange theory is that individuals and groups will engage in a variety of behaviours in order to obtain rewards or avoid perceived consequences (Bersani & Chen, 1988). The influence of reinforcement is also noted, as those actions which are rewarded will likely be repeated more often. In earlier work, Gelles (1983) combined this exchange theory of aggression with Hirschi’s (1969) social control framework to develop an exchange/social control model of family violence. In summary, this model states that violence in the family is most likely to occur when 1) rewards outweigh the costs, 2) social controls which sanction violence are low, and 3) level of bonding among family members is minimal.

Exchange/social control theory is supported by findings which indicate that adolescents are more likely to use violence if the perceived costs are minimal (Agnew & Huguley, 1989), and when their actions are in some way rewarded through parents’ responses (Charles, 1986; Harbin & Madden, 1979; Ney & Mulvihill, 1982). In addition, the clinical experience of Price (1996) suggests that patterns of assaultive behaviour in youth are often reinforced when interventions from justice personnel are lax or ineffective. Finally, a number of research studies note that low levels of bonding exist between physically assaultive youth and their parents (Agnew & Huguley; Libon, 1989; Paulson et al., 1990; Peek et al., 1985).
An obvious strength of the exchange/social control theory relates to its synthesis of the psychological, intra-familial, and social factors that contribute to family violence. Nevertheless, an improvement to this theory would include elaboration on the concept of motivation, for it is unclear how/why the “reward” of assaulting a parent can be seen by a youth to outweigh the resultant consequences. The exchange/social control theory also lacks depth in terms of its political analysis, as limited discussion is offered regarding the gendered nature of existing ideologies and institutions which sanction male authority (Yllo, 1993).

The connection between violence and authority is addressed in resource theory, which suggests that two types of power are used to legitimize abusive behaviours (Bersani & Chen, 1988; Chafetz, 1988). Resource power refers to the ability of individuals and groups to gain control over others through the use of real or threatened force. Definitional power is more implicit, and involves the use of resource power to impose a variety of values, definitions, and restrictions onto others. Assaultive youth clearly have a great deal of resource power, and the level of definitional power they possess is noted in clinical assessments (Charles, 1986; Micucci, 1995; Ney & Mulvihill, 1982), and in research involving the Madanes Family Hierarchy Test (Harbin & Madden, 1979; Madden & Harbin, 1983). These findings indicate that assaultive youth are frequently described as having higher levels of authority than their parents. The connection between definitional power and the predominance of adolescent-to-mother assault can also be viewed in terms of gender politics, as “[s]exism at all levels of society continues to make women vulnerable to acts of violence [and they] often lack the necessary confidence . . . to deal with abuse from their teens” (Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996, p. 66).

Resource theory further outlines that the more authority individuals can effectively command, the less likely they are to use force in an open manner (Bersani & Chen, 1988; Chafetz, 1988). According to this perspective the opposite is also true of the violence/authority

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7 In this test procedure, parents and youth were shown a series of diagrams which represented four distinct patterns of family hierarchy. The participants were then asked to choose the diagram which best represented their family, and to identify which family members (son, daughter, mother, father) corresponded with each of the characters in the diagram that was chosen.
relationship, as it has been noted that “family members (including children) may use violence to redress grievances when they have few alternative resources available” (Gelles, 1993, p. 38). These concepts are important as they suggest that youth who have significant levels of resource power over their parents may use “direct” forms of violence (hitting, punching, pushing) to a lesser extent than weaker or victimized youth. As a result, studies which measure the rate of adolescent-to-parent assault solely on the basis of certain overt acts of violence will likely underestimate its prevalence—particularly with regard to male youth.

According to family systems theory (Micucci, 1995), a lack of parental power is one of the primary contributing factors of adolescent-to-parent assault, and evidence of this dynamic is seen in a number of research studies (Boone, 1991; Charles, 1986; Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996; Madden & Harbin, 1983; Paulson et al., 1990; Wells, 1987). The process through which abused parents abdicate their authority relates in part to the use of inconsistent disciplinary methods, as the act of intermittently “giving in” to a youth’s violent demands serves to reinforce this type of behaviour. Within such family patterns of inconsistent parental rules and consequences, it is suggested that violent youth may either be “attempting to force their parents into taking charge” (Ney & Mulvihill, 1982, p. 194), or “manifesting a grandiose sense of self along with an enormous sense of entitlement” (Harbin & Madden, 1979, p. 1290).

Family systems theorists outline the importance of clear boundaries between family members, since blurred roles may cause confusion and instability (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1991). Indeed, research suggests that parents of assaultive youth are characterized as being in frequent conflict (Libon, 1989; Paulson et al., 1990; Peek et al., 1985), thereby undermining each other's power, and “triangling” youth into their relational problems (Charles, 1986; Harbin & Madden, 1979; Micucci, 1995). Systems theory also suggests that denial among family members is problematic—especially in situations of violence (Imber-Black, 1993). This response is common in families of assaultive youth, as parents often deny or minimize the extent of their
victimization (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996; Gelles & Cornell, 1985; Pelletier & Coutu, 1992), or even assume responsibility for “causing” the abuse.

It is clear that family systems theory offers a valuable framework from which to conceptualize adolescent-to-parent violence. However, this perspective has been criticized for its narrow focus on “homeostasis” within the family whereas issues that are “based on economics, gender, and class are not addressed” (Coates, 1991, p. 90). As a result, traditional assumptions and values are often reflected in problem formulations, and this may serve to entrench the very social factors that are contributing to an issue (Burstow, 1992; Carniol, 1984). For instance, one study concluded by noting that while “father variables” were unimportant in terms of understanding adolescent violence, “mothers of aggressive boys may have been too lax and inconsistent in their disciplinary practices” (Boone, 1991, p. 223). A further example of sexism through “mother-blaming” is noted in Kumagai’s (1981) analysis, which suggests that mothers of physically assaultive youth “possess nervous traits [and] lack ability to appreciate humor in their lives” (p. 342). Finally, Micucci’s (1995) approach to therapy with assaultive youth and their parents cautions against interventions from schools, social workers, and legal professionals by outlining that “[s]ometimes extrafamilial systems become embroiled in conflicts which appropriately belong within the family . . . In these cases, it often happens that the symptomatic cycle expands to include the helping agencies” (p. 159).

A broader social analysis of family violence is presented in ecological and general systems theories, which assume that a number of individual, familial, and social factors interact on a continual basis to influence behaviour (Allan et al., 1996; Gelles & Loseke, 1993; Bersani & Chen, 1988). Within this approach, Dutton (1994) has proposed a “nested ecological theory” of violence which includes the “interactive effects of the broader culture (macrosystem), the subculture (exosystem), the family (microsystem), and individually learned characteristics (ontogeny)” (pp. 167-168). In a similar theoretical approach, eight influencing factors are outlined by Straus (1973), who suggests that physical violence within the family 1) has many
causes and roots, 2) is under-reported, 3) is minimized, 4) and is learned in childhood from various family members 5) and societal messages. Further, violent acts 6) will be repeated if desired results are obtained, 7) create additional conflicts within the family, 8) and encourage persons who are labeled as violent to continue with their abusive role.

Ecological and general systems theories provide a wide framework from which to analyze violence within the family, and numerous studies have confirmed that abusive behaviour from youth is under-reported (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Gelles & Cornell, 1985; Pelletier & Coutu, 1992), is learned from family members (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Kratcoski & Kratcoski, 1982; Libon, 1989; Livingston, 1986; Peek et al., 1985; Truscott, 1992; Ulbrich & Huber, 1981), and is repeated if desired results are obtained (Charles, 1986; Harbin & Madden, 1979; Ney & Mulvihill, 1982). In addition, the influence of societal messages on violent behaviour has been noted in a number of studies regarding youth and the media (Allan et al., 1996; Centerwall, 1994; Huesmann & Eron, 1986; Wood, Wong, & Chachere, 1991). However, it should also be noted that ecological and general systems theories of “family violence” have been criticized for their relatively gender-neutral approach to both research and theory development. For as Yllo (1993) outlines, “the general systems model propositions obscure the importance of gender . . . and are not as fruitful as they might be if a feminist lens sharpened their focus” (p. 50).

The relationship between violence and gender is addressed to some extent in social learning theory. This approach suggests that various forms of modelling serve to influence the formation of assaultive behaviour, as violence can be learned either through direct experience, or by repeatedly observing the actions of others (Linden, 1992). Three sources of influence are outlined by Bandura (1973), who states that aggressive behaviour may be learned from 1) parents and family members (family), 2) social models and peer relations (subcultural influences), 3) and various types of communications media (symbolic modelling).
The role that *family* plays in modelling violence appears to be well documented in research studies. For instance, children who witness wife assault have high rates of externalizing problems (disobedience, lying, destructive behaviour, cruelty to others), and this appears to be especially true for boys (Hughes, 1982; Jaffe, Hurley, & Wolfe, 1990; Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986; Wolfe, Zak, Wilson, & Jaffe, 1986). Research also shows that youth who assault their parents have often witnessed and/or experienced physical violence themselves (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Kratcoski & Kratcoski, 1982; Libon, 1989; Livingston, 1986; Peek et al., 1985; Truscott, 1992; Ulbrich & Huber, 1981). Indeed, Carlson (1991) found that adolescent males who witness wife assault are twice as likely to abuse their mothers than those who have not seen this form of violence.

Research also lends support to the role of *subcultural influences* with regard to youth violence. For instance, Agnew and Huguley (1989) examined this concept to conclude that youth who assault their parents are more likely to have peers who approve of these actions. Finally, the impact of *symbolic modeling* on violent behaviour has been noted, as most research suggests that exposure to media violence promotes aggressive behaviour among youth (Allan et al., 1996; Centerwall, 1994; Huesmann & Eron, 1986; Wood et al., 1991). Indeed, it has been argued that contemporary society is influenced by “a vast system of communications technology that has led to the creation of a culture of violence of unprecedented dimensions, much of it directed toward or available to children” (Miedzen, 1995, p. 20).

**Political Theories**

It is suggested that in North American society, the overall process of conceptualizing and responding to social problems follows a series of interrelated stages (Finkelhor et al., 1983). First, those people who act out various forms of abuse against others are pathologized on an *individual level*, and specific assessment and treatment approaches are developed in an effort to address the problem. In the second stage, a number of explanatory theories begin to emerge.
which usually serve to blame victims, and exonerate the abusers’ actions. Finally, a strong social movement develops in an effort to address the systemic nature of the problem, and this process often succeeds in exposing and politicizing various aspects of an issue.

From this framework, it is clear that social movements have influenced the ways in which wife assault, child abuse, and sexual abuse are presently conceptualized. This progress relates primarily to the influence of feminist theory, which asserts that violence in the family must be understood in terms of gender and power (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Kurz, 1993; Yllo, 1993). When feminism is applied to the dynamic of adolescent-to-parent assault, it is suggested that such acts are not related to the individual pathologies of victims or aggressors, but rather to the social relations and institutions that create and maintain violent behaviour.

The feminist perspective would predict that incidents of parent abuse typically involve powerful male youth assaulting their mothers. A number of studies support this view, as son-to-mother violence is often found to be the most frequent dynamic (Charles, 1986; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Inoff-Germain et al., 1988; Straus et al., 1980), and masculine role-modelling appears to have a significant influence on assaultive behaviour from youth (Carlson, 1991; Kratcoski & Kratcoski, 1982; Libon, 1989; Peek et al., 1985; Truscott, 1992; Ulbrich & Huber, 1981). In addition, those studies which measure the power structures of families reveal that assaultive youth are on equal or higher levels of authority than their parents (Charles; Madden & Harbin, 1983; Micucci, 1995; Ney & Mulvihill, 1982), and overall rates of assault appear positively correlated with the age, size, and strength of an adolescent (Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996; Harbin & Madden, 1979; Kumagai, 1981; Wells, 1987). Finally, researchers explain that high rates of female victimization are connected to traditional gender roles, as mothers are typically the primary (or sole) caretakers and are therefore the most likely targets for abuse (Cornell & Gelles; Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996).

While adolescent males clearly have high rates of assaultiveness toward parents, some research also indicates that a significant number of females engage in similar forms of violence
(Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996; Livingston, 1986; Paulson et al., 1990). These findings are problematic, as feminist theory claims that violence in the family is acted out primarily by males (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Kurz, 1993; Yllo, 1993). Indeed, the topic of gender has sparked considerable debate among family violence researchers, as some argue the feminist approach to be incomplete since it fails to adequately explain the existence of female-perpetrated violence, nor can it account for high rates of lesbian and gay battering (Dutton, 1994; Lenton, 1995; Lettelier, 1994).

In response to these criticisms, various feminist authors have countered that a critical analysis of gender does not ignore the wide variations in power that exist within relationships (Miller, 1994; Renzetti, 1994). For as Kelly (1996) explains, “feminism which begins from understanding gender as a social construct [in] which gendered selves and individual biography combine, can locate women’s use of violence within its existing framework” (p. 37). This analysis is expanded on by hooks (1984), who states that “[w]hile male supremacy encourages the use of abusive force to maintain male domination of women, it is the Western philosophical notion of hierarchical rule and coercive authority that is the root cause . . . of all violence between those who dominate and those who are dominated” (p. 118). From these explanations, it is clear that both male and female adolescents are influenced by their experiences with social relations of power. To further describe this process in terms of adolescent violence against parents, Cottrell and Finlayson (1996) outline that “[b]ecause society teaches girls that women are weak, some girls attempt to attach themselves to success by imitating the aggressive behaviour of males rather than identifying with that weakness” (p. 55).

It is important to note that in terms of adolescent-to-parent assault, the majority of violence from female youth is directed toward mothers (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Livingston, 1986; Pagelow, 1989; Paulson et al., 1990). This particular dynamic illustrates that while male and female youth may both engage in acts of physical violence, the victimization of fathers is
relatively rare. The abuse of mothers is therefore cyclical as they are first devalued through societal messages, and then assaulted by female youth who “hate their mothers for being so submissive . . . and resent those qualities” (Cottrell & Finlayson, pp. 55-56).

An Integrated Model

This literature review suggests that psychological, sociological, and political perspectives of violence offer a number of valuable—and often complementary—explanations for adolescent violence against parents. For the purpose of this study, these various perspectives were combined within an integrated model which outlines that the contributing factors of adolescent-to-parent assault are: 1) attachment issues, 2) rewards and consequences, 3) abusive parenting, 4) resource and definitional power, and 5) sex role. In addition, this model suggests that youth violence against parents is reinforced within a climate of 6) minimization/denial among family members, and 7) limited intervention from communities and service providers.

A number of studies indicate that assaultive youth have low levels of attachment with their parents (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Libon, 1989; Paulson et al., 1990; Peek et al., 1985). Psychological and systems theories propose that a lack of closeness is created by weak family boundaries, and from punitive, inconsistent parenting styles. The exchange/social control model states that close bonding between family members serves to reduce violence. Feminist theory adds that intimacy is to some extent a learned behaviour which is less developed among males than females. Overall, it appears that theorists and researchers describe the feeling of closeness with others as an integral component of non-violent relationships.

Research suggests that adolescents are more likely to use violence against parents if the rewards of such behaviour are perceived to outweigh the consequences (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Charles, 1986; Harbin & Madden, 1979; Ney & Mulvihill, 1982). And while philosophical differences exist regarding the way in which this dynamic is conceptualized, it appears that frustration-aggression, exchange/social control, systems, and feminist theories all agree with its
basic premise. The process through which youth develop this reward/consequence appraisal system is complex, but a number of themes can be drawn from the research. First, the level of attachment between assaultive youth and their parents is often quite low, and this creates a dynamic in which the emotional costs (guilt, shame, remorse) of violent behaviour are lessened. Second, it appears that when parents “give in” to adolescents’ abusive demands, a pattern is established wherein the rewards of this behaviour are reinforced. Finally, it should be noted that denial and minimization from family members, communities, professionals, and the legal system serve to decrease the extent to which such violence is adequately addressed.

Research shows that youth who are physically violent toward their parents have often been exposed to various forms of abusive parenting such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, or witnessing wife assault (Carlson, 1990; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Kratcoski & Kratcoski, 1982; Libon, 1989; Livingston, 1986; Peek et al., 1985; Truscott, 1992; Ulbrich & Huber, 1981). Social learning and systems theories suggest that violent behaviour is modelled in the family, and from a variety of social influences. Feminist theory adds that violence throughout society is directed primarily against women, and therefore youth who assault their parents will tend to imitate this pattern.

To clarify how violence is learned through modelling, it should be noted that among adolescents, the motivation to use such behaviour may vary. First, youth may learn through example that physical force is an effective means to achieve certain needs and/or goals. Second, the experience of witnessing wife assault creates a number of emotions such as fear, anger, guilt, powerlessness, and loyalty confusion. These feelings often lead to identification with the abuser, and objectification of the victim--especially among adolescent males. Finally, the relationship between victimization and retaliation should be noted, as it is suggested that “[c]hildren who have been abused physically or psychologically by their parents may retaliate when they are sufficiently strong and independent” (Ney & Mulvihill, 1982, p. 194).
Resource theory suggests that resource and definitional power are used by individuals and groups to establish control over others. From this perspective, the potential for violence against parents will increase when youth have the physical ability to do so, or when they are in danger and must protect themselves from victimization. Resource theory also predicts that youth who establish physical control over their parents may subsequently be less likely to use force in an overt manner. Systems theories add to this framework by suggesting that families of assaultive youth are often characterized by poor boundaries, and low levels of parental authority. The feminist viewpoint asserts that violence toward parents (particularly mothers) must be understood in terms of the systems of patriarchy which influence such behaviour.

In support of these theories, research indicates that the age, size, and strength of an adolescent appears to increase the potential for abuse (Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996; Harbin & Madden, 1979; Kumagai, 1981; Livingston, 1986; Paulson et al., 1990; Wells, 1987). A number of studies also suggest that parents of assaultive youth are lacking in terms of power and authority (Boone, 1991; Charles, 1986; Madden & Harbin, 1983; Miccuci, 1995; Paulson et al.). Finally, the majority of research reveals that adolescent-to-parent assault is committed primarily against mothers (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Livingston, 1986; Pagelow, 1989; Paulson et al., 1990). Clearly, these findings show that an adolescent’s actual ability to use physical force against parents increases the potential for this type of behaviour to occur.

The influence of sex role socialization has been noted in various research studies which indicate that violent behaviour from youth relates to masculine role-modelling (Carlson, 1991; Kratcoski & Kratcoski, 1982; Libon, 1989; Peek et al., 1985; Truscott, 1992; Ulbrich & Huber, 1981). Theorists also suggest that because males are taught to value the qualities of separateness and individuation, their relationships with others are often characterized by power, distance, and control (Connell, 1993; Dienhart & Meyers Avis, 1990; Gilligan, 1982). However, it should be understood that youth are shaped by this system of social messages in a fluid and contextual
manner. For while males appear to be directly influenced by the construct of masculinity, females may also be socialized into similar relations of power and control.

Once an incident of physical violence occurs within the family, a number of factors serve to reinforce this pattern of behaviour. For instance, research indicates that parents of assaultive youth tend to deny or minimize the abuse they are experiencing, and this response likely results in the continuation of violence. (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Charles, 1986; Gelles & Cornell, 1985; Pelletier & Coutu, 1992). It has also been noted that adolescent violence toward parents may increase in severity and frequency when this behaviour receives minimal consequences from parents, communities, and justice personnel (Price, 1996).

In summary, it is suggested that adolescent-to-parent violence can be understood in terms of five contributing factors. In addition, this conceptual model outlines that limited intervention from communities, and minimization/denial from parents and family members serve to further entrench the cycle of violence. Finally, it should be noted that while these factors often occur in an interconnected and reciprocal manner, not all areas of influence need to be present for assaultive behaviour to exist. To conclude, the diagram (Figure 1) on the following page illustrates the model that was used as a working hypothesis for this study.
Figure 1 outlines the hypothesis used for this study. The outer circle notes five primary contributing factors of adolescent-to-parent violence: 1) attachment issues, 2) rewards and consequences, 3) abusing parenting, 4) resource and definitional power, and 5) sex role. Beneath these headings are summary descriptions which further clarify the main elements of each contributing factor. The inner circle relates to reinforcing factors which maintain the cycle of abuse: 6) minimization/denial and 7) limited intervention. These contributing and reinforcing factors typically occur in a reciprocal manner, but they may also influence behaviour in relative isolation.
Part 1 - Participants

All participants in this research study were selected through the process of *purposeful sampling* (Maxwell, 1996; Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 1994). With this method, persons are chosen for their involvement because they possess a unique form of knowledge or experience about a particular topic. Since my research aim was to learn more about the various factors which contribute to and decrease incidents of adolescent-to-parent physical assault, 3 distinct groups of participants were selected; 1) counsellors who work families in which adolescent violence against parents occurs, 2) parents who had experienced violence from their adolescent children, and 3) adolescents who had been physically violent toward their parents.

**Counsellors**

The selection of counsellors was made by contacting various social service agencies to explain my research intent. The supervisors of 3 family counselling programs agreed to participate (Appendix 1), and they confirmed that a number of counsellors from their programs worked with families in which adolescent-to-parent assault occurred. Direct participation from counsellors was facilitated through the process of *third party recruitment*, as program supervisors were asked to distribute an Introductory Letter (Appendix 2) to counsellors which briefly described the purpose and format of my study. In order to meet the selection criteria, counsellors were required to 1) indicate an interest in participation, and 2) confirm that they had worked with families in which adolescent-to-parent violence had occurred.

Those counsellors who met the selection criteria and agreed to participate in this study were required to sign an Informed Consent Form (Appendix 3). This document outlined my primary research intent, and described the overall data collection procedure. Issues regarding
confidentiality were clearly explained, and counsellors were informed that they could refuse to participate in the research study, or withdraw from it at any time. Finally, the names and phone numbers of the appropriate research advisors were included on this form.

Of the 3 family counselling programs involved with this study, 2 receive funding from the B.C. Ministry for Children and Families. Counsellors in these programs work primarily on an outreach basis (in clients’ homes), and their mandate is to provide crisis intervention and ongoing counselling services to families who are referred by Ministry social workers. The other participating program receives funding from the B.C. Ministry of the Attorney General, and services to clients are provided on either an outreach or in-office basis through both family and support group formats. Program referrals are made by Ministry probation workers, and the youth involved in this service have been charged with various juvenile offences.

A total of 3 supervisors and 18 counsellors (10 male, 11 female) participated in this research study. In terms of race/ethnicity, 19 of the participants were Caucasian, 1 was First Nations, and 1 was Indo-Canadian. Levels of academic training varied, as 9 participants had certificates (lifeskills, early childhood education, criminal justice, social service, drug and alcohol counselling), 9 had Bachelor degrees (education, criminology, psychology, social work), and 3 had Master’s degrees (counselling psychology, marriage and family therapy). On average, these counsellors had 7 years of experience in the field of individual and family counselling. In addition, each participant had worked with approximately 8 families (past and present caseloads) in which adolescent-to-parent violence was a presenting issue.

Parents

The initial selection of parents was facilitated through assistance from the 3 participating counselling programs, as supervisors and counsellors agreed to review their caseloads (past and present) in order to establish a list of suitable participants (Appendix 1). Because my research aim was to explore both contributing and ameliorating factors with regard to adolescent-to-parent
violence, the selection process was based on 2 distinct criteria. First, parents who were chosen must have experienced at least 1 incident in which physical violence was directed toward them by a youth (10 to 18 yrs) who was under their guardianship. Second, it was required that the relationships between family members had subsequently improved to the extent that violence from these youth had decreased in terms of frequency and severity.

Once a list of parents who fit the selection criteria was compiled, supervisors and counsellors contacted these clients in person or by telephone to determine their interest in participation. This third party recruitment process was controlled by the use of a Letter of Introduction (Appendix 4) which briefly described the purpose and procedure of my research study. The letter also requested for those parents who agreed to participate in the study to indicate their verbal consent to the supervisor or counsellor who approached them. Once this verbal consent was obtained, a series of initial contacts (telephone or in person) between myself and the parents were arranged so that interview times could be established.

Parents who agreed to participate in the study were required to sign an Informed Consent Form (Appendix 5) which outlined the research intent, and described the interview process that would be used. Issues regarding confidentiality were explained, and parents were informed that they could refuse to participate, or withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, this form stated that parents could review the preliminary research findings so they would have the opportunity to edit any unwanted personal information. Finally, the names and phone numbers of the appropriate research advisors were included in this form.

A total of 7 parents (6 female, 1 male) agreed to participate in this research study. Specifically, 4 of these parents were single mothers, 1 parent was married but participated without her husband, and 1 mother/father couple were interviewed together. In terms of race/ethnicity, 2 of the parents identified themselves as First Nations, and the other 5 parents were Caucasian. Each of the parents had been assaulted at least once by their adolescent children (4 male, 2 female) within the previous 3 years, and these episodes occurred when the youth were
between the ages of 10 to 16. Overall, these parents had experienced a range of abusive actions against them such as pushing, slapping, punching, kicking, and choking. In addition, a number of parents had been subjected to verbal and physical threats.

Youth

The selection of adolescent participants followed the same process used with parents, and eligibility was based on 2 distinct criteria. First, those youth who were chosen for participation must have been physically violent toward their parent(s) at least once from when they were between the ages of 10 to 18. Second, the frequency and severity of these violent episodes was required to have decreased to some extent during the actual time of study.

In terms of actual recruitment, 2 of the participating youth were contacted through the same process as the parents. This involved an initial introduction (Appendix 4) from counsellors or supervisors, and the arrangement of a meeting between myself and the youth. The other 3 youth in this study had mothers who were also involved as research participants, and therefore in these cases the process of third party recruitment was conducted by parents.

The youth who agreed to participate in this research were asked to give assent to their involvement by signing an Informed Consent Form (Appendix 5). In addition, parental consent was required for those youth who were under 19 years old at the time of the interview. In one particular case, consent from a parent was not required as the participant was 20 years of age. Another youth was also exempted from obtaining parental consent because she was on an “independent living” program with the Ministry for Children and Families.

A total of 5 youth (2 male, 3 female) participated in this study, and they ranged in age from 15 to 20 years. In terms of race/ethnicity, 2 of the youth identified themselves as First Nations, and the other 3 were Caucasian. According to these youth, the onset of violence toward their parents typically began between the ages of 14 to 16, and all incidents had occurred within the previous 4 years. Except for 1 isolated incident in which a female youth had assaulted her
father, all 5 youth had directed their violence toward mothers. Overall, these youth identified a number of violent actions used against their parents such as pushing, biting, punching, hitting, throwing objects, using a knife, and threatening to kill or injure.

**Part II - Procedure**

While distinct procedures were developed for each of the 3 participant groups in this study, a *semi-structured* interview format was used throughout (Appendix 6). This method is somewhat informal and flexible, but is also guided by a series of questions and topics that need to be covered at some point during an interview session (Bernard, 1994; Crabtree & Miller, 1992). Since my research aim was to identify *descriptive themes* with regard to the two primary research questions, this semi-structured interview format was chosen because it allows for the collection of large amounts of *thick* data from which overall trends can emerge (Maxwell, 1996; Morse & Field, 1995). This method was also utilized because it provides a specific focus and structure, but is also flexible enough so that certain topics can be probed further, and new questions can be formulated and introduced as the interview progresses.

**Counsellor Interviews**

The information from supervisors and counsellors was gathered through *focus group* interview sessions with the 3 participating agencies. A total of 3 focus groups were conducted, as groups of participants from each agency were interviewed on a separate basis. The actual number of counsellors within these groups varied (3, 7, and 8), and 1 supervisor also participated in each of the sessions. These focus groups were approximately 2 hours in length, and the entire sessions were audio-taped for later transcription and data analysis. All groups were conducted in the staff offices of each respective agency, and seating was arranged in a circular fashion so that optimal communication between participants could be achieved.
To begin, supervisors and counsellors were informed about the general guidelines for these semi-structured focus groups. First, it was explained that I would be asking a number of questions regarding the research topic—many of which would be developed from the ongoing group discussions. Second, participants were encouraged to engage in various conversations amongst themselves, and to formulate their own questions. Finally, it was explained that diverse opinions and viewpoints from participants were welcomed.

To gather the necessary personal information about the participants, I asked counsellors and supervisors to state their academic qualifications, their level of work experience, and an approximate number of families they had worked with in which adolescent-to-parent assault was an issue. As a means of initiating discussion about the research topic, I asked participants to identify those characteristics which they found to be common among families in which youth violence against parents occurs. As the focus group discussions progressed, I asked a variety of open-ended questions which were aimed at eliciting further information. For instance, when a number of counsellors noted that a “rigid parenting style” was common among parents who were physically assaulted, I asked them to “speak more about” how this method of parenting contributed to violent behaviour from youth. For the latter part of these focus group interviews, I asked participants to identify those factors which appeared to decrease adolescents’ use of physical violence against parents, and a series of open-ended questions were again used as a means to gather more detailed and specific information.

While open-ended questions were used throughout the majority of these focus group interviews, I also asked a number of closed questions at certain points during the sessions. This technique was used primarily when ongoing participant discussions failed to reveal information regarding a particular aspect of my initial research hypothesis. For instance, when a specific focus group session which was close to completion had not yielded information about whether violence from youth was to some extent reward-based, I asked participants directly whether they perceived this specific dynamic to be a contributing factor.
Since focus group participants provided detailed descriptions regarding client families, confidentiality was a concern. To address this issue, I requested that case examples be described generically (mom, dad, son, daughter). In addition, those aspects of a case description which had the potential to reveal a family's identity were omitted from the research summary. Once data analysis was complete, the focus group participants received a draft version of the research summary so they had an opportunity to edit any unwanted or revealing quotes. Finally, the confidentiality of counsellors and supervisors was maintained by using only first names during the interview sessions, and omitting all names during the transcription process.

Parent Interviews

Information from parents was collected through private interview sessions with the exception of 1 case in which a parent chose to have her daughter and a counsellor present. These interviews were 45 to 90 minutes in length, and they occurred either in the participants' homes, or in a private office space which was arranged by the recruiting counsellor or supervisor. All parent interviews were audio-taped for later transcription and data analysis.

To begin, parents were informed about the general guidelines for these semi-structured interview sessions. First, it was explained that I would be asking a number of questions which related to the research topic, and that some of these questions would be developed as the interview progressed. Second, parents were asked to provide answers based on their own experiences and perceptions from living with physically violent youth. Finally, parents were encouraged to agree or disagree with any comments made during the interview, or to decide not to answer those questions which felt inappropriate or private.

In order to commence the interview process, I asked parents what they thought was “going on” when youth were violent toward them. From this initial question, various open-ended questions were then used to elicit further information from parents. At a certain point during these interviews, parents were also asked a series of closed questions which related to my
research hypothesis. For example, I asked a number of parents (who had not yet addressed this topic) whether their children had ever witnessed and/or directly experienced violence in the home. During the latter part of the interviews, parents were also asked to identify those factors which helped to decrease youth assaultiveness in their family.

The confidentiality of all family members was maintained by using only first names throughout the interviews, and these names were omitted during the transcription process. In addition, parents received a draft version of the interview summary so they would have an opportunity to edit any unwanted or potentially revealing personal quotes.

**Youth Interviews**

Information from youth was collected through the use of private interview sessions, except for one case in which a participant chose to have her mother and a counsellor present. These interviews were 30 to 60 minutes in length, and they occurred either in the youth's homes, or in a private office space arranged by the recruiting counsellor or supervisor. All youth interviews were audio-taped for later transcription and data analysis.

To begin, youth were informed about the general guidelines for these semi-structured interview sessions. First, it was explained that I would be asking various questions about the research topic, and that some questions would be developed as the interview progressed. Second, the youth were asked to provide answers based on their own perceptions about those times when they had used violence against their parents. Finally, youth were encouraged to agree or disagree with any comments made during the interview process, or to decide not to answer any questions which they felt were inappropriate or private in nature.

In order to start the interview process, I asked youth what they thought was “going on” when they had been violent toward their parents. As they responded, I asked a series of open-ended questions with the aim of eliciting further information. At various points during these interviews, the youth were also asked a number of closed questions which related to my research
hypothesis. For example, I asked certain youth (who had not addressed this topic) whether they believed that societal messages about gender roles had influenced their behaviours in any way. During the latter part of the interview process, youth were also asked to identify those factors which helped to decrease their violent behaviour toward parents.

The confidentiality of family members was ensured by using only first names throughout the interview sessions, and all names were omitted during the transcription process. After the data analysis was complete, I also sent a draft version of the interview summary to 2 of the participating youth (1 declined, 2 could not be contacted) so they would have an opportunity to edit any unwanted or potentially revealing personal quotes.

**Part III - Data Analysis**

This section on data analysis is divided into three areas of discussion. First, an overview is presented with respect to the various philosophical perspectives that are applied to methods of analysis. Second, the qualitative content analysis approach used in this particular research study is described in detail. Finally, the research methodology and data analysis approach used in this study is discussed in terms of generalizability, reliability, and validity.

**Philosophical Perspectives**

Throughout the various methods used in social science research, three main philosophical perspectives can be identified; positivism, constructivism, and critical constructivism (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Hayes, 1991; Kvale, 1996; Monette et al., 1994; Neuman, 1994). From a positivist philosophy, research is conducted through precise methods of inquiry which are governed by a number of characteristics and assumptions. First, the collection of data is obtained through direct observation as opposed to subjective interpretation. Second, this research approach adheres to an organized system of procedures so that results can be analyzed and replicated by other researchers. Third, the positivist philosophy assumes the existence of a “cause and effect”
pattern within the universe which can be described, quantified, and predicted. Finally, researchers who follow this approach claim to reduce the influence of subjectivity by “separating” their values and biases from the methodological process.

Research conducted from a positivist philosophy can provide valuable information about those social phenomena which can be readily observed and measured. However, this approach has also been criticized for being less suited to studies which require a more in-depth analysis of the “unobservable” meanings, interpretations, and experiences that exist within the social world (Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Kvale, 1996; Maxwell, 1996). An additional concern is that positivist research tends to ignore the structural and political elements of certain phenomena, as these factors are considered to be outside of the scientific realm.\(^8\) Finally, positivism is criticized for its implicit assumption that an ultimate “truth” or “reality” actually exists.

Within a constructivist philosophy, the positivist assumption of a predictable, measurable reality is rejected as it is argued that any action or event exists primarily through a shared system of personal and social interpretation (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Efran, Lukens, & Lukens, 1988; Kvale, 1996; Neuman, 1994; Wakefield, 1995). In its purest form, the constructivist approach challenges the existence of any universal patterns or laws, and instead directs its attention toward an analysis of the ways in which knowledge is created and maintained. From this stance, human experience can be understood within a series of “local contexts” which vary according to the perspectives of those involved in the construction of a particular reality. Observable facts cease to exist except through a common framework of values, and the positivist tendency to separate objectivity from subjectivity is described as a false dichotomy.

Certainly, the constructivist perspective has provided researchers with a means to understand and “give voice” to the multiple truths which appear to constitute our social world.

\(^8\)Monette et al. (1994) cite numerous concerns regarding this “apolitical” method of research. Some examples include; 1) racial bias in terms of conceptualizing and measuring crime statistics, 2) ignoring the effects of heterosexism with regard to AIDS research, and 3) failure to acknowledge the role of race or gender in the interviewer/interviewee encounter. Kirby and McKenna (1989) summarize these concerns by noting that “research and knowledge are produced in a manner which represents the political and social interests of a particular group. [and have] helped perpetuate and maintain current power relations of inequality” (pp. 16-17).
However, research findings based on this philosophy are by their own definition difficult to validate, and the emphasis on “contextuality” that is central to constructivism discourages any conclusions which imply generalizability (Kvale, 1996). This philosophy has also been criticized for creating a system of thought whereby any attempts to legitimize certain areas of knowledge over others has become immediately suspect. As a consequence, research conducted from a constructivist standpoint has a tendency of “sliding toward a depoliticized relativism where every viewpoint becomes equally valid” (Allen & Baber, 1992, p. 6).

Whereas positivist and constructivist philosophies have been challenged for representing the two extremes of objectivity and subjectivity, a critical constructivist philosophy attempts to combine the uniqueness of individual experience with an understanding of the dominant social structures that influence perception and action (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Kvale, 1996; Neuman, 1994). With this stance, social researchers support the “constructionist interest in the historical and social determinants of knowledge, while emphasizing the political, moral, and practice implications of theory and research” (Witkin, 1993, p. 240). From the interplay that occurs between these concrete and experiential realities, it is assumed that the world is constantly being re-created through a series of interpretive contradictions. The aim of critical constructivist research is therefore to explore such conflicts in order to gain a better understanding of the complex ways in which knowledge, experience, and reality are formed.

While critical constructivism rejects any claims which suggest a universal framework of understanding, it should be noted that this philosophy is neither relativist nor neutral. By providing a critical interpretation of the connections between subjective and objective realities, this approach endeavours to create social and political change within the actual conditions that are being examined. The value of such research is therefore judged not only by the general importance of its findings, but also in terms of the liberatory potential this knowledge has for society. Throughout this method of inquiry, it is important for researchers to maintain a subtle balance between critical analysis and subjective integrity, as the goal is to “present our work in a
way that grants the [participant] interpretive respect without relinquishing our responsibility to provide our own interpretation” (Borland, 1991, p. 64).

The critical constructivist perspective is certainly valuable in the sense that it seeks to understand how the experiences of various individuals and groups are influenced by dominant social structures and ideologies. However, certain concerns arise when this particular philosophy is applied to social science research. For while critical constructivism claims to have an interest in both subjective and objective realities, its emphasis on social change implies that political interpretations of the world are to some extent more “valid” than individual perceptions. As a result, biased conclusions may be drawn from those findings in which the participants’ perceptions contradict the political views of the researcher. To counter this tendency, it is important for results to be presented in a way that separates the researcher’s critical analysis from the personal views expressed by the participants (Kvale, 1996).

Throughout this overview, a number of strengths and weakness have been discussed with respect to the three philosophical perspectives common to social science research. The aim of my study was to analyze adolescent-to-parent physical violence from within a critical constructivist philosophy, and the decision to use this approach was based on a number of factors. First, I wanted to understand and give voice to the individual experiences reflected in parents’ and adolescents’ descriptions of the dynamics involved in this form of physical violence. Second, I sought to combine this subjective information with the more “interpretive” perspectives of counsellors and supervisors who work with families in which adolescent violence against parents occurs. Third, I wanted to contextualize these participant viewpoints within a critical constructivist framework that connects acts of violence to various personal, interpersonal, and social realities. Finally, it should be noted that my ongoing goal is to use this research information as means to provide therapeutic family support, community education, and political advocacy regarding the issue of adolescent-to-parent violence.
**Applications to Research**

Research approaches generally exist along a continuum in which data collection and analysis procedures are either grounded solely in the information obtained from participants, or developed entirely from existing knowledge and theory (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Kvale, 1996; Maxwell, 1996). Although the participant-based approach provides valuable information regarding the phenomenological aspects of a study, the conclusions drawn from this process do not necessarily have an intrinsic “truthfulness” over less subjective methodologies. Conversely, research strategies which are guided primarily by theoretical concepts may inhibit the open-ended process that is often needed to recognize and validate new interpretations of a phenomenon. In response, the critical constructivist approach seeks to combine all sources of information which relate to a particular area of study, and therefore theoretical knowledge is viewed as a valuable complement to the grounded data obtained from participants.

The aim of my research study was to use a combined methodology in which information was collected and analyzed through both participant-based and theoretically derived perspectives. In terms *data collection*, participants were interviewed in order to obtain information about their personal interpretations of adolescent-to-parent violence. At the same time, my research questions were organized around a pre-developed framework which derived in part from the existing literature. Similarly, my approach to *data analysis* combined the subjective information obtained from participants with an overall theoretical perspective of the ways in which violent behaviour is created and maintained throughout society.

Research studies are often assumed to be successful when participant statements indicate high levels of agreement (Dreher, 1994; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Malhotra, 1993). If such congruence is achieved, it is common for researchers to make generalizations about various findings. While this approach appears reasonable, a critical constructivist perspective cautions that any understanding of a phenomenon is formed through a series of social interactions and perceptions. It should therefore be noted that while a congruency in research results may indeed indicate validity, a series of conflicting viewpoints may provide equally valuable information.
For instance, many counsellors who were interviewed in this study suggested that violence against parents derives in part from a "developmental need" for autonomy among youth that is somehow blocked. However, other counsellors questioned the existence of this developmental stage, and instead argued that violent behaviour from youth relates to the extreme prejudice and control they often experience within society. Following the critical constructivist view that all perspectives have an inherent validity, I have included both of these explanations within the research findings rather than value one interpretation over the other.

Although my research aim was to honour the perceptions and experiences expressed by the participants, this does not imply that my approach remained relativist or neutral throughout. Within a critical constructivist philosophy, it is also important for researchers to provide their own interpretations of the data as a means to continue the dialectic process. In an effort to conduct this study in a truthful and respectful manner, the majority of "themes" that I developed were drawn directly from the views of participants. However, parts of this analysis also include my personal and theoretical biases—some of which differ from the data as originally presented. In order to "come clean" regarding this process, it is important for me to note that the development of the theme titled socialization of male power was in many ways influenced by a feminist perspective of family violence. Similarly, the sub-themes regarding lack of remorse and lack of control were also formed from my understanding of the rationalizations used by individuals and family members to explain violent behaviours. In chapter 8, my views regarding these overall findings are discussed, and recommendations are offered in terms of addressing adolescent violence against parents on individual, intrafamilial, and social levels.

**Qualitative Content Analysis**

Content analysis is described in general terms as "the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data" (Patton, 1990, p. 381). However, definitions which are more specific tend to reveal significant differences between the qualitative and quantitative research traditions. Within the quantitative approach, content analysis involves the measurement
of data through the application of precise coding techniques (Allen-Meares, 1985; Edwards & Hopps, 1995; Monette et al., 1994). This method usually focuses on *manifest content*, which refers to the clearly evident aspects of communication within a particular text. The quantitative approach also implies a high level of objectivity, as it is assumed that "the rules to be used in classifying the content of a communication help control any special interest or ideology that might influence the research study" (LeCroy & Solomon, 1993, p. 305).

Within the *qualitative* tradition, the aim of content analysis is to provide an holistic interpretation and description of the text (Boyle, 1994; Edwards & Hopps, 1995; Holsti, 1969). From this approach, less emphasis is placed on rigorous counting procedures than on a contextual analysis of the data to reveal various meanings, patterns, and "deeper phenomena" (Allen-Meares, 1985, p. 52). The information obtained through this method is often referred to as *latent content*, which is "the underlying meaning of what is communicated" (LeCroy & Solomon, 1993, p. 309). Overall, researchers use a significant amount of subjectivity and interpretation during qualitative content analysis, as conclusions are drawn not so much from what is directly observed, but more from what is implied or buried within the text.

It is often suggested that research methods should focus exclusively on either manifest or latent content (Boyle, 1994; Holsti, 1969; LeCroy & Solomon, 1993). Nevertheless, my aim was to use both types of data within a qualitative approach to analysis. Parent and youth interviews were therefore analyzed for manifest and latent data in order to obtain a detailed understanding of the many experiences, perceptions, and underlying meanings portrayed. Counsellor interviews were analyzed somewhat differently, as these participants were asked to provide various *explanations* of the *underlying dynamics* involved in adolescent-to-parent violence. As a result, the explicit (manifest) descriptions from counsellors were used to gather information about the deeper (latent) issues involved in the actual research topic.

In this study, the process of incorporating manifest and latent content within the overall analysis revealed a number of internal congruencies and contradictions. However, it is important to note that the conflicting messages found within various interview texts were not perceived as
being problematic. In fact, statements from participants which appeared to be contradictory often provided valuable information about the interplay between subjective experience and external reality. To illustrate, a youth who said that she “completely lost it” during violent episodes also noted that the frequency of her assaultiveness decreased after being charged by the police. This example suggests that while violence was described (manifest data) as being pre-conscious to some extent, the youth nevertheless exercised a high level of personal control over her behaviour (latent data) when external authorities become involved.

In many respects, the qualitative approach to content analysis appears similar to certain descriptions of grounded theory (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Maxwell, 1996; Morse & Field, 1995; Tesch, 1990). With this method, all categories and themes are developed from the original data (constant comparative technique), and any interpretations influenced by pre-existing theory are discouraged. A strength of the grounded theory approach relates to its emphasis on remaining “true” to the original data. However, it should also be noted that this method has been criticized for its “failure to acknowledge implicit theories which guide work at an early stage” (Silverman, 1993, p. 47). Because my approach to analysis incorporates the use of 1) original data, 2) existing theory, and 3) personal interpretation, it is my assertion that qualitative content analysis is a more appropriate description of this study than grounded theory.

**Elements of Content Analysis**

Content analysis methods are typically designed in terms of three elements; 1) categories, 2) units of analysis, and 3) systems of enumeration (Allen-Meares, 1985; Boyle, 1994; Holsti, 1969). Throughout this section, these elements are described with respect to their application to my research, and examples are provided in an effort to clarify the procedures used. In addition, the method of data comparison used in this study (cross-case analysis) is outlined, and the actual process through which various themes were developed is described in detail.
**Categories**

In quantitative approaches to content analysis, the development of *categories* must adhere to three basic criteria. (Allen-Meares, 1985; Monette et al., 1994; Nachmias & Nachmias, 1981; Weber, 1990). First, these categories should be *exhaustive*, which means that specific groupings are available to account for every aspect of data relevant to a particular study. Second, each item of analysis should be placed into one category only, and this requirement is referred to as *mutual exclusivity*. Finally, a consistent *classification principle* should be used in the development of these categories, as quantitative data which derive from unequal groupings would be difficult to compare in such a way that meaningful conclusions could be drawn.

Qualitative methods of content analysis place less emphasis on the development of categories that are mutually exclusive and consistently classified (Allen-Meares, 1985; Boyle, 1994). While these criteria may be essential to quantitative research, an approach which defines qualitative information in too rigid a manner is likely to create artificial divisions between categories. To illustrate, one youth who had been violent to her mother stated that:

> I was just really resentful, too. Like really angry at her that she would leave me alone with somebody who abuses me all the time.

In this statement, the youth indicated that her violence was related to 1) the experience of being abused, and 2) subsequent anger and resentment toward the “non-protective” parent. In addition, this statement implies that 3) she had the physical power to carry out such an action. From this example, it is clear that a small segment of text can be assigned to a number of categories simultaneously. As a result, strict adherence to a criterion such as mutual exclusivity would likely hinder the development of interrelated groupings. In addition, the use of a rigid classification principle would probably be too narrow in scope to measure the relevant aspects of a text, as categories developed solely on the basis of “events” (child abuse) would not allow for a concurrent analysis of “emotional states” (resentment) or “dynamics of abuse” (non-protective female parent was the victim of violence from the youth).
The data analysis method used in this study stems from a qualitative orientation to category development. For the reasons outlined, my study did not adhere to the requirement of mutual exclusivity. Instead, my aim was to utilize a form of *fuzzy exclusivity* whereby identical segments of interview data could be assigned to more than one category.\(^9\) Similarly, I rejected the use of a consistent classification principle, and instead developed a *contextual classification principle* from which to analyze the data.\(^10\) Finally, I followed the traditional requirement that data analysis categories should be *exhaustive*, and therefore specific groupings were developed to account for all aspects of information relevant to the research topic.

**Units of Analysis**

In the content analysis approach, all units of analysis are comprised of two distinct components; recording units and context units. A *recording unit* is defined as “the smallest body of content in which the appearance of a reference is counted” (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1981, p. 261). The actual size of these recording units can vary considerably, as researchers may choose between 1) words/symbols, 2) overall themes, 3) people/characters, 4) sentences/paragraphs, or 5) an entire text. It is extremely important to maintain a subtle balance in the selection of these recording units, as they should be sufficient in size for the item of study to be analyzed, yet their design must also be precise enough so that useful conclusions can be made.

Once a recording unit has been chosen, the researcher must develop specific boundaries from which to draw the data. These measurement criteria are defined as *context units*, which are the largest portions of a text that may be searched to identify a particular recording unit (Allen-Meares, 1985; Holsti, 1969; Nachmias & Nachmias, 1981). It should also be noted that context units must be the same size or larger than recording units, and the most important factor

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\(^9\) I created the term “fuzzy exclusivity” as a means to describe my research methodology in a more accurate fashion. The idea for this term derives from a particular form of computer technology called “fuzzy logic,” in which traditional binary modes of processing are replaced by a series of data sets that represent varying degrees between “yes” and “no” (Flynn, 1993).

\(^10\) I also developed the term “contextual classification principle” as a means to suit my analysis method. From this approach, a number of measurement categories (beliefs, values, emotions, behaviours, events) were used simultaneously in order to apply the data to themes.
to consider in any design of this nature is whether the context unit can incorporate detailed information while at the same time ensure that valuable data are not overlooked.

The primary aim of my study was to identify those factors which contribute to and ameliorate incidents of adolescent-to-parent violence. Since my interest was not to perform a search of words, sentences, or paragraphs, the *entire transcripts* were chosen as the context units, and interview texts were analyzed in such a way that *overall themes* were used as the recording units. With this approach, I was able to review large sections of text in order to obtain the rich, contextual data that was necessary for the qualitative nature of this study.

*Systems of Enumeration*

The final aspect of any content analysis procedure relates to the *systems of enumeration* that are used. These measurements may be carried out in various ways, as interview texts can be searched in order to determine the 1) presence or absence, 2) frequency, 3) density, or 4) intensity of certain recording units (Holsti, 1969; Monette et al., 1994; Nachmias & Nachmias, 1981). While these systems of enumeration are essential to content analysis, considerable debate exists regarding the validity of various “counting” procedures—especially in terms of qualitative approaches. For while numerical measures may be accurate indicators with respect to some units of study, it could also be suggested that all elements of an interview text should be compared on an equal basis regardless of any rating value (Holsti, 1969).

In my research study, interview transcripts were searched in an effort to determine which themes related to adolescent violence against parents. Throughout this process, categories were enumerated by noting their overall *presence* or *absence* within the text. For example, if a transcript revealed no information that indicated “abusing parenting” as a contributing factor in terms of assaultive behaviour, this category would be noted as absent. Conversely, those texts which indicated that violent youth had witnessed wife assault as children would be enumerated as present within the category of “witnessing violence.”
**Method of Data Comparison**

In any data analysis method, the researcher must determine how a selection of interview transcripts will be interpreted in relation to each other. When the research aim is to study variations between participants, a *case analysis* approach is used whereby each text is studied on an individual basis before being compared with the others. In contrast, a *cross-case analysis* method involves “grouping together answers from different people to common questions or analyzing different perspectives on central issues” (Patton, 1990, p. 376). While these two methods can certainly be used together, the primary aim of my study was to identify common themes with regard to the topic of adolescent-to-parent assault. From this, I chose to use a cross-case analysis approach in which transcripts were analyzed together.

It should be noted that because 3 groups of participants were involved in my study, each set of transcripts (3 focus groups, 6 parent interviews, 5 youth interviews) were analyzed on a separate basis. As a result, these findings are organized into four separate chapters; 1) youth interviews, 2) parent interviews, 3) counsellor interviews, and 4) a summary of findings which includes a synthesis of the themes drawn from these 3 groups of participants.

**Process of Thematic Development**

Throughout the actual process of thematic development, I used a specific method of data grouping. First, each set of transcripts was reviewed in an effort to identify common themes and sub-themes. Second, the verbatim segments of these interview texts were compiled under various “working titles” which represented different themes, and this process continued until no new themes were identified. Third, these themes were combined, separated, and reorganized a number of times until a satisfactory analysis had been achieved. Fourth, the findings of these 3 sets of transcripts were presented in the form of separate summaries (chapters 5, 6, and 7). Finally, the themes from these chapters were combined (chapter 4) to produce an overall framework of understanding with regard to adolescent violence against parents.
Generalizability, Reliability, and Validity

There is considerable disagreement within the research community about which particular approaches are best used to assess qualitative studies (Kvale, 1996; Maxwell, 1996). In some instances researchers have rejected quantitative guidelines altogether, arguing that these concepts are antithetical to the qualitative philosophy. New descriptions and terms have thus been created, and studies are assessed by whether they are honourable, credible, confirmable, transferable, and positional.\(^{11}\) While such methods indeed expand the range of options for researchers, my study reflects the view that traditional approaches to generalizability, reliability, and validity may be successfully adapted and applied in a way that is relevant to the qualitative research aim. This perspective allows for the use of familiar quantitative terminology and procedure, yet ensures that evaluation criteria are “used to fit with the philosophical assumptions, purposes, and goals of the qualitative paradigm” (Leininger, 1994, p. 97).

**Generalizability**

It is commonly acknowledged that the results from quantitative studies can often be generalized to a larger population (Monette et al., 1994; Wakefield, 1995). In contrast, qualitative methods of analysis are described as being best suited for gathering “rich” or “thick” data in order to make specific conclusions about individual research participants. This latter focus has led some critics to assume that the findings from qualitative samples cannot be applied with any accuracy outside of the research context. While this may be true to some extent, it could also be argued that there is no clear reason to believe that qualitative results are not generalizable (Maxwell, 1996). From this, it is suggested that researchers should utilize a method of analytical generalization in order to make informed judgments about whether specific findings can be applied to other situations (Kvale, 1996). Various factors are taken into account when

\(^{11}\)See Kirby and McKenna (1989), Leininger (1994), and Lincoln (1995) for full descriptions. Honourable research attempts to reflect the experience of marginalization in a way that is respectful and supportive. Credibility refers to the truthfulness or believability of research findings. Confirmability is achieved when repeated evidence from participants affirms what is known. Transferability refers to the extent that conclusions can be shifted to other contexts. Positionality occurs when researchers make their personal biases and assumptions explicit.
determining the generalizability of such studies, as this process involves a critical understanding of the persons, relationships, and contexts that are to be compared. Throughout, the researcher should provide sufficient information about the analysis procedure so that readers are given the opportunity to make their own conclusions regarding generalizability.

A primary aim of my research study was to draw certain conclusions about adolescent violence against parents which could then be applied to the wider population of families who are affected by this problem. However, I recognize that the contexts in which such violence occurs may differ in terms of age, race, sex, class, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, and family constellation (number of parents, number of children). It is also acknowledged that youth violence may be directed toward grandparents, step-parents, adoptive parents, foster parents, and other types of adult caregivers. To some extent, violent relationships that occur within these diverse contexts are likely to have a number of similarities. However, my research findings are less applicable to those family characteristics which were not represented within the study. It is therefore noted that my overall results relate primarily to 1) Caucasian, 2) First Nations, 3) single mother, 3) heterosexual two-parent, and 4) step-parent families.

Another limitation to the generalizability of my study relates to the characteristics of the supervisors and counsellors who participated. For while there was a roughly equal distribution with regard to sex (10 male, 11 female), 19 of the focus group participants were Caucasian. As a result, my research findings may include certain biases which reflect the experience of white culture whereas the views of “non-white” counsellors (1 First Nations, 1 Indo-Canadian) were not given equal representation. In addition to these racial/cultural limitations, the wide range of training, education, and experience among participants likely had an influence in terms of their “interpretations” of the research topic. For instance, some counsellors expressed a “family systems” orientation whereas others were more “political” in their focus.

While the sample size of a study generally refers to the actual number of participants involved, the qualitative research tradition includes a variety events, incidents, and experiences
within this measurement criterion (Sandelowski, 1995). From this, it should be noted that my study involved “direct” participation from 21 counsellors who had each worked with approximately 8 families in which adolescent-to-parent assault was an issue. It can thus be argued that the information obtained from these focus groups involved an overall “experience” base of approximately 168 families. With this sample size, I maintain that conclusions can be generalized to the larger population of families with assaultive youth.

Reliability

In both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis, reliability refers to the extent that research produces consistent findings (Kvale, 1996; Monette et al., 1994). Because this issue of consistency relates to the 1) interviewing, 2) transcribing, and 3) analyzing stages of the research process, various methods are often used to ensure reliability. During the interview stage, researchers should follow a uniform procedure so that variability due to individual and group characteristics can be minimized. At the same time, efforts to achieve reliability in qualitative research should not result in a rigidity which hinders the creativity and interpretation that is crucial to the interview process. For although “increasing the reliability of the interview findings is desirable in order to counteract haphazard subjectivity, a strong emphasis on reliability may counteract creative innovations” (Kvale, p. 236).

In the interview stage of my research study, a semi-structured guide (Appendix 6) was used in order for data collection to be consistent. However, a significant degree of variability existed throughout this process, as each interview session brought forth a series of unique responses and discussions. Regardless of these differences, I attempted to maintain reliability by avoiding the over-use of closed or dichotomous questions. Instead, a series of open-ended questions were used as a means to allow respondents “the opportunity to structure an answer in any of several dimensions” (Krueger, 1994, p. 57). As the interviews progressed, I became somewhat directive by asking questions which were designed to explore specific statements. To
illustrate, I commonly probed participants to “speak more about this” or “explain that further” in relation to various comments they had made. In some cases, I also asked closed questions during the latter part of those interviews which had not addressed certain aspects of my hypothesis. For instance, I asked counsellors in one focus group whether they thought violence toward parents was related to “perceived rewards” among youth. While this question was potentially leading, it enabled me to gather information that was relevant to the study.

A number of methods can be used to ensure that reliability is achieved during the transcribing stage (Kvale, 1996). One approach is to have two or more transcriptions of the same interview independently produced in order to compare them for consistency in interpretation. A second method involves the development of clear instructions for the transcriber so that a uniform result can be achieved. While my research study involved the creation of only one transcription-per session, I attempted to ensure reliability by cross-checking each transcript with the corresponding audio-taped interview. In addition, I gave clear guidelines to the transcriber regarding the procedures that were necessary for this particular study.

In addition to maintaining reliability during the interviewing and transcribing stages, it is necessary for the researcher to ensure that data analysis is consistent. This may be addressed by having various analysts interpret the data so that the threat of bias or subjectivity is lessened (Kvale, 1996). Furthermore, a uniform approach can be used during the coding process, and this is usually accomplished by developing a comprehensive analysis guide. My research approach did not use multiple analysts to address consistency. However, I attempted to achieve reliability by adhering to the criteria outlined in my content analysis approach.

In qualitative research methods, the confirmability of a study may be enhanced if results appear to present repeated evidence which supports a particular conclusion (Leininger, 1994). While this form of reliability is not always necessary to ensure the intrinsic value of findings, researchers commonly find that a saturation point is reached whereby most of the significant information regarding a study is collected after a certain number of transcripts are analyzed.
(Dreher, 1994; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Malhotra, 1993). The level at which saturation occurs is related primarily to the type of research conducted, and therefore this aspect of confirmability is best approached from a flexible, context-specific perspective. In my study, the information obtained from focus groups reached a significant level of saturation at the point where all three sessions had been conducted, and this pattern is consistent with the literature (Krueger, 1994; Malhotra, 1993). Results were similar among the parent and youth interviews, as the majority of themes were developed from the first few interview texts.

A final method through which reliability can be addressed involves the participation of the reader. To facilitate this process, it is important for researchers to provide an *explication of procedures* which thoroughly outlines the methodology involved in gathering and analyzing the data (Kvale, 1996). With this information, readers should be able to follow a study in order to make personal judgments regarding the extent to which research findings are consistent with the data collection and analysis methods used. Throughout this study, I have attempted to provide detailed explanations of my design, implementation, and analysis methods so that the reader can make an informed assessment regarding reliability.

**Validity**

Within quantitative research methods, *validity* is achieved when data collection and analysis procedures provide an accurate measure of the topic that is being explored (Monette et al., 1994). In contrast, the qualitative research approach outlines that “validity pertains to the degree that a method investigates what it is intended to investigate” (Kvale, 1996, p. 238). From this latter approach, it is clear that the concept of validity should not be addressed simply by determining whether an “objective accuracy” has been achieved with respect to the measurement of a particular phenomenon. Instead, emphasis is placed primarily on determining how and why certain findings are revealed within a topic of study.
According to Kvale (1996), the issue of qualitative validity occurs throughout the seven stages of the research process; thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, validating, and reporting. During the thematizing stage, researchers should attempt to ensure the validity of a study by grounding its assumptions on a solid theoretical base. Although minimal research has been conducted on the topic of adolescent-to-parent violence, my understanding of this issue was derived from a thorough analysis of the available literature. In addition, my prior experience as a family counsellor, youth worker, and child protection worker provided me with a practice-based knowledge regarding this form of family violence.

In the designing stage, the extent to which validity is ensured depends on whether the proposed methodology is relevant to the research aim. Because I was interested in gathering “rich” or “thick” data regarding the families of assaultive adolescents, I chose to use purposeful sampling as a means to obtain information from those people who possessed a unique form of knowledge about this area of study (Maxwell, 1996; Monette et al., 1994). To gather data from these participants, a semi-structured interview format was designed with the aim of eliciting large amounts of detailed information from which various themes could emerge (Bernard, 1994; Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Morse & Field, 1995). To optimize results, I decided that parents and youth would be interviewed separately in order to encourage spontaneity and honesty in their responses. Focus group interviews were designed for the participating counsellors, as this method is seen to be “especially useful for studies of complex issues involving many levels of feelings and experience” (Carey, 1994, p. 226). Finally, the overall design of these focus groups met the methodological requirements outlined in the literature; they ranged from 4 to 8 participants, lasted for approximately 2 to 3 hours, were audio-taped and transcribed, and were homogeneous, relaxed, and informal (Carey; Krueger, 1994; Malhotra, 1993).

An additional aspect of validity which should be addressed during the designing stage pertains to the level of usefulness that a research study can provide to the general community. From this action-oriented perspective, the pragmatic validity of a study is determined by whether
the findings can be applied to society in a beneficial and meaningful way. Because my research aim was to explore those factors which relate to adolescent violence against parents, I maintain that the requirement of pragmatic validity was met. For example, since the results indicate that youth violence is closely related to prior experiences of physical abuse, this may be particularly useful in lobbying for changes to section 41 of the Criminal Code.\textsuperscript{12}

A number of requirements must be met to ensure that validity has been addressed throughout the interviewing stage. First, it is important for researchers to be aware of any personal biases they hold which may influence the outcome of an interview. Second, the trustworthiness of participant responses should be explored, as people may alter their statements during an interview session for a number of reasons. Finally, a continual process of “checking” must occur throughout the interview process so researchers can ensure that the meaning of particular statements from participants have been understood correctly.

The extent to which an interviewer’s values and assumptions influence the process and outcome of a study is referred to as researcher bias (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Maxwell, 1996). To counteract this tendency, my interviews were conducted in such a way that questions were usually asked in an open-ended manner. As the interviews progressed, I used a variety of follow-up, probing, specifying, and interpreting questions\textsuperscript{13} in order to gain more clarity around statements made by the participants. While I made clear efforts to reduce researcher bias through the use of this interview style, I also incorporated leading questions during those times when information about certain issues had not been addressed during the discussions. Admittedly, this approach has been criticized for its tendency to shape the outcome of a study. However, it could also be argued that a complete rejection of leading questions stems from a “naive empiricism” in research philosophy, as the important issue is not whether to lead, but “where the interview

\textsuperscript{12}This particular section of the Criminal Code provides legal protection for caregivers who use physical force against children.

\textsuperscript{13}See Kvale (1996) for full descriptions of these techniques. Follow-up questions include a number of verbal and non-verbal responses from the interviewer to encourage more information from the participant. Probing questions ask for more detailed explanations, and may include statements such as “can you speak more about that?” Specifying questions ask for more precise definitions regarding topics, and this may involve asking “can you describe these types of violent actions that youth commit?” Interpreting questions are used to determine whether a statement or theme in an interview is properly understood, and this usually takes the form of a summary or reframe.
questions should lead, and whether they will lead to important directions, producing new, trustworthy, and interesting knowledge” (Kvale, 1996, p. 159).

Interview situations often have a significant influence over the types of responses elicited from respondents, and this effect is known as participant bias (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). This form of bias can occur in a number of ways, as persons who are interviewed may either “censor” or “exaggerate” their responses in order to present ideas which they believe are acceptable to the researcher or co-participants. Although such biases are difficult to reveal, their effects can often be reduced by fostering a relaxed, nonjudgmental atmosphere during interviews so that diverse viewpoints can be expressed. In addition, research reports should always outline the types of participant bias which may have influenced the outcome of a study.

To reduce participant bias among family members, I chose to conduct separate interviews for both youth and parents. With this approach, the potential for patterns of secrecy and denial to occur during the interviews was likely decreased. Participants were also informed that these meetings were confidential, and that they would be given an opportunity to remove any unwanted quotes from the final research report. An effort was made to create a non-threatening atmosphere for participants by clearly describing the research process, and by utilizing a relaxed, informal interview style. Finally, I attempted to reduce the effects of exaggeration and minimization by interviewing only those family members whose situations had improved, as I expected that people were more likely to be honest about retrospective information.

Traditionally, it has been suggested that participants in focus group sessions should be unknown to each other (Krueger, 1994; Malhotra, 1993). This requirement stems from the rationale that people who interact regularly may be influenced by a variety of group dynamics which could inhibit an open discussion of the research topic. For instance, a group of colleagues who are experiencing racial/ethnic tension at work may be reluctant to discuss issues of diversity with respect to youth violence against parents. While such concern is noted, researchers are also beginning to question whether participant anonymity is always a valid guideline for focus group
sessions (Krueger). For if the goal of a group moderator is to “establish a congenial atmosphere for optimal sharing [so that] all experiences are valid and legitimate” (Carey, 1994, p. 231), then it is reasonable to consider that certain groups of people who know each other might already be relating within a safe, open, and trusting environment.

In my study, all focus group sessions were conducted with counsellors who worked together in the same agencies. These employees had regular interactions with each other, and each “team” participated in weekly meetings with the aim to discuss caseloads, and provide mutual support. Because these agencies appeared to operate within a cooperative and trusting atmosphere, I maintain that the conditions necessary for a successful focus group session were achieved. Finally, it should be noted that in many types of focus groups, participants are asked to discuss topics of a personal nature—thereby increasing the risk of respondent bias. Since my research involved information about clients only, this likely served to reduce the need for counsellors to censor their responses within the group sessions.

A final method of ensuring that validity is achieved during the interviewing stage is by using member checks. This approach refers to the process of “systematically soliciting feedback about one’s data and conclusions from the people you are studying” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 94). For instance, an interviewer may use interpreting questions to confirm with participants that a particular statement or idea has been properly understood. Specifically, this approach takes the form of a summary or reframe followed by a question; “So it sounds like you and your mom got along really well up until a certain age—did I understand that right?”

During both counsellor and family interviews, I used member checks to ensure that a high level of validity was achieved. Various interpreting questions were used to determine whether participants’ statements were understand properly, and this technique also assisted me to clarify certain themes that emerged from the data. When participants agreed with these summaries, the accuracy of my interpretations was confirmed. Conversely, a lack of agreement with a particular interpreting question indicated that more discussion was required.
In order to address validity during the *transcribing* stage, researchers must be aware that the process of transforming "real-time" conversation into a static written text is to a large extent inaccurate and artificial. For as Kvale (1996) explains, transcriptions produce "decontextualized conversations [which] make an impoverished basis for interpretation" (p. 167). To compensate for this concern, researchers should incorporate a number of methods to confirm the accuracy of a particular transcription, and this may include additional forms of verification that are based on audio-tapes, field-notes, and personal memory (Krueger, 1994).

In my research study, a number of methods were used to address the limitations inherent in the transcription process. First, I verified the accuracy of each interview text by performing a comparison with its corresponding audio-tape. In addition, these transcripts were "enhanced" by combining them with field notes that I made after each interview. Finally, I relied on personal memory to "recontextualize" each transcript to its original situation, and this helped to improve my understanding of the various nuances and styles of these texts.

Throughout the *analyzing* stage of a study, validity refers to the clarity, depth, and logic of the researcher’s interpretations. However, a common criticism of interview-based research is that a number of different conclusions can be drawn from any given text. While this concern clearly applies to a positivist philosophy, it is generally agreed that qualitative research approaches “allow for a legitimate plurality of interpretations” (Kvale, 1996, p. 210). From this, it is suggested that three main areas of validation relate to these interpretive possibilities. First, the perspective of the *interviewee* should be acknowledged as a valid base from which to understand a topic of study. The participant’s original “voice” must be honoured throughout this process, and the extent to which validity has been reached can only be decided by the person from whom the data originated. Another type of validation stems from the *theoretical community*, as research findings are often analyzed within a number of frameworks and academic perspectives. In this case, validity is obtained by determining whether these interpretations follow from theory in a consistent manner. Finally, researchers should always attempt to bring their
findings beyond theoretical and subjective perspectives with the aim to present information in a way that is meaningful to the general public. Clearly, the validity of this particular approach is best judged by whether or not it makes sense to the reader.

As the purpose of my study was to gather information about adolescent violence against parents, I maintain that the most comprehensive analysis regarding this topic involves a synthesis of views which relate to the interviewee, the theoretical community, and the general public. To honour the viewpoints of participants, I developed summary chapters (4 through 7) which attempt to accurately reflect the experiences and perceptions of youth, parents, and counsellors. These findings are then compared with theoretical concepts (chapter 8), as the inclusion of an academic perspective often provides for a broader interpretation. Finally, I have attempted to describe my research study in a way that makes common sense to the general public. This will hopefully invite community discussion, and allow the reader to make a personal assessment with respect to the practicality and validity of the research results.

The “truthfulness” of any qualitative study is determined primarily by its research intent, and therefore the validating stage should be designed in such a way that is sensitive to the methodology used. As outlined, the aim of my study was to combine three different perspectives in order to gain an understanding of adolescent-to-parent assault, and I achieved validity in this regard through feedback from each group of participants (Maxwell, 1996). To ensure that the perspective of the interviewee was accurately represented, participants were asked to review my analysis summaries so they had an opportunity to make additions, or delete unwanted quotes. Similarly, feedback was obtained from professors (theoretical community), and from various friends and relatives (general public) who read this research study.

One of the most effective methods of achieving validity in research is referred to as triangulation. Through this process, data are collected from a wide range of procedures in order to reduce the potential for bias, and increase the overall accuracy of a study (Kvale, 1996; Maxwell, 1996). Overall, the types of data gathered from these various research sources will
either be complementary (which may increase confirmability) or divergent (which provides a more complex analysis). In either case, the use of triangulation is a valuable method through which researchers can increase the validity of research findings.

Within my research study, validity was increased by utilizing a number of triangulation methods. First, I obtained information from four distinct sources (literature, youth, parents, and counsellors) so that a wide information base was developed from which to draw conclusions. Second, I utilized both private interview and focus group techniques during the data gathering process, as each method has unique advantages. Finally, I obtained feedback from representatives of three distinct perspectives; the interviewee, the theoretical community, and the general public. In using these various methods, I attempted to reduce the threat of bias by obtaining information and feedback from a wide range of sources (Maxwell, 1996).

The final and perhaps most important aspect of validity occurs during the reporting stage of a research study, which is described as “a social construction in which the author’s choice of writing style and literary devices provide a specific view on the subjects’ lived world” (Kvale, 1996, p. 253). From this, researchers must ensure that the publication of any report reflects an awareness of ethics, confidentiality, and social/personal consequences. To illustrate, my study revealed that youth violence against parents is sometimes reduced through the use of punitive law enforcement practices. If this finding were to be presented in isolation, readers might assume that strict penalties are the best response for assaultive youth. This example shows that incomplete descriptions of findings may produce unintended social consequences.

To achieve validity throughout the reporting stage, I have provided detailed descriptions regarding the design, implementation, and subsequent analysis of this research study. As outlined, participant feedback was also obtained in order to ensure that all views were accurately understood and represented. Finally, care was taken to present the research findings in a manner that was socially responsible, and this involved a detailed, holistic description of the results with a series of accompanying conclusions and recommendations.
CHAPTER 4 - SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the information obtained from youth, parent, and counsellor interviews. These findings are categorized into a number of themes and sub-themes which fall into three primary frameworks; contributing factors, reinforcing factors, and change factors. While the information within this summary is presented in the form of distinct groupings, many of these themes are interconnected. From this, it should be understood that numerous factors will often occur in combination to influence assaultive behaviour.

In order to develop an initial context of understanding, it is important to illustrate the various types of violence that are used by youth against their parents. According to counsellors, these abusive actions occur along a continuum which ranges from verbal and symbolic threats to assaults that cause severe injuries. Common forms of physical assault include “punching”, “pushing”, “kicking”, “biting”, “scratching”, “pulling hair”, and martial arts such as “karate”. Adolescents may also use objects or weapons against parents, and counsellors noted various examples which included “throwing scissors”, “knife at the throat”, “slamming the door on her fingers”, and using a “frying pan”. In terms of injuries, parents sometimes have “bruises” and “bite marks”, and in one scenario a “mother’s leg was broken.”

The parents who were interviewed also described a number of violent actions which were perpetrated against them by their adolescent children, and these incidents ranged from verbal threats to various forms of assault which sometimes caused injury.

It slowly escalated to that point where he started shadow boxing, he put me in a head-lock.

[She’d] hit, kick, shove, corner. A lot of . . . cornering me so that I couldn’t get out the door or even get to the phone to call for back-up.

He would punch me, he would throw me into closets, he would put his hands around my throat, and he would hold me against the wall and threaten to hurt me. He would pull [knife] blades.

[And he came out and said; “Dad’s dead, he’s as good as dead. He’s not going to live, you know. I’ve got friends. He’ll be taken care of.”]
Finally, youth interviews revealed descriptions of physical violence that were quite similar to those provided by parents and counsellors. Again, these abusive actions ranged in terms of severity, and verbal threats were also noted.

I'd scream and I pushed her and I'd bite her . . . I left bite marks on her hand once.

I pushed her down the stairs [and] I threw a coffee pot at her [and] I'd be throwing forks and stuff.

Backhanding her, punching her in the gut and stuff . . . hitting her in the stomach.

I told her I'd kill her a few times. I knew I couldn't, but all the anger was built up, right?

I tried to stab her . . . I ran after her with a knife.

Contributing Factors

Socialization of Male Power

Youth Dynamics

Findings indicate that both male and female youth are violent toward their parents. Although the design of this study does not allow for accurate conclusions to be made about the ratio of male versus female assaultiveness, it does seem clear that the rate of violent behaviour from female youth is increasing. It was also noted that while males are assaultive primarily toward mothers, females use violence against both mothers and fathers.

There appear to be a number of ways in which violent behaviour from youth is influenced by sex-role socialization. Among adolescent males, the use of violence is formed through direct role-modelling of traditional masculine stereotypes. In response to these images and messages which are received from within the family and throughout society, males learn that the use of power and control within relationships is to some extent valued and accepted.

Assaultive behaviour from females is also influenced through sex-role socialization, but in a somewhat different manner than among males. Because traditional feminine stereotypes are related to characteristics such as weakness and vulnerability, violence from female youth occurs
as an *oppositional* response to their prescribed role. In fact, these "compensating" attempts from females to appear strong and powerful sometimes result in incidents of violence which are more "severe" than acts perpetrated by males. The ongoing deconstruction of feminine stereotypes was also noted as a contributing factor, as more images are now being portrayed throughout society in which female characters embody a masculine image of power.

**Parent Dynamics**

Findings revealed that mothers are the primary victims of adolescent-to-parent assault, and this pattern is influenced by traditional sex-role stereotypes. Because mothers are often perceived by youth as being powerless and vulnerable, the likelihood that they will be the recipients of violence is increased. In contrast, fathers are generally seen to be stronger and more intimidating, which decreases the possibility that a physical assault will be directed toward them. It was also found that among male/female parent couples, adolescent violence toward mothers occurred primarily when the father was absent from the home.

It appears that common gender divisions with regard to parenting roles also contribute to the prevalence of youth violence against mothers. Because many families are parented solely or predominantly by women, the likelihood that fathers will be physically abused is obviously diminished. In addition, the social and familial factors that are common to single mothers (stress, poverty, isolation, previous victimization) often combine to form certain conditions wherein the potential for violence toward them is more likely.

**2) Escalation of Power Struggles (Intrafamilial)**

**Age/Strength of Youth**

Incidents of adolescent-to-parent assault appear to occur most frequently when youth are between 14 to 16 years of age. During this time, a significant increase is often noted in terms of their size and strength, and violence may therefore result from family interactions in which youth are attempting to test the boundaries and limits of their own power. While this increase in
physical ability is related to the onset of assaultive behaviour, it should be noted that the severity of violence toward parents is often inversely related to the size and strength of a youth. Specifically, a pattern tends to emerge in which stronger youth use intimidation and control tactics against parents whereas weaker youth will use injury-causing methods in an attempt to exercise their power. This finding is crucial in terms of understanding the complex—and somewhat misleading—dynamics of violence, as it explains why a powerful male youth may use less overt violence against a parent than a younger, smaller female.

**Response to Blocked Goals**

Youth who have various needs or goals blocked by their parents may respond to these imposed boundaries by using violent behaviour. Typically, these assaults are motivated by the anger that is felt toward a parent who has set specific rules or limitations. In certain cases, violence is also used as a deliberate attempt to coerce the parent into compliance with various demands. Finally, it appears that with the onset of adolescence there is often a greater need for autonomy, and therefore the potential for conflict escalates as parents and youth are involved in an increased number of struggles with respect to power and authority.

Findings reveal that three distinct family patterns are particularly related to assaults which stem from a youth’s response to blocked goals. First, assaultive behaviour may occur when a father has recently left the home and the mother is parenting on her own. Second, parents who begin to enforce more consistent limits and boundaries for their adolescent children may evoke angry and violent responses from them. Finally, violence from youth often occurs in situations where conflicting parenting approaches are used. In this case, violence is either directed toward the “consistent” parent for blocking certain goals, or to the “inconsistent” parent as a means of coercing him/her into transgressing various limits or rules.
Redirection of Vulnerability

Youth may use violence toward parents in an effort to redirect or compensate for feelings of vulnerability, and this dynamic is understood in terms of three distinct patterns. First, some incidents of violence appear to be precipitated by situations in which parents attempt to engage youth in conversations which are private or sensitive in nature. When these youth are pressured to elicit such personal information, they will commonly redirect their feelings of embarrassment or inadequacy into a sense of anger toward the parent. At this point, youth may react with violence as a means of escaping this unwanted form of conversation.

Second, youth who feel guilty about their involvement in a particular activity may respond to this emotion by using violence—especially when parents have “exposed” them for committing these transgressions. It appears that when youth have done something wrong and feel badly about it, they will transform this sense of guilt into anger and violence as a reactive means of protecting themselves against feelings of shame or self-blame.

Finally, youth will sometimes use violence as a means of coping with certain external relationships in which a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability is felt. The perception of being controlled by others appears to create a response from youth in which they attempt to regain a sense of power by directing violence against their parents. In this way, the anger that is initially felt toward others is redirected and acted out within a “safer” context.

Substance Misuse

Conflict between family members often escalates over the use of drugs and/or alcohol among youth. If parents attempt to use their authority as a means of preventing the use of these substances, youth will often respond out of anger and frustration, or as a means to coerce their parents into compliance. It was also found that conflicts are more likely to occur when youth are either “high” or “coming down,” as these drug-induced states tend to increase irritability and decrease inhibitions. Finally, it should be noted that substance misuse among youth may indicate that various forms of abuse are occurring within the family.
3) Escalation of Power Struggles (Extrafamilial)

Peer Influence

The influence of peer associations may contribute to youth violence against parents in a number of ways. First, peers may model to youth that violence is an effective means of gaining power and control, and this learned behaviour may be transferred to relationships with parents. Second, various behaviours (substance misuse, illegal activities) associated with certain peer networks may lead to increased power struggles, as parents often attempt to control and limit these aspects of youth’s lives. Finally, violence against parents may be used as a method of gaining social acceptance, and incidents of this nature are especially likely to occur if family conflicts are taking place in the presence of a youth’s friends or peers.

Negative Labelling

Negative labels are ascribed to youth from a number of sources such as peers, the school system, traumatic experiences, and society in general. Those youth who are labelled will often develop a poor self-concept, and this may lead to a pattern of behaviours which increases the potential for violence to occur. Initially, adolescents who believe they are somehow “bad” or “different” may attempt to fulfill this negative ascription by acting it out. If a certain level of recognition is gained through this tactic, these youth may continue with such behaviours in order to have some sense of control over the ways they are defined. Ultimately, this pattern of role fulfillment leads youth to a series of activities and peer associations that create increased power struggles with parents, and within this dynamic violence may be used.

Stress/Poverty/Isolation

The experience of family poverty tends to increase the potential for adolescent violence against parents to occur. Youth who grow up in this atmosphere typically have less opportunities to achieve certain goals, and they may be angry and resentful toward parents for the sense of “differentness” they are feeling. It should also be noted that many physically abused parents are
single mothers who have been attempting to cope with a variety of pressures related to finances, responsibilities, and social isolation. Within this atmosphere of family stress, frustration, and anger, the potential for violence to occur is often exacerbated.

**Culture/Value Differences**

Conflict between youth and parents may derive from a number of individual differences based on culture, ethnicity, and/or age. These differences may lead to power struggles in which parents are attempting to impart their values and beliefs onto a youth who is clearly opposed to them. Youth who physically assault their parents may thus be reacting out of frustration and anger, or from a sense of vulnerability and confusion about personal identity.

**4) Response to Abusive Parenting**

**Rigid Parenting**

Violence from youth often relates to a form of authoritarian parenting in which extreme control is exercised over their behaviours. Initially, this parenting style may appear to be working “effectively,” as young children will generally comply with the strict limits that are set for them. However, family tension begins to surface as youth display an increased need for autonomy, which causes a reaction from parents to maintain the same level of rigid control. As this power struggle becomes amplified, violence may be introduced as the only means by which youth feel they can create a sense of personal agency within their lives.

**Witnessing Wife Assault**

Youth who physically abuse their parents have often been witnesses to wife assault, and this pattern is especially common among adolescent males. The violence will typically begin when an abusive dad/partner leaves the home, and a number of factors appear to motivate this behaviour from youth. First, they have learned through masculine role-modelling that violence can be used as an effective means to enforce certain wants or needs. Second, these youth may
have idealized the abuser to some extent, and are angry at the mother for “causing” him to leave. Finally, assaultive youth may be “punishing” the mother for being weak and vulnerable, and for failing to protect the family. While violence against mothers is the predominant pattern in cases of witnessing wife assault, some youth may instead respond by assaulting the abusive adult male in an effort to protect the mother from being further victimized.

**Physical Abuse**

Violent youth have often been raised in a manner that is physically abusive, and when they have sufficient power to do so, these adolescents will respond to their experiences of victimization by assaulting the abusive parent. Such behaviour is typically motivated by the need to protect themselves, or by feelings of anger toward the abuser. In addition, these youth are repeating the relational styles which have been role-modelled for them. Violence toward the non-abusive parent is also noted in some instances, and this behaviour appears to be motivated by a sense of anger and resentment for not having been protected.

**Sexual Abuse**

The experience of sexual abuse appears to be particularly common among female youth who physically assault their parents. In some cases their violent behaviour is motivated by self-protection, as youth are attempting to retaliate against a parent who is sexually abusing them. Violence toward abusive parents may also be used when youth are trying to protect younger siblings from being sexually abused. Alternatively, physical violence may be directed toward the non-abusive parent—usually the mother—in an attempt to “tell” her about the abuse, and/or as a reaction to the anger and resentment that is felt for not having been protected.

**Emotional Abuse**

Emotional abuse or neglect may contribute to youth violence against parents in a number of ways. First, emotionally abused youth have often internalized a negative perception of
themselves, and therefore they may be fulfilling a role which has been ascribed to them. Second, the feelings of vulnerability they are experiencing may be redirected toward the abusive parent in the form of anger and violence. Third, acts of violence against parents may be used as an attempt to gain some form of attention or emotional connection. Finally, youth who are emotionally abused have seldom been taught healthy modes of communication, and therefore conflicts within their families are commonly dealt with in an aggressive or violent manner.

5) Influence of Organic Conditions

Brain Dysfunctions

Various types of brain dysfunctions may contribute to adolescent violence against parents. In some cases, youth who suffer from these conditions appear to display a decreased ability to control certain aspects of feeling, cognition, and behaviour, and this leads to increased aggression toward parents and/or others. Some examples of these brain dysfunctions include attention deficit disorders (ADD/ADHD), learning disabilities, mental illness, and various brain disorders. Other findings indicate that extreme conflict in the family may also be exacerbated by various dynamics associated with a parent’s mental illness.

Onset of Puberty

In addition to the influence of various organic dysfunctions, the onset of puberty was described as a contributing factor in terms of adolescent-to-parent violence. Although this explanation was certainly not perceived as being complete, it was nevertheless noted that hormonal changes during this developmental period may relate to aggressiveness.

Lack of Attachment

Certain characteristics present during a youth’s infancy may contribute to violence in later years. Specifically, it was noted that assaultive youth are sometimes extremely resistant to being cuddled or touched as infants—a dynamic which may stem from organic conditions. This lack of
early attachment with parents may contribute to the development of a relationship in which children feel neglected. As a result, violence may stem from feelings of resentment and anger toward those parents who are perceived as being emotionally distant.

**Reinforcing Factors**

**1. Youth Dynamics**

**Lack of Control**

Incidents of adolescent-to-parent assault are often described by both youth and parents in a manner which suggests that the violence is "dissociative" in nature. From this explanation, it is implied that assaultive youth have limited ability to control themselves—which may in fact give them more "permission" to continue with their abusive behaviours. Regardless of whether these are genuine perceptions or merely rationalizations, the result is that youth who accept minimal responsibility for their actions will display little desire to change.

**Lack of Remorse**

A number of youth who are physically violent toward parents seem to lack a sense of remorse with respect to their actions, and will blame parents for being the sole "cause" of these assaults. This defensive stance may also be amplified when parents take a position in which they blame the youth as being the cause of these violence incidents. In such cases, it seems clear that abusive behaviour from youth is more likely to continue when personal responsibility for their actions is denied, and when others are blamed for the violence that occurs.
2) Parent Dynamics

Maintaining Secrecy

Parents who are assaulted by their adolescent children often maintain a high level of secrecy regarding the abuse they are experiencing, and this pattern of denial and minimization is related to a number of factors. First, many parents have feelings of intense shame regarding their abuse, and the reluctance to disclose their victimization stems from a desire to avoid further embarrassment. Second, some parents begin to believe that what they are experiencing is “normal,” and therefore they do not recognize that intervention is necessary. Third, feelings of love and family loyalty may prevent parents from contacting the police, as it may be too difficult for them to initiate legal proceedings against a son or daughter. Finally, parents may be reluctant to disclose their abuse because they fear that such action may elicit further incidents of violence. In summary, it should be noted that regardless of the reasons for maintaining secrecy, this pattern teaches violent youth that their actions receive only minimal consequence.

Excessive Tolerance

In some instances, parents who are abused may display “excessive” levels of tolerance and understanding toward their adolescent children—especially in those situations where the youth have been victimized by others in the past. In part, parents may believe that the violence directed against them is a natural result of the trauma these youth have experienced. While this may indeed be valid, continued tolerance from parents may also create a pattern of behaviour among youth where violence is used as a manipulation tactic.

Blaming Youth

Just as adolescents who are violent will tend to blame their parents for “causing” the abuse, many parents of assaultive youth may be unwilling to recognize the influence of their own behaviours with respect to conflicts in the family. Within this dynamic, the cycle of violence will
likely become entrenched because parents are not willing to work on changing those aspects of themselves which may be contributing to the physical violence.

3) Community Response

Legal Interventions

Ineffective support from both police agencies and the juvenile justice system appears to reinforce youth violence against parents. If interventions are delayed and result in minimal consequences, youth will receive the message that their behaviours are to some extent condoned. However, in some cases it was also noted that a punitive response from the justice system reinforces violent behaviour in youth, as this legal process exacerbates the power struggles which already exist among family members who are experiencing abuse.

Social Service Interventions

Lack of support from social service professionals also appears to reinforce violent behaviour from youth. A number of examples were provided which indicate that parents of assaultive youth are commonly denied support services for their families--even when repeated requests for assistance are made. In addition, it was noted that social service agencies and the juvenile justice system often present competing philosophies, and this serves to increase the level of fear, confusion, and frustration that is already felt by abused parents.

Medical Interventions

Finally, it was noted that inadequate support from medical and psychiatric professionals sometimes exacerbates existing conflicts between parents and youth. When certain “defeatist” or pathologizing assessments are made by professionals, parents feel even less hopeful about their situation, and these “expert predictions” may eventually become self-fulfilling. Overall, families who are “blamed” by professionals rarely feel supported to change.
Change Factors

1) Youth Focused

Self-Care

Depending on the factors that are contributing to abusive behaviours from youth, various personal changes can be effective in developing a non-violent lifestyle. Youth who were abused and are able to work through issues of personal trauma may be able to reach the point where anger is no longer used as a reactive or protective response. The development of a positive sense of self also creates change, and allows youth to give and receive the care and support from others that is necessary for meaningful, non-violent relationships to develop.

Communication Skills

Youth who learn new methods of interpersonal communication can often prevent further conflicts from escalating into violence. When they begin to express their thoughts and feelings more effectively, youth are able to address sensitive issues directly instead of releasing feelings such as hurt and anger through physically abusive methods. In addition, it appears that when adolescents begin to acknowledge parents' feelings, the mutual understanding of each other that develops through this process reduces the potential for future conflict.

Sense of Remorse

Youth who no longer assault their parents generally feel a strong sense of remorse for the pain they have caused in the family. From this, it is implied that violence against parents can be reduced when adolescents learn to adopt an empathic understanding regarding the negative effects of their behaviours. Those youth who can acknowledge these consequences will therefore feel motivated to prevent the pattern of violence from reoccurring.
**Future Thinking**

For females (and perhaps males), the possibility of becoming a parent often fosters a desire to overcome their assaultiveness. With the idea of bringing a new life into the world, youth appear to become increasingly concerned about repeating the pattern of violence against their own offspring. It can therefore be suggested that when youth are able to project themselves into future scenarios, a number of potential consequences become evident.

**2) Family Focused**

*Sensitivity*

Violent behaviour from youth can often be reduced when parents endeavour to act in ways that are egalitarian and non-violent. Within this atmosphere of respect, youth are more likely to feel that they are valued, and new forms of behaviour are role-modelled. It also appears that when youth are treated with dignity and sensitivity, they no longer need to use violent behaviour in order to feel a sense of personal power and safety.

*Intimacy*

The development of parent-child relationships that are close, caring, and meaningful can often help to reduce further incidents of violence. Youth who use physical abuse as a means to get “attention” from their parents will be less likely to use such tactics when intimacy needs are already being met. It also appears that young persons are less prone to assault parents when they begin to feel a strong emotional connection with them.

*Clear Consequences*

Violent behaviour from youth can be effectively reduced when parents begin to set consistent boundaries and consequences, and this may involve requesting police intervention when future incidents of assault occur. With this approach, youth learn that assaultive behaviours will not be tolerated, and that parents will not contribute to patterns of secrecy.
**Social Support**

Finally, various forms of social support appear to be helpful in cases of youth violence against parents, and this may take the form of individual, family, or group counselling. This approach is particularly valuable when the emphasis is placed on improving communication skills, and on increasing the sense of emotional connection that exists between youth and parents. Parents also noted that their sense of isolation would likely be lessened if a parents’ group existed where they could talk with others who have similar problems.

**3) Community Focused**

*Legal Interventions*

Violence from youth can often be decreased when clear and consistent consequences are received from the legal system, and these interventions may involve either probation conditions or incarceration. In cases where this approach is effective, it appears that youth are motivated to change primarily because they are afraid of receiving a custody sentence, or are concerned about the future consequences that may arise from having a criminal record.

*Social Service Interventions*

In some cases, interventions from social service agencies are effective in reducing youth violence against parents. When family counselling is provided by various agencies, parents and youth are given the opportunity to address specific issues which are contributing to the ongoing violence. In certain situations where parents are in extreme danger, foster care placements may also be helpful. This approach is effective in the sense that it creates the safety and “space” required for family members to work through certain areas of conflict.

*Meaningful Connections*

Violent behaviour can often be reduced when assaultive youth establish meaningful connections with members of the community. Through such relationships, these youth begin to
recognize some of the positive aspects of themselves, and acknowledge those areas in which they need to make personal change. It should also be noted that youth who are involved in these relationships do not want to risk being rejected by the person they have connected with. As a result, they are internally motivated to conduct themselves in a way that “honours” the opinions of those people with whom they have established a meaningful relationship.

**Medical Interventions**

Finally, psychiatric and medical interventions may be helpful in situations where violence is influenced by organic dysfunctions on the part of the youth or the parents. In these particular cases, the use of appropriate medication may help to address some of the cognitive and affective conditions which are contributing to the assaultive behaviour.

**Summary**

These overall findings suggest that adolescent-to-parent violence occurs within a complex framework of contributing and reinforcing factors. In addition, those elements which help to reduce incidents of violence are in many ways connected to this “causal” framework. As the information obtained from these interviews is substantial, a series of visual representations which outline the data (Tables 2, 3, & 4) are provided on the following pages. These tables allow the reader to compare the data that was collected from the three interview sources.
### Table 2 - Contributing Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes from all Data</th>
<th>Youth Interviews (corresponding sub-themes)</th>
<th>Parent Interviews (corresponding sub-themes)</th>
<th>Counsellor Interviews (corresponding sub-themes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Socialization of Male Power</td>
<td>- Youth Dynamics (direct process for males, indirect for females).</td>
<td>- Parent Dynamics (mothers viewed as weak/passive, fathers viewed as dominant/powerful).</td>
<td>- Parent Dynamics (mothers viewed as weak/passive, fathers viewed as dominant/powerful).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Parent Dynamics (mothers viewed as weak/passive, fathers viewed as dominant/powerful).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Escalation of Power Struggles (Intrafamilial)</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- Age/Strength of Youth (testing limits of power, attempt to dominate/control parents).</td>
<td>- Age/Strength of Youth (testing limits of power, increased need for autonomy, size of youth sometimes inversely related to severity).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Response to Blocked Goals (anger and frustration toward parent).</td>
<td>- Response to Blocked Goals (effort to coerce parent, reaction to shift in parenting style).</td>
<td>- Response to Blocked Goals (effort to coerce parent, reaction to shift in parenting or conflictual parenting, increased need for autonomy).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Substance Misuse (increases family conflict, decreases self-control).</td>
<td>- Substance Misuse (increases family conflict, decreases self-control).</td>
<td>- Substance Misuse (increases family conflict).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Escalation of Power Struggles (Extrafamilial)</td>
<td>- Peer Influence (increases family conflict, peer pressure to be tough).</td>
<td>- Peer Influence (increases family conflict, peer pressure to be tough, social modelling).</td>
<td>- Peer Influence (increases family conflict, social modelling).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Negative Labelling (negative role fulfilled, conflict increases).</td>
<td>- Negative Labelling (negative role fulfilled, conflict increases, anger at parent for 'causing' label).</td>
<td>- Negative Labelling (negative role fulfilled, conflict increases).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- Stress/Poverty/Isolation (increased conflict, anger at parent, common among single-mother homes).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- Culture/Value Differences (increased conflict, anger at parent).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Response to Abusive Parenting</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- Rigid Parenting (escalating power struggle as youth seeks autonomy).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Witnessing Wife Assault (abusive behaviour is modelled, attempts are made to protect the mother).</td>
<td>- Witnessing Wife Assault (abusive behaviour is modelled).</td>
<td>- Witnessing Wife Assault (abusive behaviour is modelled, attempts are made to protect the mother).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Physical Abuse (self-protection, learned behaviour, retribution).</td>
<td>- Physical Abuse (learned behaviour, anger toward non-abusive parent).</td>
<td>- Physical Abuse (self-protection, learned behaviour, retribution).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Sexual Abuse (self-protection, anger toward non-abusive parent).</td>
<td>- Sexual Abuse (anger toward non-abusive parent).</td>
<td>- Sexual Abuse (anger toward non-abusive parent).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Emotional Abuse (anger related to unmet needs, attempt to be heard).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- Emotional Abuse (anger related to unmet needs, attempt to be heard, learned behaviour).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- Onset of Puberty (hormone-based).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table provides a summary of the data that was collected from youth, parent, and counsellor interviews. Column #1 lists the 5 main themes identified as contributing factors of adolescent-to-parent violence. Columns #2 (youth interviews), #3 (parent interviews), and #4 (counsellor interviews) list the corresponding sub-themes found within these 5 main contributing factors. For each sub-theme identified, a series of descriptions are also provided in brackets.
### Table 3 - Reinforcing Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes from all Data</th>
<th>Youth Interviews (corresponding sub-themes)</th>
<th>Parent Interviews (corresponding sub-themes)</th>
<th>Counsellor Interviews (corresponding sub-themes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Youth Dynamics</td>
<td>- Lack of Control (violence described as &quot;dissociative&quot; in nature).</td>
<td>- Lack of Control (violence described as &quot;dissociative&quot; in nature).</td>
<td>- Lack of Remorse (youth blame parents for violence).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- (no data)</td>
<td>- Lack of Remorse (youth blame parents for violence).</td>
<td>(no data).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Parent Dynamics</td>
<td>- Maintaining Secrecy (incidents not reported to police).</td>
<td>- Maintaining Secrecy (incidents not reported to police).</td>
<td>- Maintaining Secrecy (incidents not reported to police).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- Excessive Tolerance (parents are too understanding/forgiving).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(no data).</td>
<td>(no data).</td>
<td>(no data).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(no data).</td>
<td>- Social Service Interventions (no prevention services, conflicting agenda with legal system).</td>
<td>- Social Service Interventions (no prevention services, conflicting agenda with legal system).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(no data).</td>
<td>- Medical Interventions (inaccurate and pathologizing assessments).</td>
<td>(no data).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4 - Change Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes from all Data</th>
<th>Youth Interviews (corresponding sub-themes)</th>
<th>Parent Interviews (corresponding sub-themes)</th>
<th>Counsellor Interviews (corresponding sub-themes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Youth Focused</td>
<td>- Self-Care (trauma work, improving self-esteem).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Communication Skills (improving talking and listening skills).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Future Thinking (concern about passing on violence to children).</td>
<td>(no data).</td>
<td>(no data).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Family Focused</td>
<td>- Sensitivity (increased respect for youth's wishes/needs).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- Sensitivity (increased respect for youth's wishes/needs).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Intimacy (increased closeness in the family).</td>
<td>- Intimacy (increased family closeness, open communication).</td>
<td>- Intimacy (increased family closeness, open communication).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Clear Consequences (involving the legal system).</td>
<td>- Clear Consequences (involving the legal system).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Social Support (seeking assistance from friends, family, others).</td>
<td>(no data).</td>
<td>(no data).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Meaningful Connections (healthy connections with others, desire to &quot;honour&quot; the opinions of others).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- Meaningful Connections (healthy connections with others).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>- (no data).</td>
<td>(no data).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables 3 and 4 provide a summary of the data collected regarding the reinforcing and change factors of adolescent-to-parent assault. The information in these tables is presented in the same manner as table 2.
CHAPTER 5 - YOUTH INTERVIEWS

Contributing Factors

1) Socialization of Male Power

Youth Dynamics

Both male and female youth expressed similar opinions with regard to the influence of sex-role on violent behaviour. These participants agreed that aggressiveness in adolescent males has traditionally been viewed in society as “normal,” and so this socialization process begins at an early age. In contrast, females are consistently given the message that they are “weak” and “passive,” and this characterization often creates an oppositional response whereby young women may use violence—sometimes to a greater extent than males—as a means to distance themselves from the feminine ideal which has been ascribed to them.

I think [female youth] won’t admit it but I think they have something to prove when they do get violent because they’re a girl. They have to go that extra—more than a guy would go—because they’re female. They have to make it bigger than what it is.

I think it’s just [that] girls—from the years of being looked at as wimps and stuff—they want to prove themselves more.

I think everybody puts their baby boys in blue and baby girls in pink and they think the girls should play with dolls and the boys should play with the trucks. It’s not as much anymore, but I still know people that do that. And so you’re pretty much telling a girl that they should be like dainty and nice and everything, and the guy is supposed to like trucks and be rough and stuff. Maybe that’s another reason girls get violent when they are older, because they think; “Well, everyone thinks that I am supposed to be so perfect and nice and I don’t want to be like that so I’m just going to totally go opposite” [whereas] the guys—since they’ve always been told that they are macho and rough—they don’t have to prove it anymore.

I think it’s more acceptable for guys, but now we’re seeing a lot more where women are fighting. [So] I guess with all this feminist stuff [it’s] like women have got to have the power and stuff, get the power back. And I think . . . the only way people think they can get that is through fighting.

While it seems clear that assaultiveness from female youth is influenced by a reaction against traditional “femininity,” the perception that such violence is more frequent or severe than
among male youth may be a result of exaggeration due to sex-role bias. For as one youth noted, similar acts of aggression from male and female youth often elicit different responses from both adults and peers, as they appear more shocked by female aggression.

I've known teachers and principals [who will] turn it into the biggest thing because girls shouldn't get violent, right? They'll just make it into a big deal . . . If it's guys fighting [they] just go; "Okay, three day suspension or whatever." Come back and that's it. If it's girls, I've noticed they get suspended and all that, they come [back] to school [and] people are still talking about it like six, seven months later.

**Parent Dynamics**

According to statements from adolescents, it appears that fathers (when present in the family) were viewed as more threatening and powerful than mothers. Indeed, the information gathered from these youth interviews revealed only one isolated example in which a father was the recipient of violence. Clearly, a consistent pattern emerged where mothers were the primary victims of physical assault from their adolescent children.

My mom I wasn't scared of. My dad I was scared of, but I wasn't violent towards him.

I don't remember much from when I was little, but I know my dad was really violent . . . I don't even know if he would ever hit me or anything, but I just know that I was always scared.

**2) Escalation of Power Struggles (Intrafamilial)**

**Response to Blocked Goals**

For some youth, the experience of having certain needs or wishes blocked by their parents was a factor which led to the onset of physical violence. When these situations occurred, the youth would experience a high level of frustration and "tightness" which would then be directed toward the parent who "caused" this emotional state to develop.

It could be anything, like I remember getting mad at her once because I used to smoke, and she wouldn't give me any tobacco to roll a smoke . . . and I just freaked out.

So I would get frustrated and I would lash out or freak out. I felt really closed in, like all jammed inside and really tight. Because I'd feel almost like freedom . . . Like when you're throwing a punch it's like freedom, instead of feeling all tight and hidden.
Well, I ran after her with a knife . . . because she wouldn’t let me go to my friend’s house.

While the experience of having various needs or wishes denied sometimes led to incidents of violence, most youth agreed that they rarely used such behaviour as a conscious tactic from which to coerce parents into compliance. It appears that when these youth wanted to engage in a particular activity, they went ahead regardless of whether they had permission to do so. The youth also explained that in most cases, their use of violence would have decreased the chance of a parent allowing them a particular privilege or freedom.

No, I wasn’t like that at all. I just did it for the hell of it. And if I did it and I did want something, then I might as well forget about getting it [because] she wouldn’t give it to me.

I knew that if I wanted to go do something and she wasn’t going to [let me], she couldn’t stop me from doing anything because I would do whatever I want . . . And I knew that if I got mad at her or would yell at her she just wouldn’t want to do more [for me]. And I knew if I was nice to her then I would get more out of her.

I just did it. It didn’t matter . . . I’d just say; “Fuck you” and I’d leave.

**Redirection of Vulnerability**

Physical violence from youth often stemmed from interactions in which they felt vulnerable or exposed. In certain cases, this involved a scenario in which the parent demanded to know a number of specific details about the youth’s personal life. At other times, parents would attempt to raise a particular family issue (past or present) which youth were clearly reluctant to discuss. Regardless of the parents’ intent, the youth generally felt uncomfortable during these situations, and would react with violence in an attempt to escape the conversation, or as a response to the frustration and vulnerability they were feeling.

And then I’d come home and; “Who were you with? What were you doing?” And I’m just not one to answer questions . . . and because I wouldn’t answer her it pissed her off even more. So she got even more and more on my case. And then I’d blow up; “You fuckin’ bitch--I’m going to kill you!”

Sometimes she would just keep talking about something and talking about what I don’t want to talk about. And I’d just lose it because I’d ask her to stop. I’d say; “I don’t want to talk about it” and I’d say it over and over and she wouldn’t listen. And finally I’d start screaming and hitting.

[A]ll the things would come back from the past that she’d start bringing up again and . . . then it felt like I wasn’t heard and I’d just snap and then I’d lose it.
A number of adolescents described their violence as a coping response for feelings of guilt. When these youth acted in ways that were irresponsible or forbidden, they felt a certain measure of remorse. But if parents questioned, chastised, or expressed concern about such behaviour, this initial feeling was transformed into a sense of anger which could potentially lead to violence. It appears that by adopting an aggressive stance, these youth were attempting to avoid the pain and vulnerability that accompany feelings of guilt.

I started running away [at thirteen]. And I felt bad, and then if I feel bad then I take it out on other people, and I took it out on her [because] I knew that my mom got scared about me and that made me feel bad and then I would get really angry.

I'd do something wrong and then she'd scream at me, and then I'd lose it because I did something wrong. Like I'd just blow up.

Because if she said something, and if I had a guilty conscience then it made me more mad because I didn't want to feel guilty. And then my temper would--it would be easy to get mad.

I'd leave milk out or something like that . . . and she'd be like; "We can't afford this--I'm working my butt off." So I'd feel guilty and I'd go and beat her up.

**Substance Misuse**

The influence of drugs and/or alcohol was noted as a contributing factor among youth who assaulted their parents. In some cases, substance misuse began as an attempt to cope with neglect or abuse issues, whereas other youth appeared to become heavily involved through experimentation and peer association. Regardless of how it began, the continual use of these substances led youth to adopt lifestyles which created conflict with their parents--thereby increasing the potential for violence to occur. In addition, these youth noted that being either "high" or "down" compromised their sense of self-control, which meant that feelings of guilt, frustration, and/or anger were more likely to be transformed into violence.

I started drinking when I was eight, and then at nine and ten I started smoking dope and stuff--so that was a big factor in it, too. I didn't want to feel my feelings, I didn't want to deal with life. So I gave up and I just took it out on my parents.

A couple of times it was when I was high, but usually it was just when . . . I just wanted to mellow out and get a good four hours sleep before I got high again. And if you're coming down you're really edgy. The slightest thing can set you off just like that.
I was doing acid and speed and drinking and smoking dope. So I was doing more drugs—heavily and everyday. While I was under the influence and stuff I don’t remember too much. Lots of it’s vague to me. I just remember I would black out or something while I was doing it. I don’t remember lots of when I would be getting violent and stuff. I remember some very big incidences, but that was probably when I was clean.

And I can’t tolerate alcohol very well, and when I do I go banshee.

**3) Escalation of Power Struggles (Extrafamilial)**

**Peer Influence**

Some youth noted that certain peer relationships had a strong influence in terms of their violence. In such cases, involvement with other young people often led to a series of activities (running, substance misuse, aggression) which then created an escalation of conflict within the family—thereby increasing the potential for violence to occur.

I find that in the group that I was hanging around with, I find that a lot of the peer pressure that was going on there I really didn’t know how to handle and I thought it was... cool to be aggressive.

I know in school I was tough [so] I got to hang out with all the cool people--nobody messed with me ever... So it was really warrior-like [and] I liked having that acceptance. I’d get acceptance for fighting.

It was just the way it happened then because that’s when I started hanging out with a bad crowd, right? And if I had started later then it probably would have started later, too. I would have started being violent later.

Youth also recalled certain situations in which violence against parents occurred while they were in the presence of a peer group. It appears that when youth were controlled, humiliated, or hurt by parents while in front of their friends, they responded with violence in an attempt to demonstrate that they could not be intimidated by their parents.

I would just get so mad at her and then we would all go to my friend’s mom’s—which was a neighbour—but lots of times [mom] would come out and start yelling and screaming and I would get so mad. And then I’d start yelling and screaming at her to show off or something, to show them that my mom can’t tell me what to do.

[S]he was grabbing my hair and everything and embarrassing me in front of people and everything—trying to overpower me... And I didn’t know what the hell to do but not be embarrassed by letting my mother hit me [and so] Iclubbed her over the head.
**Negative Labelling**

When youth were made to feel as if they were somehow a “problem,” they would often adopt behaviours which reinforced the negative labels ascribed to them. By reacting in this manner, these youth could attain some measure of control over the ways in which they were characterized by others—thereby learning to become “good” at being “bad.”

I didn’t want to believe that I did stuff wrong. I also felt like I was bad, too. So if you’re bad you might as well be totally bad, you might as well just be like a horrible kid.

I felt like I was the problem, so why not become a big problem. I always think that if you’re going to become something you might as well be big at it.

**4) Response to Abusive Parenting**

**Witnessing Wife Assault**

The experience of being exposed to wife assault was a contributing factor in terms of youth violence toward mothers, as such incidents modelled that violence is an acceptable way to behave within the family. In one case, a youth also described how she directed violence against her father in an attempt to protect her mother from further abuse.

[T]here was violence too with my mom and my dad. So I think it’s also learned, too.

It was pretty bad. I just remember seeing lots of violence and throwing things. There was once when I went to go to defend my mom once when my dad was beating her up, and I got in front of a beer bottle and it hit me in the head.

**Physical Abuse**

For youth who were physically abused by their parents, there appears to have been a direct relationship between being a victim, and eventually retaliating with violence. Clearly, a certain point was reached whereby these youth decided that they would no longer allow their parents to exercise physical control over them without a struggle. While such behaviour was primarily related to self-protection, it was also noted that a sense of personal power sometimes developed in which these youth became acutely aware of the potential they had to physically
dominate their parents, or even to cause severe injury. Finally, physical retaliation from these youth was sometimes described in a way which implied that a sense of “justice” had been served, as violent behaviour toward the abusive parent was seen as a natural consequence for the pain and suffering the youth had experienced over the years.

I remember as a young girl always being hit and everything, and yanked around by the hair and dragged all over the place. So I didn’t want that to happen again so I started fighting back.

There comes a point where maybe you do need to be in control, where you felt so powerless being hit all the time . . . So there comes a point where you get sick of it and you say; “No more.” I guess I said that pretty young . . . I am going to fight back. I don’t want to be hurt anymore.

Then I think at [some] point I felt like I was in control. It progressed to the point where I felt; “Hey, like I can do something to her here, I can beat the crap out of her if I wanted to.” [So] I know that I could have done a lot more than I did to her . . . Like I used to think of ways I could kill her that wouldn’t hurt her too much--get it over with quick.

I clubbed her over the head with a trophy, but I don’t think it was as bad as what I went through in my childhood. Like being clubbed in the ass with a broom, you know what I’m saying? Like that’s scarring, too . . . Having ping pong [mallets] broken over your asses too, right? And whatever body parts she could hit . . . I’m not making any comparison . . . but what goes around comes around.

For most of the youth who had been physically abused by their parents, it was clear that their assaultive behaviours were particularly related to previous experiences of victimization. However, one male youth noted that his violence against his mother decreased significantly after an isolated incident in which he was assaulted by his father. From the youth’s perspective, this experience established a certain hierarchical boundary and “respect” between he and his father which he was subsequently reluctant to question or challenge.

I only got hit once by my dad. [I]t knocked so much sense into me. That’s the only time he ever did it and he felt so bad about it, but I’ve actually said; “Thanks” because [that] straightened me out a lot . . . I think ‘cause I was in shock--I never expected my dad to do that because it had been two years with him just sitting back and just yelling back at me. He’d never stand up to me. Like he would, but he’d never get physical with me--just like I’d never get physical with him. But then he popped me one and now I know--I wouldn’t even think about getting physical with him.

Sexual Abuse

The experience of being sexually abused was noted as a contributing factor among female youth who were violent toward their parents. In certain cases, it was explained that violence was
directed toward the abusive parent as a means to prevent further abuse from happening to themselves or to younger siblings. Alternatively, this violence was sometimes perpetrated against the non-abusive parents in an effort to “tell” them about the abuse, or as a reactive response to the anger that was felt for not having been protected.

I was sexually abused from when I was three until I was thirteen [and] I started beating my mom up when I was eight—like I started hitting her and stuff. So I think most of [the violence] came from that, like through the sexual abuse and stuff . . . I was trying to let her know maybe that I needed her to listen to me . . . I wanted her to know that I was being hurt by my dad . . . So maybe I was just really resentful, too. Like really angry at her that she would leave me alone with somebody who abuses me all the time or something.

My brother came to visit once, and so he told me that he had been abused too. And so then I blew up. Like through the abuse and stuff like that I didn’t want to deal with it anymore. I wanted to get out of the abuse and stuff, so I raged out on my dad when he tried to touch me . . . I laid boundaries, as [to] what I knew boundaries were.

Finally, being sexually abused by a relative was noted by one youth as a contributing factor in terms of her violence. This experience left her emotionally confused and vulnerable, and the resultant feelings of anger were redirected toward her mother.

And on top of that having a man, you know, touching me all the time in bad areas, and I think the outcome from that was . . . not knowing how to express how I feel, and just having it come out in anger.

**Emotional Abuse**

For some youth, violent behaviour was related to the lack of intimacy and support that was felt from parents. In such cases, this experience of ongoing isolation and neglect was transformed into a sense of “rage” which would sometimes result in violence. In addition, it appears that assaultive behaviour from these youth was used as an attempt to be noticed or listened to—regardless of whether the attention was positive or negative.

I wasn’t heard, I think that was the main thing. I felt like nobody heard me or listened to me, like they didn’t bother . . . It’s like I wasn’t there, like I was a big ghost or something. So that was mainly why I would go and rage out on my parents.

I don’t ever remember like—well maybe once in awhile—just going to the movies or going and having a picnic. Or you know, just spending time—quality time.
I think I also wanted to be loved and I wanted attention from her, too. I always heard of the mother-daughter thing like where you are supposed to go out for coffee and dinner and stuff like that. We never did that. So I think I just really wanted some kind of attention from her because she was so busy all of the time.

While abusive parenting was a contributing factor among some youth, it should be noted that two of the participants related their behaviour to a number of personal factors which had little relation to family upbringing. In fact, these youth complimented their parents on the level of care and guidance they received, and expressed appreciation regarding the perseverance that was displayed throughout times of intense conflict and violence.

I don’t know, our family is kind of different. Because my mom did a really good job of raising me and my brother. It just, I just happened to go off. Like, my brother is totally fine. I don’t think he has ever hit a person in his life.

I had parents that actually stuck with me... I don’t know how, I don’t know why, because I was harsh. I was a messed up kid--really messed up. But they stuck beside me the whole time.

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**Reinforcing Factors**

**1) Youth Dynamics**

**Lack of Control**

A number of youth described their behaviours as being “dissociative” in nature, as they were “out of control” during various episodes of violence. In this dynamic wherein youth seemed unable to stop themselves, the potential for further violence to occur was reinforced. Certainly, it should be noted that such descriptions may have been used to deny personal responsibility with respect to acts of aggression. However, it seems clear that from these youth’s perspectives, the violence they had engaged in was to some extent pre-conscious.

I know that when I used to get mad at my mom, I wouldn’t even think of what I was doing until afterwards.

I’d know what I was doing, but I didn’t think before I did it. And then afterwards I’d be like; “Oh, I can’t believe I did that.”
It was almost like a black out—I’d freak out. [L]ike something in your head triggers and it’s like I am going to do this and nothing is stopping me . . . I didn’t feel like I was in control. I felt out of control, actually, like when I was hitting her.

I’d just go nuts [and] blow up on her.

2) **Parent Dynamics**

**Maintaining Secrecy**

The majority of youth who were interviewed stated that their parents had eventually called the police regarding the ongoing violence. However, it appears that some parents failed to report these incidents because they were ashamed to do so—particularly when the assaultive youth was female. In such cases, this lack of legal response likely reinforced the violence that was occurring, as the youth received minimal consequences for their actions.

They always threatened to call the cops, but they never did.

It was [kept] quiet between the family and me when we were violent. Like, nothing was ever done whenever I’d beat my mom up . . . I guess, because why would somebody call [and say]; “My daughter is beating me up” or something. Like that would be pretty embarrassing as a parent to do that. I see it as being a bit different if it was like; “My son is beating me up,” or if “My husband is beating me.”

**Change Factors**

1) **Youth Focused**

**Self-Care**

The ability to recognize and work through various aspects of personal trauma created significant changes within the lives of these adolescents. When such issues were addressed, it appears that youth were able to develop a sense of care and respect for themselves, and begin to relate with their parents in ways that were sincere, assertive, and non-violent. One youth also demonstrated a clear sense of her cultural heritage, and an awareness of the oppressive conditions which contributed to her experience of abuse within the family.
I started thinking positive about myself. And I started actually taking care of myself.

Actually, we still fight but it's not physical. I think it's more of an assertive thing. She still has her ways, like they're still the same--she hasn't changed. But since I got clean . . . I've been working on lots of this stuff--lots of my abuse and stuff like that.

[A] lot of Native teens have been sexually abused and everything, and taken advantage of in many ways, and are just now speaking out about it. And I am glad I'm going to speak out about it at such a young age . . . I am ready to speak up now, I am ready to be who I want to be and feel how I want to feel. Although I may slip and fall, there is always room to get up. There is always room to take in new teachings.

Communication Skills

Many youth explained that their violent behaviours tended to decrease when they learned how to communicate thoughts and feelings more effectively, as this approach allowed them to process issues which might previously have led to violence. In addition, it appears that when these youth began to acknowledge and listen to parents' concerns, their relationships with each other improved. From this new method of communication, youth learned that true strength comes from the self, and not by attempting to overpower others.

There is still a lot of work to do, but we don't beat each other up anymore. There is still fights or arguments, but I listen to her now. I definitely think that people need to be heard.

I just know that I don't want to do that today. Because I can get my freedom and I can get my power and control or whatever in other ways. I know that I can talk to people, that I can communicate now. I can talk about things and feel my feelings.

Just learning how to think before you do anything and stuff . . . And I feel in my own way as a teenager that there is no way that I can take it back, but the memory will always be there. And you know I have to learn to let go. [L]earn how to respect yourself and respect other people and not always have to overpower people with intimidation.

Sense of Remorse

Most of the youth who were interviewed felt considerable regret with respect to their assaultiveness--regardless of the role their parents might have had in creating this form of interaction. There was a strong sense of awareness that their actions had hurt many people, and pain was also expressed around the rejection experienced from other family members who
disapproved of this violence. From these descriptions, it is clear that the development of a sense of concern and remorse is crucial to behaviour change.

I did a lot of things that I regret—that I wish I could take back. I hurt a lot of people, families.

I don’t want to have to do that again. Like, I’m glad that I don’t have to do that anymore . . . I’m not proud of it at all.

[A]fter I’d first done it, a few of my brothers [rejected] me . . . So it was just like feeling unloved and everything, and it just hurts when family comes against you and everything for a mistake you’ve done.

**Future Thinking**

For females, becoming a parent or thinking about being a parent created a desire to overcome their assaultiveness. When one youth became pregnant, a “maturing” process occurred which affected many aspects of her life—including a decrease in violent behaviour. Clearly, these youth were concerned about transmitting violence to the next generation.

I feel like if I don’t get help right now I don’t know what the hell is going to happen with my kids, right? Because I know . . . I’m going to have kids and I don’t want to be doing that to my kids.

And because I was pregnant I sort of grew up more.

**2) Family Focused**

**Sensitivity**

A number of suggestions were offered with respect to the changes that parents can make within a family where violence is occurring. First, it was noted that parents should become more sensitive to the ways in which they cause emotional harm to their children.

[T]hink before you speak. Because usually when parents speak they speak ‘cause they’re angry and don’t realize what they are saying until afterwards . . . We may not show it, but we get hurt, embarrassed, humiliated.

**Intimacy**

Second, youth stated that parents need to focus more effort on the development of a relationship with their children that is close, caring, and meaningful.
In a lot of families there really isn't a lot of affection going on. It makes the teenagers feel worthless [and] just not feeling loved . . . Go on a boat ride or go on a journey where you don't have to drive and you know, just lazy around.

Clear Consequences

Third, it was suggested that parents have a responsibility to address ongoing violence through legal interventions so that youth are taught the limits of acceptable behaviour.

I think lots of parents, they won't charge their kids because they think; "It's family and I don't want to do that." But I think that parents should. If the kid hits you then you should charge them to let them know that is not okay. Because if they are hitting you what happens if they grow up and have a family of their own?

Social Support

Finally, parents were encouraged to focus on positive developments in the family, to receive assistance from various support people, and most of all—to persevere.

Sooner or later there's going to be something good. And when there is something good, do the best with that. And then if it goes bad again, then at least you've got that one good thing you can remember . . . All I can say is stick with it. That's all you can do. And join a parents' group—that helps . . . Find somebody you can talk to, because you're not the only ones going through it.

Community Focused

Legal Interventions

Most of the youth who were interviewed had at some point been arrested and charged for their assaultive behaviours. In such cases, it was clear that this experience had a significant impact in terms of reducing future incidents of violence. Specifically, these youth expressed concern about having a criminal record, and those who had already been incarcerated for committing an assault were afraid of being sent back to youth custody.

She went to the police a couple of days later. And then I think that the police actually charged me [and I] got a peace bond. So I have to see a probation officer.

And now I am on probation for a very, very long time—which I just found out. And having to learn the hard way, and being tied down . . . But I don't ever want to go back to [youth custody] again so I have been trying to be good.

I don't want a criminal record. Like after [being charged] I wouldn't hit her.
**Social Service Interventions**

In certain cases, child protection agencies became involved with assaultive youth and provided foster care placements for them. These interventions did not occur as a direct response to parent assault, but rather as a means of providing support when the youth refused to live at home, or when concerns arose regarding the young person's protection. This obviously served to decrease violence, as parents and youth were no longer in contact with each other.

I went into foster care [because] me and my boyfriend, we broke up for a little bit . . . I knew that I couldn't live at my mom's.

I never did end up going back home. I became a permanent ward, like I became a ward of the court.

**Meaningful Connections**

A number of youth stated that the care and support they received from significant people within their lives--such counsellors, probation officers, and friends--helped to foster a sense of personal growth. Through such relationships, these youth were able to recognize the positive aspects of themselves, and acknowledge areas in which they needed help. It should also be noted that when meaningful connections were established, these young people felt a sense of internal motivation to conduct themselves in a way that "honoured" the opinions of others.

[My counsellor] could find something awesome about you that he'd love and broadcast to everybody . . . So that helped me a lot--it built my self-esteem.

And my probation officer . . . was good. She's the one who got me into detox. She understood completely what was going on. She was cool. Called me all the time.

I don't like people thinking that I am a bad person or anything, and so I really bonded with my one-on-one worker and I didn't want him to think that I was bad so I tried not to be so mean to my mom . . . Like, my mom would love me and care about me no matter what, and this person might say; "Well, this is a bad kid and I don't want to be around her." And well, I doubt he would ever say that, but that's the way I felt.

I think everybody loves to be heard and nurtured and cared for. And I just know like now that when I am loved and people care for me and they tell me that, how much more safe and secure I feel . . . It's scary to show love, but once you show it, like it changes a lot.
CHAPTER 6 - PARENT INTERVIEWS

Contributing Factors

1) Socialization of Male Power

Parent Dynamics

The majority of parents interviewed were female (6 female, 1 male), and therefore only one example of violence toward a father was described. With regard to mother/father couples, it was noted that physical violence was directed primarily toward mothers by their adolescent sons, and these incidents occurred only when fathers were absent. In such cases, it appears these youth were well aware that if the fathers were in the home when episodes of violence occurred, they would likely intervene and protect the mothers. This pattern suggests that while male youth believe they can assault their mothers with only minimal consequence, they are less confident regarding their ability to overpower fathers in a similar manner.

So there would be definitely more conflicts I think between me and [my son] if [my husband] was not at home. But because [my husband’s] home, you know, so it stopped. [My son] won’t come near me, he won’t try and fight me or anything because he knows his dad will take him down and basically sit on him.

He even said things to me like; “Well, dad’s not here to protect you.” [O]r else he’d start with this bit about; “Well dad--he’s your protector, you can’t do things, you can’t take care of things yourself.”

Youth Dynamics

Parents also explained that violence from adolescent sons is partly a result of the social role-modelling they receive which portrays men as being tough and aggressive.

They’re supposed to be big, tough, strong. [So] I think he’s going through a stage right now. Because I see him as being really quite a good person and a good man [and] what’s stopping him is the image that society gives.
2) Escalation of Power Struggles (Intrafamilial)

Age/Strength of Youth

According to a number of parents, violence from their adolescent children was clearly motivated by a desire to test the boundaries of power. In these cases, the youth used various tactics as a means to control, dominate, and hurt. It is also clear from parents’ descriptions that they felt extremely frightened and intimidated as the strength of these youth increased, and this was particularly common among parents of adolescent males.

[I]t almost seems like [she wants] power over me . . . When she gave me the punch in the stomach, it’s almost like she had a look of great satisfaction on her face.

This isn’t an issue about him losing control, he has control over himself when he’s in this state. [H]e walks around me, like he tries to psyche himself up to be this person that he really isn’t. It’s very deliberate.

It was scary, it was scary. My concern was his getting older and stronger himself, and I didn’t know what was going on, and of course I felt nobody could help me.

I was afraid of him, and of course as he’s gotten bigger . . . it would scare me as to what he was capable of. And a few times--well last summer--the whole summer was a nightmare.

Response to Blocked Goals

Some parents described that physical violence from their adolescent children was often used as a form of direct manipulation. When they were denied certain rights or privileges, these youth would respond with abusive behaviour as a means to coerce parents into compliance. Similarly, those youth who felt forced to do something against their will also used violence as a means of “convincing” parents to withdraw certain demands.

It would be him, whether he was wanting money, or usually wanting something from me . . . And it would escalate, and a lot of times it was threats [like]: “I want this, I expect I am going to get this.” [I]t was always when he’d want something, and if I dared to say no to him.

I wouldn’t give him the phone or something, I was trying to discipline him. And he came up and he kicked me, and he shadow boxed with me, and he wouldn’t let me out of the house, [then] he locked me out of the house . . . He was trying to be controlling. He was trying to control the situation and he was doing the wrong thing.

Trying to make him do anything he didn’t want to do. As long as I just let him do whatever he wanted to do there was no problem. When you start telling him; “Yes you have to do this and no you can’t do that.” If it was something he wanted to do at that point he would at times get violent.
In certain cases where physical violence was used as a method of coercion, it appears that assaultive youth were reacting against a recent shift in parenting style. Usually, this new form of parenting involved stricter limits and boundaries which the youth were not accustomed to. The parents in these situations were often going through a process of personal growth, or responding to the increased autonomy and defiance that were exercised by the youth.

I wouldn’t give her money anymore. I told her I wasn’t going to stand beside her in court anymore, [and] I started to say no. She didn’t like it because she couldn’t control me anymore, and that’s when she would get violent, swear at me, throw things around.

She actually did go through a period of being mad at me because I didn’t have enough rules for her, I didn’t have curfews for her. [W]hen she clicked with the street kids and she couldn’t live by my rules, then she started almost like blaming me for not having had rules from the time she was little. [I]t was like; “Now I am having a hard time handling any kind of rules at all and this is why--it’s your fault. I don’t like rules at all because you never had them for me.”

She seemed to like it when I’d go out to a party and we’d [drink and] be in the same state. And she liked it when I was just being funny. But I don’t live that way anymore. [S]he wants me to be kind of the way I used to be. She wants things to be the way they used to be and it is not the same.

While violence from certain youth appears to have been motivated by a conscious effort to demand compliance, some parents were clear that their adolescent children’s behaviours were not manipulative in nature. These parents also stated that regardless of the violence that was directed toward them, their parenting style had remained clear and consistent.

He’s not normally a manipulative, “I’ve got to be in control” [type], you know? The way that he acts out, it sounds like that, but he’s not that intimidating. [H]e doesn’t even go from one house to the other without phoning me or telling me. And then if he wants to go downtown [a]nd if I say; “No,” then he doesn’t go. He might get angry, but he doesn’t go.

I’ve actually paid very ultimate prices of saying no and sticking to no. It’s hard, but you have to.

Redirecting Vulnerability

A number of parents explained that incidents of physical violence occurred when they tried to question youth about various topics which were personal or sensitive in nature. In these situations, it appears that the youth not only felt frustrated in terms of their inability to communicate, but they also resented being engaged in conversations which threatened their
privacy—particularly if the matter being discussed was something which the youth felt defensive about. From these descriptions, it appears that violence toward parents was used in an effort to avoid certain feelings or issues from being addressed.

He’s never been able to express himself or to talk about his feelings or anything. If something was going on or if something was bothering him, he’d keep it all bottled up . . . He does not like anyone asking him questions, he doesn’t like being probed.

So if he’s in a bad mood [and] we want to talk to him about something [that] happened that day, and we want to talk to him about it and he doesn’t want to talk about it. When we enforce it then that’s when it just starts . . . Pushing him to release some information that we need on something.

Parents also noted that youth would use violence toward them as a means of coping with any external relationships in which they felt victimized. It appears that the experience of being controlled by others was enough to create a response from youth in which they attempted to regain a sense of power by directing violence against their parents. In this way, the anger that was initially felt toward others was redirected and acted out within a “safer” context.

It was outside stuff; being angry at teachers, a boyfriend, anybody . . . and being in a screaming rage and then physically taking it out on me . . . here’s somebody that I can dump it on or beat on to get it out [because] I’m the next best thing. Or definitely the safest, because if she had taken it out on the other people that wouldn’t have been safe.

[W]hat almost seemed to happen too when you look back on it is some of the aggression at school—the physical aggression with kids—seemed to tone down, and at that point the aggression went against us.

**Substance Misuse**

Some parents stated that drug and alcohol use among adolescents was a contributing factor in terms of assaultive behaviour. Overall, these incidents of violence which involved substance misuse appeared to occur within the context of other precipitating events such as ongoing family power struggles. Nevertheless, parents suggested that the disinhibiting effects of drugs and/or alcohol played a significant role in the violence that occurred.

As her drug habit would get worse, she would be more angry toward me.

He came home one night, and by his own admission he was high on drugs—he doesn’t remember what. And just as soon as he walked in the house he started arguing with [my wife] and he was
getting pretty rude. [H]e got really belligerent and I went; “You’re going to your room.” [A]nd he
turned on me [and] he kicked me so hard . . . that the next day I couldn’t lift my arm. [H]e
remembers bits and pieces and . . . I asked him, I said; “What were you on?” He says; “I don’t
know what I was on—I was on something.”

She phoned me to pick her up [and] she was really drunk. She [then] tried to get me to leave, and I
said; “You are coming home.” And she shoved me and I shoved her, and then she started to fight
with me, and I was just holding her off. I ended up having to protect myself, and in that short time
she punched me in the face and kicked me in the mouth. [A]t that point I think she had a mixture of
alcohol and drugs because she was very aggressive.

3) Escalation of Power Struggles (Extrafamilial)

Peer Influence

Parents described various scenarios which indicated that violent behaviours from youth
were influenced by certain peer associations. In some cases, violence toward parents appeared to
be condoned and encouraged by other young persons, and assaultive behaviours from youth
therefore seemed motivated by an attempt to appear “tough” or “cool.” Parents also suggested
that through the experience of being victimized by peers, many youth adopted a more aggressive
stance which sometimes increased the potential for violence to occur within the family. Finally,
these ongoing associations with certain “undesirable” peers created intense conflict between
parents and youth which amplified the tension between them.

It was like she was trying to put on a show for all her friends there. And I had no-one to help
me--everybody just stood back and watched.

Then last summer things got really bad. [He] had a gun pulled on him by another student [and]
started surrounding himself with what we would consider undesirables--the kind of kids that he
was afraid of up until that point. Sort of like the idea that somebody . . . will have his big brother
take care of the problems for him.

She had connected with some street kids [and] she came home to pack her bags and she was
leaving. And I was trying to talk her into staying [a]nd she bruised my body pretty badly . . . Then
there was more [abuse] on the street . . . It went from bad to worse . . . All of a sudden she’s with
street-hardened people out there. She is talking about cults--all kinds of strange stuff.

Negative Labelling

According to a number of parents, their children were routinely labelled and pathologized
within the school system from an early age. Sometimes these children were focused on because
of poor academic performance, and other times they were described by the school as being excessively violent or oppositional. Regardless of the inherent accuracy of these descriptions, the experience of being labelled often led youth to feel a sense of isolation and “difference” from others. As a result, they reacted by internalizing the negative characteristics which were ascribed to them, and this often included “living up” to a reputation for being violent. As these children approached adolescence, the combination of labelling and ongoing family tension likely increased the potential for violence toward parents to occur.

From the age of eight I noticed it. He started failing in school [and] if something would happen they would automatically brand him. [So] they just looked at him as a child with a behaviour problem, and automatically assumed that it was him that did it [H]e was labelled quite early, and that got to him . . . he had the flashlight in his face, he had that big spotlight.

[A]fter awhile the school just wouldn’t take her because . . . the rage was right at the surface all the time [toward] authority figures--anybody that gave rules.

The first time he was suspended from school was grade two. It’s just devastating to a parent to have a child suspended from school. [So] he was such a “bad kid.” We were told that often enough—[that] I think he started to believe it, and he started to live up to whatever was necessary to get that label.

In addition to being labelled within the public school system, some youth developed a negative perception of themselves from learning that they were a “product” of certain events which society describes as being negative or pathologizing. In these cases, the youth blamed their parents for the dysfunctional labels which were ascribed to them, and the intense feelings of confusion and anger that developed were sometimes externalized in the form of physical violence. In other situations, these adolescents were angry because of their parents’ inability to alleviate the various “problems” they were experiencing.

[My husband] is not [my son’s] biological father, and we didn’t tell him until [he was] about nine, I think. [W]e agonized over it [and] kept putting it off. [We] told him that he had a different dad [and] like, it was no big deal to him . . . I guess you never really know what goes through their head. He hasn’t asked, he hasn’t said anything to me for a couple of years. [B]ut when all this happened with all the threats and everything [he said], “He’s not my dad anymore . . . I’m not going to call him dad anymore.”

When I was eighteen I was raped. [M]y son] is a product of that rape [and] he knows of this. He found out I guess when he was about eleven. [S]o I knew it was probably eating him up inside, but he had buried it just like I had. [T]hat’s where the whole violence issue comes in [because] I think
he’s angry with me because I’ve held in this story. [T]o realize that ... your natural father is a rapist, you know he has all of those different issues to deal with.

So he was basically getting angry with me and saying that he was going to kill me and kill himself, and he hated his life, and he didn’t like the way things were going in his life, [and] nobody is there to help him and he feels really lost and lonely.

And I said; “So you took it out on me because I was supposed to be your saviour, and what was going on with you, and why couldn’t I fix you, and why couldn’t I make it better? So you hit me, you took it out on me.”

4) Response to Abusive Parenting

Witnessing Wife Assault/Physical Abuse/Sexual Abuse

A number of parents indicated (or suspected) that their adolescent children had been victims of violence, and these experiences were seen as contributing factors in terms of assaultive behaviour. The types of abuse that occurred were physical and/or sexual, and the perpetrators were usually ex-partners of the mother. In such cases, the parents who were currently being assaulted were not the perpetrators of abuse against these youth.

She’s seen me when I attracted abusive men . . . One time [when] the kids were small this [man] held a gun to their heads and I managed to get out the door and down the road. And they don’t forget that.

She doesn’t even have full memories, but [her dad] did something to her and she doesn’t know, she blocked it out. From her reaction after the visit I know something really serious happened, but she couldn’t tell me. So if it ever comes out, if she ever starts dealing with it, I’ll know. Because I don’t know what, but something drastic happened and that’s when everything kind of snapped.

Some parents also noted that their children had (or may have) been abused by relatives, or by members of the community. These experiences were described as being traumatic for the youth, who acted out their victimization through violence and self-destructiveness.

There are seventeen in our family that were abused by my brother-in-law, and it goes . . . right down to [my daughter]. She hadn’t dealt with it. She’d self-destruct.

We had a suspicion years ago that something happened. We weren’t sure if it was at daycare or what. I can’t remember what set off our suspicion, but we thought somebody had sexually abused him . . . So we had that suspicion but we had no proof.
Among those youth who had been previously abused, the use of violence against parents seemed motivated on a number of levels. Parents suggested that because these youth had experienced victimization in previous relationships, they were attempting to protect themselves by gaining control or dominance over persons they were presently involved with. A feeling of intense anger toward non-abusive parents was also noted as a common reaction, as the youth appeared to blame them for allowing the abuse to occur.

She's a victim of violence, and a lot of it was taking that out—I guess her reaction to what happened.

I think the point she was trying to make was that: "I'm good enough, I'm better, I'm tough, you can't hurt me anymore." You know, she was trying to demonstrate that.

I think sometimes in her own mind she blames me because of some of the men I've had in my life. And she don't say it, but I feel like she's blamed me.

5) Influence of Organic Conditions

Brain Dysfunctions

According to some parents, violence from their adolescent children was clearly related to various organic conditions such as learning disabilities, attention-deficit disorder (ADD/ADHD), and brain dysfunction. In certain cases, the violent behaviour was seen to be a direct result of a specific condition, whereas other parents explained that these disorders contributed to a number of related problems for the youth. Overall, it appears that certain dysfunctions had significant effects on youth in terms of feeling, cognition, and behaviour.

And he hasn't been taught how to work with his learning disability, which makes it hard. And for years—until he hit grade four—nobody would believe me that he had learning disabilities.

[He] was diagnosed with attention deficit when he was about ten or something [and] for a couple of years [was on] Ritalin. And it did seem to help him at times.

He's got an enlarged right side of the brain, and the brain wave frequencies are extremely slow—which affects his logic. [And] aggression [is] a behaviour that goes along with this disorder.

He couldn't concentrate, he'd get frustrated . . . You would say something to him, something quite basic and he wouldn't, he couldn't comprehend it properly. And therefore he'd get confused, and he would get angry because he couldn't understand. So therefore he would become aggressive.
**Onset of Puberty**

In addition to the influence of specific organic dysfunctions, the onset of puberty was described as a partial factor in terms of youth violence against parents. In their explanations, parents suggested that the hormonal changes which occur during puberty create a number of psychological effects that may lead to aggressive behaviour from youth.

Well, I think a lot of it has to do with his adolescence. His body changing and his hormones going and that sort of thing. [A]nd you know I think a lot of that has to do with it because he is very emotional.

Maybe it is the hormonal changes, you know. Everything is just so helter-skelter all over the place. [Because] when she was nine she wasn’t like that.

[R]ight now being a teenager . . . we’re having lots of fun. So that makes it even harder because their hormones are changing, their body chemistry is changing.

**Lack of Attachment**

Finally, parents noted that certain characteristics which were present during the youth’s infancy may have contributed to violent behaviour in later years. Specifically, it was explained that some youth were extremely resistant to being cuddled or touched as infants, and this lack of early attachment with parents resulted in the development of a relationship in which children felt neglected and unnurtured. As a result, this feeling of separation may have created a context in which violence was introduced as a way of meeting various needs.

[W]hen he was a baby all he did was scream [and] he was not a cuddly baby at all . . . So I think there’s that attachment where there’s that uncertainty for him also. That he feels in his own mind that I really don’t love him and I really don’t care about him.

He doesn’t like being touched, he never has. I guess with some kids they have their personal space.

I think basically that there is an attachment problem. When they are first born they’re not attaching, they’re not bonding properly so there’s this big space. Even as they get older, they become more and more distant.
Reinforcing Factors

II Youth Dynamics

Lack of Control

According to a number of parents, violent youth are struggling with what appear to be two distinct “personalities.” Although these youth were often described as being considerate and respectful, they also had another side to them which could be extremely abusive and destructive. Parents found this violent behaviour difficult to predict or explain, and added that the youth themselves often demonstrated minimal “control” over their actions.

Sometimes you could see him building up to it and sometimes it was just out of the blue . . . It was like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde sometimes.

She did tell me one time afterwards . . . she said; “You know mom, it feels like I’m fighting the devil (my dad) on one shoulder, and you (the good) on the other.”

He is very helpful, he’s always there for people, but he does have this other side to him. That’s an awful way to put it, but he does have another side that is out of his control.

Not only did some youth appear unable to “control” their abusive behaviours, but certain descriptions also indicated a refusal to acknowledge that violence had actually occurred. In these cases, parents noted that youth appeared to be experiencing a “rage” wherein they were no longer cognizant of their actions. Even after an assault had occurred, these youth would commonly deny the extent of their abusiveness, and minimize the damage that was caused. Regardless of whether this denial process was genuine, it appears that adolescents who refused to acknowledge personal control over their actions were more likely to repeat them.

While she was being in this screaming lunatic rage she couldn’t see herself being in there. And then afterwards she didn’t see it for what it was. And you know, either I was bruised or the house was turned upside down, the phone was ripped out of the wall, the car brake lights were smashed or whatever. After it was all over and even after the police had come . . . it’s like she couldn’t connect to her having done all this damage.

He didn’t even really understand. There was times that he would say that I was doing to him what he was doing to me, because he didn’t know. It was almost like he couldn’t see what he was actually doing.
Lack of Remorse

Even when youth did admit to being violent, they typically displayed minimal remorse, and blamed parents for "causing" these incidents to occur. In such cases, it appears that violent behaviour from youth was more likely to continue when they attempted to blame others for their actions, and when they felt no sense of regret for what they had done.

He didn’t want to have anything to do with us, it was all our fault. Anyone who would charge their child with a crime is a moron. It was all us. It was none of his responsibility at all.

I often find that scary because she would, I have yet to hear her apologize or have her sound like she’s sorry for all the stuff she’s done or does. And I often wonder, it makes me wonder; is she just so stubborn that she’s not going to admit it, or does she really not...

2) Parent Dynamics

Maintaining Secrecy

Some parents noted that as the violence continued, their family became involved in a pattern of secrecy and denial which further entrenched abusive behaviour from youth. Because of the shame and embarrassment that often surrounded such incidents, parents would be reluctant to disclose their experience of victimization to anyone—including partners. In addition, some parents who were being abused started to question their own "sanity," as the events that were occurring seemed too difficult to believe. As a result of this response from parents, many youth learned that violence could be used with only minimal consequence.

[And] there were times that I didn’t even tell [my husband] about it because I knew that he had a long day, and I knew the way that he would deal with it, and I would think that it would just make it worse.

[When] someone in your family is behaving [in a way that is] so off the wall, so nuts, you start to think; "Well, am I going nuts?" Because this person is doing this and they don’t seem to see there is anything wrong with it.

I was also embarrassed to tell anybody. It’s not something you go around telling your neighbours or something... I guess it’s almost like the same idea as a person who’s husband beats her. You’re not going to go and tell anyone. I’ve had bruises a few times when [my son] would kick me and stuff on my leg and I’d just, I wouldn’t want anyone to know.
**Excessive Tolerance**

Parents also explained that the physical violence against them may have been connected to the “excessive” levels of tolerance and understanding they had portrayed toward their children. In those cases where youth had been abused in the past, some parents rationalized that the violence toward them was part of a post-traumatic reaction. While this assumption may indeed have been valid, the retrospective statements of parents indicated that “too much” understanding sometimes resulted in manipulative behaviour from youth.

I put up with a lot . . . because I understood--maybe too much. [Y]ou get so used to it you get kind of programmed into it.

I don’t know, sometimes I wonder too if it’s just pushing the limits. That maybe all those talks that she got from the RCMP, from counsellors, social workers, whoever. Everybody’s been so patient and understanding of the fact that kids do take it out on the next safest thing, you know? And she’s very smart. There is no doubt about that, she catches on. You give her something to work on, something that will benefit her, she grabs onto that. [So] some of it was; “Everybody is going to forgive me and I’m allowed to get away with it.”

**3) Community Response**

**Legal Interventions**

According to parents, limited and ineffective support was often received from police agencies and the juvenile justice system, and intervention approaches varied depending on the personal styles of the individual officers and judges. These types of responses appeared to encourage further incidents of violence from youth, as they learned that minimal consequences arose from their abusive actions. Conversely, it was noted by one parent that any interventions from the justice system were generally ineffective because its punitive nature reflects the same dynamic of power and control that violence derives from in the first place.

Each time was different. It depended on which cop showed up.

I just wouldn’t give up, [but] I was occasionally told by some over-worked and over-tired cop that I should just give up on her. Maybe she was just born bad.

The court, it all depends on what judge you get. Some judges think; “Let’s just let the kid go home and he’ll be okay.” Other judges look at it and; “You’ve done all this in this period of time. No--we’ve had enough.” And I still believe that when he went to court the very first time for stealing a chocolate bar, if it hadn’t have been sloughed off, this may not have happened.
They picked her up and she spent the night in jail and . . . she was put on probation. Unfortunately, things with kids are so easy that they also quickly learn that they can do it hundreds of times and nothing much happens.

[He] has been released into my custody under certain conditions. He has to keep the peace and be of good behaviour, he has to follow rules at home, there could be a curfew on that. [B]ut you know, those [conditions] don’t work. I mean it’s just a big control issue. [M]y son is a very active boy. He likes to go down to the local church and play basketball, for instance, and there is no harm in that. But he’s not able to do that because he’s on a 7.1 [condition] which leads to a lot of frustration, anger, control, right?

**Social Service Interventions**

Parents had a number of criticisms of the social service system, and stated that the violence they experienced from their adolescent children might have been prevented if family support had been received when it was initially requested. Descriptions of certain scenarios also showed that the social service mandate is often in contradiction with the courts--thereby creating a dilemma in which families are caught between competing agendas.

[About] five years ago there was a supervisor in Social Services who told me [my son] wasn’t being abused, so there was no help for him. [M]aybe it wouldn’t have been cured, but if there had been some help or some [intervention] instead of waiting until things got as bad as they did . . .

I got in trouble with the Ministry because they told me that I was trying to label him. And I said; “No, I am not trying to label him. I would never do that to my child . . . Pay attention to what I’m saying, pay attention to what I’m living through . . . I live with this child on a twenty-four hour basis, and I think I know what I am talking about.”

There was a no-contact order instituted by the judge, [so] legally he couldn’t come home. And there was a real, we were sort of stuck in the middle. We were told by the probation officer and the social worker he had to come home—they refused to provide a home for him. [B]ut the courts were telling me; “You don’t disregard a court order.”

**Medical Interventions**

Finally, various negative experiences were described with respect to interventions from medical and psychiatric professionals. While some parents had been aware for years that something “organic” was contributing to their children’s behaviour, this idea was often met with considerable resistance from professionals within the community. As a result, many of these parents not only suffered from ongoing incidents of violence, but they also struggled with a lack of support from counsellors, psychologists, and physicians. Negative and “defeatist” assessments
regarding youth were generally of no assistance to parents, and this approach provided them with little hope for the possibility of future change or improvement.

And he was in the Forensic unit for a week. [T]hey did some testing on him and it was all extremely negative.

I was seeing a psychiatrist out here because I was having a really tough time just coping with things, and that psychiatrist had asked me at some point how old I was. And then he told me I was still young enough to have more children. Basically, [my son] was a “right-off.” [A]nd I thought; “I don’t need this—for someone to be telling me to give up on my son.”

When I moved here [he] was six weeks old and then I started seeing some weird stuff. [A]nd I was going to doctors here [who said]; “Oh no—it’s just because he needs a dad.” [S]o I was really starting to think I was going crazy and stuff. And you’d think that if he has such a hard time if it’s a dad situation or whatever, then how come my other two [children] weren’t going the same way?

Change Factors

1) Youth Focused

Sense of Remorse

An important factor in terms of behavioural change among assaultive youth relates to the development of a healthy sense of guilt and remorse. From parents’ descriptions, youth often began to display regret with regard to their abusive actions at the same time that the episodes of physical violence decreased. In some cases these youth would clearly state their feelings of regret to parents, and in other instances an implicit apology was offered.

I think his actions speak louder than words. He’s never been a person to apologize for anything, to say; “I’m sorry.” So I think in some of the ways, some of the things that he does around the house I think he’s trying to ... apologize.

He came in the house one night just shortly after starting his medication [a]nd he was really angry with himself. [A]nd he started to cry, and he said; “I’m a woman beater ... because of what I’ve done to you.”

Right now I have to hang on to the fact that she’s just too embarrassed or feels too bad to admit it.
2) **Family Focused**

**Intimacy**

A number of parents noted that the conflict between themselves and their adolescent children could be reduced by openly discussing various issues of dispute. At the same time, parents added that such communication should be respectful and caring, and that attempts to discuss specific problems with youth should be clear and to the point.

You talk things out. We never talked. So things got worse instead of better. And there is a lot of assuming going on. If you're a mother and daughter there is a lot of assuming going on . . . Like she could be having a bad day and I'd look at her and I'd say something and I'd assume something, she'd immediately react.

[Don't talk too much. As a parent don't sit there and talk, talk, talk, and say; “This is how it is.” Let the kids talk, too. And then when enough is said, enough is said--leave it at that.

I would say stick by your kids no matter what. If they get to the point where they’re abusive, get help . . . Love your kids no matter what, because kids know when you love them.

**Clear Consequences**

Some parents noted that once they had reached a personal decision to involve the police in further incidents of violence, the abusive behaviours from youth decreased. Clearly, this change in parental response gave youth the clear message that violence would no longer be tolerated, and that future incidents would receive legal consequences.

He knows the police will be called. I’m not going to put up with it . . . Because he’s got to realize like there are consequences, you can’t go and do that.

I had her charged. It was hard. It was really hard. [I]f it’s done anything positive, it is to make her take a step back and stop and think; “If mom can charge me for just a punch in the stomach, then maybe I better start being a little bit more careful.” [So] when I told her that I had talked to the RCMP and I was charging her . . . that’s the first time I ever saw her scared of me.

3) **Community Focused**

**Legal Interventions**

While legal interventions were often described as being negative and counter-productive, parents also noted that certain justice system approaches had been helpful in terms of addressing
issues of physical violence in the family. One response which some parents found to be effective was for police officers and judges to take a "hard line" approach with youth, and to enforce clear and immediate consequences with respect to their abusive actions. Other parents noted that officers who made a personal connection with adolescents sometimes left a lasting impression which influenced their future behaviours in a positive way.

Then they arrested him, he went to jail, went to court. [H]e gets released and not even an hour later he took off. [And] the police picked him up [again], so he was getting those instant consequences—which is good. If he had got away with it I don't know where we'd be at.

Him spending 52 days straight in jail. I think that's the only thing that had an effect on him. And the fact that it was over Christmas was good. I mean, he told us about the rats in the jail, and the strip searches after he got visited—that I think is what had the effect on him. I don't think anything else did.

And what they would usually do is talk to her and calm her down, try and find out why she was so angry, what she could do, you know. How she could cool off rather than coming at me ... I found that they were really good.

After he was processed and was taken down to the cells, the officer came down and said to [him]; "How would you like to go out in the police cruiser? How would you like to see the other side of it?" So he took him out in his police car in the front seat. [A]nd that was really helpful. I mean, I went down to see [him] that Sunday in the holding cells and that was all he talked about.

Social Service Interventions

While a number of inadequacies were outlined with regard to social service interventions, parents also described various forms of support which they perceived as being helpful to their family. In some cases, the issue of violence was successfully addressed by placing the youth in temporary foster care so the family could have time to work through the conflicts they were experiencing. For other parents, valuable assistance came from being provided with support workers who would listen to them in a genuine and respectful manner.

When he was put into foster care it worked really well, a lot better than I had anticipated ... And the lady that he went to at that point in time did really well, worked with him very, very well.

I have one person on that team that's still here, that has stuck it out three years with me and really, really has tried to learn. And I've shared my information with that person and said; "This is my new research, this is my new stuff, this is what I'm feeling, this is what's happened, let's discuss this." And I get treated like a human being, and I get treated with respect, and I get treated like what I say matters and that I'm not some welfare mom who doesn't know anything.
They agreed to put him in care for sixty days, and during that [time] we would work on the issues that started all these problems. So we did that, and he went into care . . . and started seeing someone for anger management counselling. [So] slowly we were trying to rebuild the family instead of doing it all at once and having it explode in our face—which we felt at that time was very likely that it could happen.

Parents noted that various types of counselling (individual, family) can be helpful as a means of addressing violence in the family. It was also suggested that such supports should be provided on a proactive basis rather than the common approach of using counselling only after incidents of violence occur. Finally, a number of parents explained that membership in a support group would have been helpful in terms of coping with their experiences.

Family counselling, individual counselling, whatever will work. Don't give up on it. I don't think anybody should be doing it on their own.

Why not help these kids when they are little and there are problems surfacing. Because it just doesn't suddenly appear out of nowhere [and] it adds to it when it hits school. [B]ecause that's what you've got to keep going in these kids is their self-esteem, is the love, to feel good about themselves.

Actually one of the things that I've most often said to counsellors [is]; “I wish I knew other parents who were going through something like this . . . because it would be so nice to know that I'm not the only one . . . It would be nice to have . . . something like just a group where you could meet and talk about things that are going on, and something to keep your sanity together so that you could go on for the next week.

Medical Interventions

Finally, some parents noted that when youth violence was related to organic factors, the use of appropriate medication was an effective means of reducing further incidents of abusive behaviour. It was also outlined that in any form of medical or psychiatric intervention, those professionals who focused on the positive attributes of the adolescent gave some sense of hope to the family that significant improvement was possible.

And then once he was diagnosed and put on the medication it was like he stopped. It just stopped. He didn't hit anymore, he didn't throw the fits anymore, he started to identify with himself. [S]o the medication stabilizes his aggression, it helps him with his logic.

And one lady I talked to at [youth custody], I gave her [my son's] name. “Oh, [him]—he's such a nice young man.” She said; “You know, it's really easy when we see the kids here, it's very easy to see which kids have hope, which ones have been raised well, which ones have good parenting. And [your son's] one of them.”
1) Socialization of Male Power

Parent Dynamics

The majority of counsellors agreed that mothers are the primary victims of adolescent violence against parents. As will be described, this victimization of mothers is closely related to sex-role stereotypes, violence against women, female poverty, and gender of the assaultive youth. Counsellors also suggested that female rates of victimization are particularly high because mothers are often the sole caretakers in households where violence occurs.

Of the families that I have worked with, a higher percentage would be of moms being abused.

When we are talking about violence of adolescents toward their parents, it usually springs to mind that it's towards the mother.

In a lot of these homes the father is not present. So there is no one else to beat up.

While mothers were portrayed as being the primary victims of violence, counsellors noted various examples which indicated that adolescents are physically assaultive toward male parents as well. In certain instances the fathers appeared quite powerless and vulnerable, but this pattern of violence was most often described in a manner which implied that male parents are more able to protect themselves. As a result, acts of violence against fathers were generally perceived as being less threatening, and more symbolic or indirect in nature.

In my experience the fathers have been either the focus of the violence against them, or the focus of some indirect violence against them—whether their windows are broken in their house, or whatever.

He just tried to keep the daughter away from him. But he didn’t fight back or hit back or anything. But again, very passive man—very quiet.
[W]hat tends to happen is the man will fight back and then he'll get in trouble. [So] the fathers in those situations, often they get aggravated to the point where they will hit [and] they have the power to hurt more than the kid does.

The other thing is how do you beat up dad? When you're fifteen and you're a girl how are you going to beat dad up?

**Youth Dynamics**

From the descriptions provided by counsellors, it appears that both male and female adolescents engage in various forms of parent assault. Overall, female adolescents were described as being violent toward both mothers and fathers whereas male youth were physically abusive primarily against mothers. While conflicting views were expressed regarding the actual ratio of male versus female assaultiveness, counsellors were in agreement that the rate of female violence toward parents is increasing. With regard to adolescent males, it was explained that traditional masculine stereotypes play a direct role in the formation and perpetuation of violent behaviour toward parents. In terms of female youth, the explanation for an increase in assaultiveness was primarily related to the ongoing deconstruction of “femininity” that is occurring throughout society. While this recent expansion of the feminine character clearly has liberatory potential for women, counsellors also noted that female youth are now more likely to adopt aggressive roles which have traditionally been assigned only to men. This process was described as a negative manifestation of “gender equality.”

[W]hat comes to my mind is boys growing up learning... all the stereotypical things that they are going to learn [and] that it's a man's right to... be physically violent.

Up until a couple of years ago the majority of my clients were males assaulting parents [and] most of the parents being assaulted were single women. But now I am seeing more and more teenage girls. It's becoming very problematic, they are becoming more aggressive.

I think what the gender construct does is tells us that it is more valuable to live in this male-oriented way. This male-oriented way has to include power, it has to include a certain view of women and others... and the girls can adopt that preferable way of life as easily as the guys can.

I think women's liberation [is] freeing us from roles, gender-related roles [in which] girls are quiet, they don't talk back—they're little ladies. You don't get mad at your parents when they tell you what to do.
A number of counsellors suggested that the popular media play a crucial role in the promotion of youth violence toward parents. With respect to male adolescents, it was noted that media images directly model various forms of masculine aggression. Increasingly, females are also being exposed to characters who use physical force against others.

If you watch the nine o'clock movies, ninety-nine percent of the time it's men abusing women, husbands abusing wives, dad abusing the daughter. That is what you see.

Even on the television, the shows that kids watch . . . anything that has violence in it there's always women in them as well. And women aren't always the victims. They're right there in the fights, and giving punches and taking punches—even in cartoons.

It's changed since I was a child. You didn't use to see that . . . And if a girl was in a cartoon or a show where there was any kind of violence, it was always that there was males protecting her against it.

When adolescent females embrace certain characteristics of masculinity, they may begin to perceive their mothers as being weak and powerless. In an attempt to distance themselves from this “image” of vulnerability, female youth may react toward their mothers by using various forms of violence against them. Within this dynamic, it is suggested that assaultive females are attempting to conquer the fears that are associated with being “feminine.”

The girls . . . see the mothers as the passive, submissive female and they're not going to be that way and really re-neg against the mothers.

A lot of it could be fear and anger that they could turn out like their mothers. Because when we add poverty and the role reversal . . . maybe the daughter sees herself like; “Oh god, this is what I'll be” and just wanting to destroy or lash out at it . . . Because it's very scary for us if that's how we're being mirrored.

[O]nce you're oppressed you oppress. [I]f you feel like you've been oppressed--and women I think in general have that feeling [and are] raised that way in society--so if I can oppress by beating up my mother or having power over her, then you [repeat] that abuse cycle.

Some counsellors suggested that violence from female youth is more “severe” in nature, and this was explained within two distinct frameworks of understanding. First, the social perception that female aggression is somehow less dangerous or threatening results in a paradoxical response from these youth, as they may increase their level of violence in an effort to be taken more seriously. Second, female violence toward fathers was perceived as unique in the
sense that adult males are somewhat bound to a social rule against “hitting girls.” While this value appears to prevent some fathers from “defending” themselves against daughters, it was also pointed out by counsellors that many men do hit their female children, and that society in general has historically condoned male violence against women.

[The girls] are not seen as threatening . . . They’re not really seen as the ones with power.

She’s got to start to be feeling powerful, and nobody acknowledges that . . . She has to do twice as much as the boy does because the boy is male and she isn’t.

I also think that [girls] don’t have the traditions that create the context for violence . . . What I mean is; when guys fight there’s rules that often—not always—will be put into place. You know, they’ll get out, and they’ll gather around and do their thing. And there’s a certain cultural context that’s set up there for them to fight.

For one thing the fathers are less likely to physically get in the way of their daughters—for numerous constraint reasons . . . You don’t hit girls.

The other kind of aside is [that] as a man there is that whole notion that; “Well, you can’t hit a lady.” You know, where if that pattern started happening, what do you do as a guy?

Dads hit their kids, their girl children, and I think that . . . the reason why the dads don’t hit back in some cases . . . is because it’s now against the law.

Finally, counsellors noted that social service professionals, communities, and the legal system are less likely to respond seriously to incidents of violence from female adolescents whereas similar behaviours from males are more readily believed.

One thing that’s unique is I tend to go into denial when it’s a female . . . I would believe it of a male right away [so] I’m very conscious of that denial process I am going through, thinking; “They must be exaggerating.” I’m from that generation that we weren’t—girls weren’t violent.

I think part of the . . . patriarchal myth is that women are in their place and they don’t do these things. So therefore girls in our community don’t do that.

Another thing as well [among] adolescents is the courts aren’t as hard on girls for violence.

2) Escalation of Power Struggles (Intrafamilial)

Age/Strength of Youth

Counsellors suggested that a number of significant intrafamilial changes occur as children reach their adolescent years. An increased need for autonomy begins to develop, and this shift
often corresponds with a desire to explore the limits of personal power—especially with regard to parents. In some instances, this dynamic may reach a point where the testing of parental authority leads to an assault. Overall, counsellors were in agreement that violence toward parents is most frequent among youth who are “14 or 15” years of age.

I think a lot of parents are really focused on how their children are growing and how big they’re getting, and children are constantly measuring up to their parents to see how big they are. And when it becomes physical there is . . . always that point where the child is testing to see when they become stronger than you.

Feeling that they're infallible in the adolescent years. All powerful. I don't think all teenagers go to the extreme, but some do in feeling all powerful; “Nobody can tell me what not to do.”

Many counsellors noted that the physical strength of an adolescent is often inversely related to the level of force directed against parents. Youth who are smaller in size tend to use more severe forms of violence, as they have to compensate for their lack of strength by adopting a more aggressive stance. In contrast, larger and more powerful youth often use tactics which are focused on controlling and/or intimidating their parents. This dynamic can also be used to explain some of the gender differences that counsellors described in which female youth would cause more severe injuries than males. From these descriptions, it is clear that violence toward parents must be viewed within a framework that recognizes the complex nature in which personal strength contributes to the “severity” of a particular assault.

And if the guy is bigger he’s less likely to be as extreme, whereas if he is smaller he’s more likely to act out in the more extreme ways—but because he has to—in order to make the same statement. Whereas the big guy, all he has to do is make a gesture.

The one kid that shot the boyfriend was very small . . . And the other kid that physically fights with his father actually was a big kid anyways for his size.

Where it was [the boy] against the mother . . . the violence was more issues like; breaking the door down, it was more likely to be a push. It was less likely that it was going to be extreme.

The girl in this family . . . gets very angry and her intent is to injure. She’s got a black belt in one of the martial arts and she is out to really hurt somebody. Her dad is like twice her size and weight.

A lot of factors would contribute. I don’t know that you could nail it down to one age. It would depend whether the child was male or female and whether the parent was male or female. It could depend on the size of the kid, maturity level, and their ability to articulate.
Response to Blocked Goals

In some instances, it appears that a conflict around blocked goals is related to adolescent violence against parents. As youth begin to exercise more autonomy within their lives, parents may respond by increasing certain boundaries and limits. In many cases, these parents are acting out of concern for their children, and counsellors noted that power struggles often occur when single mothers attempt to maintain authority within the home.

And the more the kid gets out of hand, the more the parent tries to restrict the kid. The more the parent tries to restrict the kid, the more it gets out of hand. And it's like they have no other alternative, so eventually the stress gets so wound up that it just explodes.

There's more fears there. The child now wants to go out to movies, they want to have girlfriends and boyfriends, they just have all these needs and they're acting out. They are older so they have older needs but the parent has less control over those so . . . they try to control them.

The mother in this family had started to try to regain control of the home as a single parent, and tried being consistent with curfew and setting the boundaries and the limits. But the more that she worked and tried to do that the more fight she got from her teenagers.

And [the violence] usually revolved around mom trying to set limits and boundaries and follow through on them. And the harder that mom worked at trying to follow through and set the boundaries and limits, the harder the teens fought against it.

While power struggles between parents and youth were described as a contributing factor among some families, counsellors were clear that such explanations are insufficient to explain the majority of situations in which adolescents assault their parents.

But to some extent those power struggles happen in most families, and so when it gets to the point of actual physical violence, or to the intensity that we sometimes see, I think that there are other factors that have been at play.

It doesn't just start. [The problem] has got to have been there for a long time.

Some counsellors stated that youth violence against parents is reward-based to a certain extent. Through previous attempts, youth may learn that violence can be used successfully to coerce parents into changing certain rules, or to provide various material needs. In many cases, this dynamic is related to issues such as wife assault and poverty.

[T]here seems to be this idea that . . . if I'm violent then I get what I want. So there is some type of reward there I guess for the violence.
So if there was violence, then there would be a pacifier that was introduced... Usually the pacifier involved running, or permission to go and do something.

[It's] reason enough to start screaming and yelling because all [her] friends have pagers so why can't she. At first it sounds absurd, but when I really stop and talk to what the meaning is behind all this, it's the same with a pair of shoes or with any other item a teenager wants.

Getting your needs met. Whether that be to go out or to get the attention.

Among two-parent families, assaultive behaviour from youth is sometimes related to a conflicted or oppositional style of parenting. Counsellors described various scenarios in which one parent attempts to set boundaries and consequences for the youth which the other parent will then contradict. In these family situations, the father is typically the one who undermines the mother—especially with regard to setting limits for their daughters. Youth who are brought up in this type of atmosphere may respond in two different ways. In one scenario, the adolescent develops a strong resentment toward the “consistent” parent, and this feeling is often overtly or covertly supported by the “inconsistent” parent. As a result, conflict between the youth and the “consistent” parent may increase to the point at which violence occurs. In the other scenario, the youth may use violence as a means to threaten or intimidate the “inconsistent” parent into transgressing certain rules or boundaries which have been established.

I think there is a lot of couples involved... where one parent will absolve themselves from participating in the discipline and the action, and consequently become saboteurs. Dad wants to be Mr. Nice Guy—especially to the daughters—and doesn’t want to lay the “heavy” so passes the buck to the mother... And the father, when the child rebels, absolves himself.

The female child will dominate the mother quite often. The mother struggles to get the partner to participate [and the youth] will sit back and watch their parents in conflict... And when you bring it up to the father he doesn’t like to be held accountable for his sabotaging.

One of the things that I have noticed is that the parental unit is quite unstable... that there is not a high degree of either togetherness on the parts of the parent, or a sense of trust... So there doesn’t seem to be [much] solidarity I guess on the part of the parents. [The father] was in the line of fire [as] he would try to join with the mother in what she has laid down.

While adolescent-to-parent assault often occurs when couples are unsupportive of each other, violence from youth is also related to conflicts in which the powerful parent--typically the father--attempts to support the less powerful one. Within such situations, a father may react in
anger to an adolescent’s defiance toward the mother, and this interaction sometimes escalates to the point where violence ensues between the father and the youth.


Mom says; “Be home by 10pm.” Son says; “Fuck you.” Dad says; “Don’t talk like that to your mother.” Walks toward the son. The son may be 16 years old, getting bigger, doing weights or whatever, gets a smack in the head by dad [and] then forces dad back with a push. And then realizes a sense of power.

**Redirecting of Vulnerability**

While developmental concepts such as “autonomy” and “puberty” were noted by some counsellors as contributing to assaultive behaviour, others suggested that “adolescence” is to a large extent socially constructed. From this view, violence against parents is primarily related to the general powerlessness that many youth feel within society, and therefore aggression is used as an attempt to gain some sense of control over their environment.

As a society, more and more youth are suspect, and more and more powerless. [A]dult people treat youth in general very, very poorly . . . So the messages of powerlessness are everywhere for them.

[T]he youth experience [corresponds] in particular with the educational experiment. What it’s done is it’s created adolescence . . . It’s a social phenomenon where someone who used to have the potential of being an adult . . . cannot live with the power, the influence that it takes to be an adult for years after that.

[T]his is new to our culture and society to have this age of kids that aren’t working or have to go through school--aren’t adults but are adults. We want them to act like adults and be adult-like, but they can have no power, or no adult benefits.

[Y]outh violence to parents is often about powerlessness. Feeling you’re not having a say you wish within your life.

**Substance Misuse**

Assaultive youth may be involved with substance misuse, but counsellors agreed that physical violence against parents rarely occurs while youth are under the influence. Instead, violent episodes are usually connected to a variety of power struggles that may occur with respect to parents’ attempts to prevent youth from using drugs and/or alcohol.
What I’ve seen is the more parents try to control that and stop the substance abuse behaviours, then that’s what would initiate the violent behaviours from the adolescent. Not as a direct result of coming home stoned or drunk.

[A] lot of the episodes happen when they want to go and do these things . . . where they’re on their way to a party and their parents won’t let them go. So then all this happens. A lot of times it’s not right while they’re under the influence but it’s related to it.

Where I see that play a big part is if it’s an adolescent involved in a substance abuse circle of friends, and so on. It seems to be when they try to keep their private life and their at-home life very separate. And if parents start to infringe on that outside-of-home life, that private life, then that’s what can cause a lot of tension and violence between the adolescent and the parents.

This young kid had gotten caught stealing out of his dad’s wallet. And the dad went in to retrieve the money back and the kid was violent—kicking, screaming, yelling, biting, clawing. He needed the money to get speed . . . I believe that the severity of that violence was the kid getting caught stealing [and] not getting the drug that he wanted.

\[3\] Escalation of Power Struggles (Extrafamilial)

Peer Influence/Negative Labelling

It appears that the experience of being labelled by the public education system contributes to the formation of violent behaviours among youth. When children go through early situations of failure with regard to school-related tasks, they may respond by seeking out negative activities (drug use, crime, aggression) and “undesirable” peer relations in an attempt to bolster their public identity. If such behaviours meet the child’s need to belong, a pattern may be established in which these labels become connected to personal identity. As a result, children may become increasingly involved in aggressive and anti-social activities which then serve to raise the level of family conflict, and create the potential for violence to occur.

I think we often look at parents, and the more I work . . . with kids in trouble with the law the less I am convinced that’s the primary factor. And I’m beginning to think more and more that a dominant experience . . . which separates them from others and certainly pathologizes them in many ways is an experience of failure—particularly in the school system.

The experience of failure, I think, drives them into other kinds of lifestyles and other social groups and other ways of operating. [And] it creates a whole scenario where they act differently.

And as he gets older he finds himself dealing with other kids who are out more in the margins, and in places where there is danger, and eventually alcohol and drug abuse happens . . . So you identify yourself with those certain kinds of kids where you can have something that can be recognized.

Here’s a young man [who] doesn’t do very well in school. He receives a lot of shaming experiences from this [and] he goes through school not having his own gifts acknowledged, not
even knowing what they are . . . And so my own feeling is that when you go through that school experience, it sets the stage for people who do not have success . . . to be more prone to display destruction and destructive activities at different times—whether against self or others . . . So my argument is that if you don’t have good activities to display within one context, you’ll display something in another context.

Stress/Poverty/Isolation

Families in which adolescent violence against parents occurs were often described as being under high levels of stress. Counsellors stated that many abused parents are single mothers who have been attempting to cope with a variety of pressures related to finances, child-care responsibilities, and social isolation. As a result of the combined stressors that exist within such families, tension and conflict may reach the point at which violence occurs.

[It’s a collective stress . . . I think that if the mom has been a single mom for awhile, she has all her stressors, and then the child would have all of his or her stressors.

So in two out of three cases here it’s been a single mom. [And] so this is someone who has been living under constant strain of finances, of kids and the energy they take to raise, broken relationships. So you have people at the end of their ropes.

[T]he ones where I see a lot of chaos is where the mom is all stressed and is reacting to the kid, and the kid is reacting to the mom . . . It’s like this constant eruption and then reaction.

The extended family was there, but it wasn’t active. They didn’t take a role. And it got to a point where I think the extended family was almost blaming the mom.

In a few instances, counsellors suggested that violence toward a mother is related to the stress and frustration a youth may feel when he is the only male in a household. It appears that these male adolescents feel somewhat alone and isolated, and may react to their situation by attempting to gain some level of control in the family. In addition, male youth often feel a sense of “obligation” to take on the authoritarian role in all-female households.

I think if the boy is overwhelmed with females in the house and doesn’t have enough male influence, a lot of frustrations will come out on the female siblings and also on the mother.

He was third born of four children and the other three were girls, and so things were happening around him that he didn’t understand and didn’t agree with . . . The girls were really disobeying their mother and just doing what they wanted when they wanted. The mom just had no control in the house and he was trying to regain that control on behalf of the mother. But it kind of got all twisted because when we intervened he had actually assaulted the mother quite seriously.
A number of counsellors noted that the experience of poverty tends to increase the potential for violence within families. Youth who grow up in these situations generally have less opportunity to achieve certain goals, and this often creates a high level of frustration which can be a catalyst for conflict. Youth may also be angry and resentful toward parents for the sense of “differentness” they are feeling, and this dynamic may exacerbate family tension. Regardless of the influence that poverty may have in terms of adolescent-to-parent violence, some counsellors were also clear that this problem is by no means class-specific.

And there is poverty, and there are parents who would like to enroll their kids in soccer and baseball and all those sorts of things . . . so the kids are bored . . . and before you know it all those tensions just . . .

They don’t have enough money to do anything so all those sorts of frustrations drive them crazy because . . . within their peer group they’re poor, they’re “losers.” So what do they do? They take all that anger for all those reasons and where is the best place to let go? At home.

It can be that they blame their parent. Like; “Why can’t you give me the middle-class standard of living? What is wrong with you?”

We did a group [in which] we asked our kids; “If you could change anything in the world what would you change?” And one of the girls that has been very violent towards her mother, the first thing she said is poverty. That everyone would be equal. That there would be no poverty, because she has lived her whole life in poverty. And she knows that, and it does make her different.

I think maybe poverty exacerbates the likelihood that [violence] could happen--it’s like a contributing factor. But certainly there are lots of situations where it doesn’t happen. I think it can lead people to feel more out of control because there are yet more things that they can’t gain when they’re 14 years old.

One of the things that is interesting to me is that I will literally go from that [poverty] case to another case where there is a lawyer’s family . . . where this is occurring.

**Culture/Value Differences**

Counsellors described the influence of certain cultural values as a contributing factor in situations of adolescent-to-parent assault. Within this dynamic, conflicts which arise between youth and their parents are related to differences that may be based on culture, ethnicity, and/or age. Youth who assault their parents may thus be reacting out of anger, frustration, or confusion
about personal identity. The scenarios presented also suggest that white North-American society is somewhat more tolerant of violence against parents.

And the culture may be the gap between the parents and the teens. When the parents [and youth have] different beliefs and different values, there is a real gap where the kids try to belong both ways, and it's like a sandwich and they're caught in between. And there is a lot of violence because they're not sure who they are and who they're supposed to be.

He is fighting against their religious values, he is fighting against their old country values, and probably just the age difference as well . . . a bigger age difference than what would be considered normal.

In the one home where it was a 16 year old son who was physically abusive towards his mom, they were a Caribbean family, and the first time that he hit her I remember she said to me; “You know, it seems in your culture that it's more okay if this sort of thing happens.” [S]he always saw it maybe not as an acceptable norm, but not as totally taboo as it would be in her culture.

In the one family where the male assaulted the mother she was absolutely devastated . . . This is an Indo-Canadian family and she . . . couldn't get over the fact that her only male child had assaulted her.

4) Response to Abusive Parenting

Rigid Parenting

Counsellors were in agreement that many violent youth are reacting to an upbringing in which extreme control is exercised over their behaviour. During the early stages of development this parenting style may appear to be working “effectively,” as children will generally adhere to the strict behavioural boundaries which are demanded of them. However, tension within these families begins to surface as youth display an increased need for autonomy, which in turn causes a reaction from their parents that is aimed at maintaining the same level of rigid control. As this power struggle becomes more amplified, violence may be introduced as the only means by which youth feel they can create a sense of power within their lives.

I think families can have a dysfunctional style that’s not so problematic in the younger years that just can’t work in the adolescent years. [And] then truly it is a pervasive pattern, it’s just not as problematic until you get to the adolescent years.

[The parents . . . have a tendency to box the kids in, to give ultimatums. They don’t know how to negotiate, compromise. It’s black thinking, white thinking. There are no gray areas for these families.
[W]ith the punitive parent what happens is they’ve lost control, or they feel that they’ve lost face. [The children] are older and so they have older needs but the parent has less control over those, so rather than engaging in cooperation, they try to control them.

[W]hat’s happening for the teenager [is] they’re having an emerging autonomy, they’re learning to abstract. And it’s any discombobulation of family that can’t accommodate that, that can’t find a place for that autonomy . . . And they get boxed in, I think, and then explode.

**Witnessing Wife Assault**

Counsellors were in agreement that youth who physically abuse their parents have often been witnesses to wife assault, and this is especially common in cases of son-to-mother violence. It was also noted that such violence will typically begin when the abusive dad/partner leaves the home, as the youth will then respond by “taking on” the role of the abuser. At the same time, the mothers in these families are often in a place of extreme vulnerability since they are recovering from their own experiences of abuse. As a result, these mothers may have difficulty asserting themselves—which may increase the potential for abuse to occur.

I find sometimes males will be abusive to the parents--especially to the mother--when the father has been in the home for a while and left for whatever reason. They may have seen the abuse going on between the father and the mother.

The kids witnessed much of the abuse . . . The father was the authority. The mother was the victim [who didn’t] know how to maintain the authority so that when the father left that became a vacuum, and the vacuum was filled by the eldest boy who re-assumed that role.

And often-times those moms were victims of abuse themselves, so they’re coming out of relationships or have histories with . . . abusive relationships.

[T]here [was] spousal abuse in that situation [so] she just went into her little defensive shell. She was very passive.

Among these male youth, the use of violent behaviour toward mothers appears to be motivated in a number of ways. First, they may have learned through masculine role-modelling that violence can be used to enforce certain wants or needs. Second, the youth may have idealized the abuser to some extent, and are angry at the mother for “causing” him to leave. Finally, assaultive youth may be “punishing” the mother for being weak and vulnerable, and for failing to protect the family when the abusive adult male was in the home.
He was acting out what he was role-modelled. This is how I can treat you, this is how you have always been treated. So I don’t have to respect you or listen to you or do anything because nobody has showed me that I had to.

Sometimes the kids aren’t beaten but they have seen it and it’s been modelled to them; this is what happens when you don’t get your way, this is what you do.

[H]is abusive behaviour to his mother [was] almost unthinking, instinctual. And that was very different from the father who was very deliberate and controlling . . . And the son’s would come from a position of out of control.

And quite often [he’ll] put the blame on the mother for the father leaving, because he’s put the father on a pedestal for his survival . . . his emotional, mental survival.

I am working with a family right now and . . . the dad has recently died. And the boy is grieving and he is angry, but he is very much taking it out on mom. So he doesn’t know what to do with his anger, but he keeps directing it right to the mom. And people are telling him; “You’re the man of the house.” So what’s he doing? That’s his choice because of his past experience.

While adolescent male violence toward the mother appears to be the predominant pattern in situations of wife assault, some youth may instead respond with violence toward the abusive adult male. In such cases, these youth appear to be motivated by extreme anger, a need for retribution, and/or a desire to protect the mother from being further victimized.

And this kid feels powerless in the sense that he watches his mother get beat up by this man.

What happened is she would [bring] home boyfriend after boyfriend--and this scenario of the abusive men. And one time the boyfriend is beating [the youth’s] mother, and he said he lost it and he shot him. He didn’t mean to kill him, but he shot him.

A five year old kid sitting in a bedroom plotting and planning his father’s murder because that particular person knows that mom’s getting beat up . . . And speaking from personal experience; watching mom get beat up by dad, rushing in to save, and then [getting] older and older until finally you get big enough to shit-kick dad.

**Physical Abuse**

Counsellors were in agreement that violent youth have often been parented in a manner that is physically abusive. When they have sufficient power to do so, these adolescents will respond to the experience of victimization by becoming violent toward the abusive parent. Such behaviour may be motivated by feelings of anger, or by a need to create some sense of personal safety. Conversely, incidents of physical violence are sometimes directed against the non-abusive parent--usually the mother--as an expression of anger toward her for not having been protective.
Finally, it should be noted that in all situations of violence, these youth may simply be modelling the very relational styles that have been taught to them.

And a lot of the history is child abuse—specifically from a step-father or step-parent or even the mother. So as the [youth] experiences power through their own growth and things are changing then they are going to . . . try and get that power.

[T]he discipline was very punitive and . . . a lot of things were not negotiable. And I think she just finally had enough. She got to an age where she said; “I’m not putting up with this anymore.”

And that was inflicted on them when they were little by dad. I think role modelling the violence, being role modelled is also an extremely important factor.

One of the things that I notice . . . is a young person feeling that they didn’t have any control over their lives—that someone else was trying to control them. And that they were trying to take some sort of power back into their lives.

As outlined, physically abusive parents often become victims of violence themselves at the point when their children have the ability to shift the balance of power. A similar dynamic was also described in situations where parents who were formerly abusive begin to adopt a more egalitarian style of relating with their children. While this shift in parental behaviour is obviously a sign of positive change, it also creates a greater sense of “safety” in which youth may respond by assuming the abusive role that the parent used to have.

[The] dad was really controlling. Now [he] has gone to counselling and he is on medication and he’s stepped back from that. [The] boy has stepped into that position where the dad used to domineer everything, control everything, and is really, really aggressive.

[All] of a sudden mom gets on the wagon, stops drinking or stops using, and then [it’s] a total change of parenting. [And the youth] doesn’t know how to deal with that so all of a sudden his frustration level is way up, but the only way he’s seen it dealt with before when mom was using [drugs/alcohol] was to hit.

I worked with a family where it was the daughter against the father, and the father was just as violent as the daughter . . . The dad had more physical power at first against the daughter until [child protection] agencies got involved. And then the daughter ended up having more power because dad couldn’t use his old ways anymore.

Sexual Abuse

While no specific examples were provided, some counsellors hypothesized that youth who are violent toward their parents may be reacting to the experience of sexual abuse. In such
cases, it was suggested that adolescents would be dealing with a range of painful feelings which might be externalized through violent behaviour. It was also noted that violence may be directed toward the non-abusive parent for failing to provide protection.

These kids may have been walking around for years being sexually abused and holding all that inside, not knowing what to do with it, not knowing who to go to with that information.

And then if dad is the one that was doing it and dad left, well now they are going to take it out on mom for not having done anything.

**Emotional Abuse**

Counsellors stated that violent youth have often been raised in an atmosphere of extreme emotional abuse and neglect. In such cases, these adolescents may be dealing with feelings of hurt, anger, and low self-esteem which may be redirected as violence against the abusive parent. Negative labelling also plays a role in the formation of violent behaviour, as youth who are told that they are “bad” will likely fulfill the role to which they have been ascribed.

I'm working with a family right now that the mother was raised in an extremely abusive situation; physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and sexually. [And] she made a commitment to herself that she wouldn’t ever treat her children like that—that she would never lay a hand on them. What she does is she becomes verbally abusive at the children.

And then of course with the verbal abuse to this kid who was eight or nine . . . she wasn’t old enough to know what her mother was calling her; whore, slut, tramp, and all of that other garbage. And she just took it out in her mother when her mother was drunk because it was the only time she could. It was her outlet for her frustration.

Then the kid is saying; “Well, I’m going to fuck-up real good now.” That mentality. “If you’re going to see me as a screw-up, then I’m going to be the best damn screw-up I can be.”

Youth who are emotionally abused by their parents are rarely taught healthy forms of communication, and therefore issues in the family are typically dealt with through anger and aggression. In this type of family atmosphere, there is a much greater potential that various conflicts between parents and adolescents will escalate into violence.

And they've never been taught how to, what to do with the anger. They don't know what to do with the anger.
The [other] thing is a real lack of skills; communication skills, discipline skills, problem solving skills—all those kind of basic things. So in the way that plays itself out is, in an argument you have two people who don’t know how to solve a problem other than who can yell the loudest, and that often will escalate beyond yelling.

The only skill they have is either arguing or spanking, and when that doesn’t work and the kids get too old and you can’t spank them anymore, it’s yelling. So you go in, and you just see families and people interacting, having violent interactions, and only having one tool—which isn’t even a very good one to deal with the conflict.

But they haven’t built that rapport from day one because that style isn’t there in the first place, those skills aren’t there in the first place.

Youth who are emotionally abused often lack intimacy with their parents, and physical violence may therefore stem from an attempt to achieve some level of connection. While such behaviour will certainly not fulfill the need for parental closeness, a youth who feels emotionally abandoned will often prefer violent interactions to nothing at all.

One family that I am thinking of, that was their intimacy, when there was fighting and violence. And that was one of the few times when there would be communication beyond this coming and going in and out of the house . . . And it was a very predictable cycle that they would get into. There would be a peaceful phase, then there would be a crisis, and however they dealt with the escalation.

The way I saw it was that the daughters had so many unmet emotional needs, that they became so angry because they were trying to get those needs met. And every time they tried to get them met they were not met, or they were blocked, or they were feeling worse about themselves. They just became so angry that it totally blinded them . . . It’s just an uncontrollable rage because they were just feeling so needy.

You find these youth and their families and parents . . . really need to learn to get to know each other again. There is no relationship there most of the time. It’s gone, it’s been destroyed. And they need to learn to put it behind them and they need to move on to a new relationship and understanding of each other.

5) Influence of Organic Conditions

Brain Dysfunctions

In some instances, counsellors noted that the actual or implied mental illness of a family member contributed to violence against parents. When adolescents and/or parents are perceived by others as being mentally ill, this may provide youth with an excuse for their violent behaviours. In cases where youth and/or parents are clinically diagnosed, the effects of mental illness were noted to have been a legitimate contributing factor.
When the boy was assaulting the mother he told me; “Well, my mother is crazy, she just doesn’t understand any other way.” [T]he implied mental illness had a big part to do with their behaviour.

I think he really used it for his benefit in the family as an excuse, but outside of the family with workers and that he [said]; “I am not crazy, there is nothing wrong with me.” So inside of the family he could use it, but outside of the family no.

I was working with the daughter who [received treatment] and probably they were thinking borderline schizophrenic as well. She was on medication, using a lot of drugs besides that. Lots of violence, very violent girl . . . If mom talked to the daughter, the daughter would understand in her own way. And because she was so paranoid she felt that everyone was going to go against her.

One parent was schizophrenic, and the other parent was bi-polar.

Finally, it was noted that abused parents are sometimes characterized as being extremely dependent and vulnerable. This family dynamic may result from a situation in which the youth is forced to “caretake” a parent who is suffering from an addiction or mental illness.

Another contributing factor [is that] the adolescent at one time or another has been in a position to take care of their parent—whether it was through addiction or mental illness. The roles have been reversed--and probably at a very young age. And then as they grow [they] realize; “Wait a minute, who is looking after me [and] how am I going to get my needs met?”

Reinforcing Factors

1) Youth Dynamics

Lack of Remorse

Adolescents are more likely to use repeated violence against parents when they feel minimal remorse for their abusive actions. Counsellors suggested that although assaultive youth may initially express a sense of guilt, they tend to “excuse” further incidents of violent behaviour through various rationalization and blaming strategies. It was also noted that when youth are blamed and labelled as the sole cause of the violence, their ability to feel remorse may be somewhat diminished--especially if the parent has been abusive as well.

There is no remorse usually because it was a “warranted” action.
I didn't see as much remorse. More anger than remorse coming from the child, even after the act. Almost like there was no other alternative. Like; “What did you expect me to do?”

I think a small percentage [of youth] have the guilt and remorse. However, through time they justify what they are doing.

I think they naturally feel remorse, but that remorse is removed when it’s put on them by the parent. When the parent is saying; “You did this to me, how could you do this to me?”

And when I spoke to the boy about [the violence], he knew very well that he had crossed over to where he shouldn’t have gone . . . He hated himself for it and was very angry that it had gotten to that point, but once he had crossed it was like; “Well, I have done it once and what is going to stop me from doing it again.”

2) Parent Dynamics

Maintaining Secrecy

Parents who are physically assaulted by their children will commonly minimize or deny the severity of the situation, and this response will often increase the potential for further violence to occur. Counsellors suggested that parents’ tendency to deny the seriousness of their victimization may relate to feelings of family loyalty, fear of retribution from the assaultive adolescent, or shame around their own feelings of parental failure.

Keeping it a secret. Keeping the child out of jail or charges from being laid. Probation and all that stuff. The feeling of being a fink.

I have advised parents to call the cops [and] they seem like; “Oh, I’m allowed to?” You know, like someone is giving them permission. But they often don’t. Then I’ll arrive next week for the appointment and [let’s] say there was another episode. What did you do? “Well, the usual.” You didn’t call the police? “Well, I don’t want to. God—he’s my kid.”

I think [the parents] don’t want to acknowledge that it is that serious—that it’s become a matter for the community.

For the parent that publicly identifies them as a failure.

Blaming Youth

Counsellors agreed that most parents who are abused tend to perceive the assaultive youth as being solely responsible. This stance may serve to further entrench the cycle of violence, as these parents are unwilling to acknowledge the influence of their own behaviours with respect to
family conflicts. Conversely, other parents may blame themselves to the point at which their own shame and guilt renders them incapable of escaping from the abuse.

They defend themselves. They did the very best job they were capable of doing . . . And it’s true, they did do the very best job they were capable of doing . . . given the tools they had.

But there is a small percentage who will take responsibility—again, out of balance . . . They become disabled by guilt.

3\ Community Response

Legal Interventions/Social Service Interventions

Counsellors noted that when physically abused parents do request assistance from the criminal justice system, a wide range of responses are experienced. Minimal and/or ineffective police interventions generally result in the entrenchment of violent patterns, as youth learn that minimal consequences will arise from their abusive actions. It was also noted that social service workers and police agencies both tend to “dump” the responsibility for intervention onto each other, which often leaves parents feeling confused and further victimized.

I think it’s helpful if the child has had little or no contact with police or the criminal justice system. But if the kid’s already been through a couple of situations where; “Hey, nothing has happened to me” then . . . it doesn’t really matter all that much.

The one family that I was working with, the mom called the police because the daughter was assaulting. The police officer said to her; “Well, don’t you have a husband there that can take care of this?” So that wasn’t helpful.

[The mother] did finally go and press charges, but really nothing was done. They picked [the girl] up, questioned her, and let her go home.

[This young man was just losing it in the home, becoming very abusive and physically violent—particularly to his mother . . . And so they called Emergency Social Services [who said]; “Your child is not in danger—call the police.” Well, [they] called the police [who] came two days later and they didn’t take it seriously at all. So I find parents that are in that trap of experiencing the violence towards them from their own kids have nowhere to go, and the kids have no one to really step in and . . . protect them from their own selves at times.
Change Factors

1) Family Focused

Sensitivity

While it is clear that a number of factors may contribute to the formation and perpetuation of adolescent-to-parent assault, counsellors noted that violence often decreases when parents and youth begin to interact in ways that do not involve power and control over each other. Within this new type of relationship, adolescents tend to develop a stronger sense of personal safety and self-identity--thereby reducing the need to dominate their parents.

It changes so much for them when they start to feel like they do have some control and power. And that sense of anger towards people seems to disappear.

I don't think the solutions are found in the power/powerlessness dynamic. [G]et out of the power game and do something else.

Intimacy

Since adolescent violence toward parents is often related to poor communication patterns and a lack of emotional intimacy, conflict can be reduced by fostering new levels of connection and interaction between family members. In this way, parents and youth gain a greater understanding of each other's needs, and a new sense of love and respect.

If the youth is being violent because they're experiencing this uncontrollable rage because their needs are not being met, they don't feel that rage anymore because their needs are getting met. They feel like they belong, they feel like they're loved, and so they don't have all that anger because they're not stuffing all those bad feelings.

If people choose to learn where each other is coming from [the violence] is eliminated . . . But if the young person has very little understanding about what the [parents] are talking about and the parents have no clue about what's going on in this young person's head, then there's a lot more likelihood violence would occur because it's a lot easier to be violent toward somebody that you don't have that type of understanding with.

I believe people--our identities, our sense of who we are--comes from our relationships with things which we give value to . . . Once we understand that we have something to give, once we understand that our mothers and fathers have things to give . . . I think that takes us out of the power game and puts us in a much safer environment.
There's a Native kid I work with . . . who was quite abusive to his mother at times. And we worked with him, and we had these wonderful conversations about seeing his gift of compassion, and his tenderness, and realizing that it came from his mom, and his culture, and his traditions. And he was able to identify those gifts, and to really hold them and cherish them. [And] as long as we were able to maintain this kind of conversation and this kind of life . . . the violence within the home vanished.

2) Community Focused

Legal Interventions/Social Service Interventions

Counsellors noted that in some situations a clear “hard-line” response from the justice system is helpful in reducing violent behaviour in youth. In addition, foster care agreements were seen to be effective in those cases where parents and youth needed some time apart so that various issues could be addressed within a safe environment. Finally, counselling and mediation services were viewed as being an important factor in terms of helping families.

I have noticed a similarity in response from our RCMP and I rather like it--what they’ve been doing. They’ve read the kid the riot act and have said; “You can be charged.”

[T]he police became involved and the son ended up in a youth detention, and enduring quite tough consequences--which is the one thing that he’s fearful of. This boy always talks about wanting to stay out of jail. That’s the one thing that seems to motivate him.

[S]ometimes when it’s escalating to the point where it’s completely out of control [social workers] will put the kid in care by agreement and put them in a foster home or a group home for a period of time until some intervention can be done.

[M]ediation is very important . . . And when we get into the parenting skills they say; “Wow--I never knew that.” [F]ind out where the parents are coming from, and what their triggers are.

Meaningful Connections

Finally, counsellors noted that when meaningful connections are established with youth who are violent, positive change can begin to occur. It appears that within this sense of care and mutual respect for others, adolescents are more likely to listen to advice, feel good about themselves, and have a healthy set of behaviours from which to role-model.

When a kid gets a one-on-one worker. If that connection is a good connection then it just takes off.

You just go from where the kid is right now and you just establish . . . a respectful relationship—a caring relationship. [W]hen they get to trust you and to know you, then you can implement change.
CHAPTER 8 - DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the research findings, and compares these results with the initial hypothesis. Various limitations of this study are outlined, and specific aspects of the overall findings then discussed in terms of practice implications. Finally, the results of this study are reviewed with respect to certain policy recommendations.

Research Hypothesis

The original research hypothesis proposed that five primary factors contribute to youth violence against parents; 1) attachment issues, 2) rewards and consequences, 3) abusive parenting, 4) resource and definitional power, and 5) sex role. In addition, this model suggested that violence toward parents is reinforced and perpetuated by a climate of 6) minimization and denial among family members, and 7) limited intervention from communities.

As predicted, attachment issues were found to be common in families who experience adolescent-to-parent assault. However, this factor was later re-conceptualized as a sub-theme (emotional abuse) within the theme response to abusive parenting. In this way, low levels of parent-youth attachment were more appropriately viewed as a direct consequence of emotional abuse rather than as an isolated contributing factor. It was also noted that certain organic factors in infancy may lead to later attachment problems between parents and youth.

Research results confirmed that rewards and consequences play a significant role in terms of violence from youth. It appears that adolescents may use physical force against parents in order to achieve certain needs or goals (rewards), and those who receive minimal consequences for their actions are more likely to repeat such behaviours. This contributing factor was also re-conceptualized during the final analysis; reward-based behaviour was seen as a motivating factor within a sub-theme (response to blocked goals) of the theme escalation of
power struggles (intrafamilial), and the influence of minimal consequences was described as a reinforcing factor within the themes of parent dynamics and community response.

The role of abusive parenting was noted as a strong contributing factor, as youth who assault their parents have commonly experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse, and/or witnessed wife assault (sub-themes). In addition to these original predictions, findings revealed that many assaultive youth have been exposed to rigid parenting. As outlined, emotional abuse was also identified as a sub-theme within the theme of response to abusive parenting.

Results supported the prediction that adolescents who have high levels of resource and definitional power within the family are more likely to use violence against their parents. These findings also confirmed that the actual strength of a youth is sometimes inversely related to the "severity" of an assault. It should be noted that the title of resource and definitional power was re-conceptualized as a sub-theme (age/strength of youth) within the theme escalation of power struggles (intrafamilial), and the contextual interaction between power and violence was further addressed within the theme socialization of male power.

Research findings confirmed the view that sex-role contributes to youth violence against parents, and this theme was re-named in more explicit terms as socialization of male power. As was originally suggested, violence from adolescent males is related to direct socialization whereas females learn their abusive behaviours through a more indirect or "oppositional" process. In addition to these predictions, it was noted that sex-role socialization influences the way in which youth perceive their male and female parents, and this factor appears closely connected to the predominance of victimization that occurs among mothers.

The results of this study validate that minimization/denial and limited intervention serve to reinforce patterns of adolescent-to-parent assault. Findings also expand on this original framework by specifying a number of reasons why parents and family members minimize the extent to which violence is occurring. Finally, it was noted that youth who display a lack of control and lack of remorse are more likely to repeat their assaultive behaviours.
Research Summary

Overall, it appears that the contributing and reinforcing factors outlined in the original hypothesis were confirmed. However, a number of these factors (attachment issues, rewards and consequences, resource and definitional power) were re-conceptualized within broader themes in the research summary. It should also be noted that the final research results revealed a number of additional themes and sub-themes which were categorized into three primary conceptual frameworks; 1) contributing factors, 2) reinforcing factors, and 3) change factors.

To review, this study revealed that the contributing factors of violence against parents include; 1) socialization of male power (youth and parent dynamics), 2) escalation of (intrafamilial) power struggles (age/strength of youth, response to blocked goals, redirection of vulnerability, substance misuse), 3) escalation of (extrafamilial) power struggles (peer influence, negative labelling, stress/poverty/isolation, culture/value differences), 4) response to abusive parenting (rigid parenting, witnessing wife assault, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse), and 5) influence of organic conditions (brain dysfunctions, onset of puberty, lack of attachment). It should be understood that these themes are often interconnected, although some factors may occur in isolation to influence assaultive behaviour.

Research results also outlined a number of reinforcing factors which serve to perpetuate the pattern of violence in families of assaultive youth. These factors include; 1) youth dynamics (lack of control, lack of remorse), 2) parent dynamics (maintaining secrecy, excessive tolerance, blaming youth), and 3) community response (legal interventions, social service interventions, medical interventions). Again, these various reinforcing factors may occur in isolation, but most commonly they interact on a reciprocal basis to maintain the cycle of violence.

Finally, this study identified specific change factors which successfully reduce further incidents of adolescent violence from occurring. These factors are; 1) youth focused (self care, communication skills, sense of remorse, future thinking), 2) family focused (sensitivity, intimacy, clear consequences, social support), and 3) community focused (legal interventions, social service
interventions, medical interventions, meaningful connections). In terms of effectiveness, these change factors should be implemented in a way that is reflective of the contributing and reinforcing factors affecting a particular family. To illustrate, violence that results from emotionally neglectful parenting will most likely be decreased when youth begin to experience a more intimate relationship with their parents. However, violence that is influenced by organic conditions might best be supported through medical intervention.

In summary, it should be recognized that adolescent-to-parent violence stems from a number of contributing and reinforcing factors which may be operating in relative isolation, or within a complex system of interconnections. Efforts to reduce violence can occur on a variety of levels, and therefore practitioners should be cognizant of the diverse dynamics that exist within families in order for interventions to be successful. To encapsulate the research findings which have been outlined, the following diagram (Figure 2) is presented.
Figure 2 outlines the major findings of this study. The five primary contributing factors of adolescent-to-parent violence (with corresponding sub-themes) are positioned on the outer circle of the top diagram, and the three reinforcing factors are outlined in the inner circle. The bottom diagram summarizes the change factors that were found to reduce incidents of youth violence against parents.
Research Limitations

While attempts were made throughout this study to address issues of generalizability, reliability, and validity, a number of limitations stem from the research methods that were used. First, it should be noted that participants were asked to speak about their past experiences of adolescent violence against parents, and in some cases this involved a “recall period” of up to four years. Certainly, this retrospective approach to information-gathering was valuable in the sense that youth and parents were perhaps more likely to provide honest and non-defensive descriptions of their past behaviours. However, it is also possible that the accuracy of this study was compromised by its primary reliance on participant recollections—especially in cases where violence against parents had occurred a number of years ago.

A second concern with this study is that participants may have biased their responses to some extent through exaggeration or minimization. For instance, it is interesting to note that while the theme of abusive parenting was predominant in youth and counsellor interviews, parents revealed less information regarding this contributing factor. These findings imply that a number of parents may indeed have been abusive to their children, but were reluctant to reveal such information during the interviews. However, a more probable explanation is that parents who agreed to participate in this study had “little to hide” and therefore gave relatively truthful responses, whereas those who declined to participate were perhaps more representative of the abusive forms of parenting outlined by both counsellors and youth.

Third, it should be noted that the influence of researcher bias likely had a number of effects on this particular study. As outlined, I attempted to reduce the possibility of such bias by using a series of open-ended questions throughout the interview process. However, certain leading questions were also used during these interviews, and this approach may have produced responses which were not entirely “participant-driven.” For example, very few participants initially described violence from youth as being a conscious attempt to coerce or threaten parents into compliance. However, this hypothesis was later confirmed by a number of parents and counsellors when I asked the question in a more direct manner. It is therefore possible that by
framing the research question of *rewards and consequences* in a way that encouraged “yes/no” responses, I influenced participants to confirm my views.

A fourth concern regarding this research relates to the influence of my own personal characteristics and identity. Specifically, it should be acknowledged that I am a young, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class male, and these aspects of “self” likely influenced my perceptions as a research designer, interviewer, and data analyst. I have attempted to make my biases explicit throughout this study, but I recognize that certain beliefs, values, and assumptions nevertheless remain “invisible” to me. It should also be noted that the individual characteristics which I represent may have affected the interview process in various ways. For instance, those participants (especially parents and youth) who were “different” from myself may have been reluctant to share certain aspects of their personal lives, and therefore information regarding gender issues, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation was possibly withheld. Indeed, it is relevant to point out that while all of the female youth who were interviewed had been sexually abused, only 2 of the 3 participants disclosed this information directly. My knowledge of the other youth’s victimization came from her mother, and this example illustrates one of the many ways in which a participant’s comfort level influences the research process.

Finally, it should be recognized that the relatively small number of participants involved (21 counsellors, 7 parents, 5 youth) in this study may have prevented the development of additional themes and sub-themes that a larger body of data would have produced. This concern also relates to various aspects of generalizability, as the majority of information gathered from this research only represents certain participant characteristics (Caucasian, First Nations, single mother, two-parent, step-parent, heterosexual). As a result, these findings may not necessarily apply to those individual and family characteristics which were excluded from data collection. The strict definition of physical abuse that was used throughout this study may also have been a limitation, as no information was gathered about the various forms of psychological and financial abuse that parents may experience from their adolescent children.
Areas for Further Discussion

Practice Implications

This study indicates that adolescent-to-parent violence is connected to a diverse range of contributing factors. It is therefore important for social service workers and justice personnel to be aware of these dynamics so that counter-productive interventions can be avoided. To illustrate, an adolescent female may use physical violence against her mother as a means of "telling" that she is being sexually abused by a male parent. In this situation, the youth may be experiencing terror, confusion, anger, hopelessness, and a sense of betrayal with regard to her "non-protective" mother. If the justice system responds to the daughter's behaviour by applying consequences without exploring the possibility of sexual abuse, she will likely be subjected to further victimization, and conflict with her mother may actually increase.

From an alternate perspective, it is possible that a male youth with a caring, nurturing upbringing may use violence against his parents as a result of various contributing factors such as peer influence, substance misuse, and sex-role socialization. Interventions which focus on issues such as assertiveness with peers, drug/alcohol use, and unlearning sexism would therefore be particularly appropriate, and the use of clear legal consequences may also be necessary to prevent further acts of violence from occurring. Unfortunately, it is common in this type of scenario for parents to be unfairly labelled as the "cause" of such violence, as the social service profession tends to assume that problematic behaviour from youth is the result of "dysfunctional parenting." If this perspective is adopted without consideration of other possibilities, parents will likely feel blamed and re-victimized, and the abuse may become further entrenched.

Gender Differences

The overall findings of this study indicate that sex-role socialization creates "imitative" behaviours from male youth, and "oppositional" responses from females. This is an important concept for further exploration, as it suggests that while male and female youth are influenced to use violence through different socialization processes, the end result of parent victimization is
quite similar. To some extent, this research finding differs from studies on child witnesses of wife assault which conclude that boys tend to respond by *externalizing* what they have learned (defiance, aggression, destructiveness) whereas girls will typically adopt *internalizing* behaviours (depression, anxiety, becoming withdrawn) to cope with their experiences (Hughes, 1982; Jaffe et al., 1990; Jaffe et al., 1986; Wolfe et al., 1986). While it is clear that not all male and female youth who abuse their parents have witnessed wife assault, it would be valuable for researchers to explore whether girls who witness violence in the family reach a point in their development where the process of externalizing becomes more common.

It is important to recognize that the level of violence used by male and female youth is often *inversely* related to the amount of physical power they are able to exercise against parents. This connection between strength and violence suggests that “severe” assaults are not necessarily committed by the most powerful youth—and in fact the opposite may be true. From this, it should be noted that “decontextualized” conclusions may be reached by researchers who attempt to “measure” rates of adolescent-to-parent assault solely on the basis of tactics used and injuries sustained. For while it is clear that injury-causing assaults have serious effects on parents, violence can also take the form of subtle intimidation and control tactics—often committed by male youth—in which power is exercised through more covert methods.

The ways in which women are viewed by their adolescent children is also an important area for discussion, as it is clear from this study that mothers are the primary targets of violence. Among adolescent males, assaultive behaviour often stems from a direct socialization process in which they learn to exercise power over women. Conversely, female youth appear motivated to use violence against mothers as an attempt to distance themselves from the “feminine” image that is being mirrored to them. These findings indicate that mothers are being victimized not only through a process of direct patriarchal denigration, but also by a paradoxical response in which young females are redirecting their own feelings of objectification. Certainly, it would be helpful for more research to be conducted with respect to these particular dynamics.
**Change Factors**

Perhaps the most important findings of this study relate to the factors that were identified as being instrumental in decreasing the occurrence of adolescent-to-parent assault. While some evidence suggests that punitive legal responses help to prevent further incidents of violence, this approach should not be viewed in isolation as a successful example of intervention. Equally important is the information which shows that meaningful connections with others can help to change the behaviours of assaultive youth. This latter finding reinforces the fact that youth who feel loved and cared for by family members and significant others will be less likely to act out in violent and destructive ways, and professionals should always be cognizant of this change factor when developing interventions with youth and their families.

**Data-Base Development**

It is clear from this study that relatively minimal information exists regarding adolescent violence against parents. While there are many reasons for the lack of attention this topic has received, an ongoing problem relates to the difficulty researchers have in terms of collecting statistics. One way this problem could be partially addressed would be to develop a system of data-collection which included relevant information from police agencies, juvenile courts, child protection agencies, hospitals, and counselling agencies. If a consistent reporting method were used where specific information (sex, age, type of violence, injuries caused) could be gathered, our present understanding of adolescent-to-parent assault would be enhanced.

**Policy Recommendations**

The strong and persistent inclination to assign the cause of crime to the endogenous constitution of the criminal, has been fostered by a more or less inarticulate, subconscious, and yet very real, sense of relief, in that such an explanation seems to free society from a share of responsibility for the crime committed in its midst (Radzinowicz & Hood, 1986, p. 3).

A review of the various forms of legislation used throughout Western/European history reveals that minimal emphasis has been directed toward the social and political structures that
contribute to youth violence against parents. It is therefore suggested that effective intervention and prevention strategies should also focus on potential areas for policy revision. The following sections outline specific aspects of federal and provincial legislation which could be changed to more effectively address the issue of adolescent-to-parent assault.

**Child Protection Legislation**

In 1996, the *Child, Family and Community Service Act (CF&CS)* came into force in British Columbia to replace the previous *Family and Child Service Act*. This new legislation includes a more detailed and comprehensive definition of abuse, offers additional forms of support and care agreements for families, and outlines alternative forms of cooperative planning and dispute resolution. While there are no specific sections within the *CF&CS Act* that deal with parents who are in physical danger from their children, section 5 outlines various “support services” which may be provided to families. In addition, section 6 allows child protection workers to provide “voluntary care agreements” to families in situations where a parent is deemed “temporarily unable to look after the child in the home.”

Regardless of these official policy improvements, it should be noted that a number of sections presently outlined in the *CF&CS Act* have not been put into force, and these include; Agreements with Child’s Kin and Others (section 8), Agreements with Youth (section 9), and the Family Conference (section 20). Such provisions may be helpful to families of assaultive youth, as this would allow child protection social workers to provide alternative forms of foster care, and to implement less adversarial methods of dispute-resolution. It is therefore recommended that sections 8, 9, and 20 of the *CF&CS Act* be proclaimed into force.

Witnessing physical violence in the home is clearly related to the formation of adolescent violence against parents. At present, the B.C. *Violence Against Women in Relationships (VAWIR)* policy (1996) provides explicit recognition of the traumatic effects that wife assault can have on child witnesses. In addition, the *CF&CS Act* outlines that a child who “has been, or is likely to be” emotionally or physically harmed is in need of protection (section 13), and can be prevented
from having contact with the offender (section 28). While this protection policy provides a
definition of abuse which can be *interpreted* to include witnessing wife assault, more explicit
legislation can be found within other Canadian provinces. To illustrate, the *Children and Family
Services* Act in Nova Scotia states that "a child is in need of protective services where the child
has suffered physical or emotional harm caused by being exposed to repeated domestic violence"
cited in Echlin & Marshall, 1995, p. 177). From this, it is suggested that the current *CF&CS Act*
be revised so that the safety needs of child witnesses are clearly recognized.

**The Canadian Criminal Code**

At the present time, the *Canadian Criminal Code* condones the use of violence against
children, as section 43 states that any person in the place of parental authority "is justified in
using force by way of correction . . . if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the
circumstances." This particular stance is in fundamental contradiction with sections 7 and 15 of
the *Charter* which speak to equality of protection under the law. In addition, section 43 violates
article 19.1 of the U.N. *Convention* which declares that member countries "shall take all
appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from
all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse . . . while in the care of parent(s), legal
guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child."

Research indicates that public attitudes are an extremely important factor with respect to
child-rearing, as parents are more likely to be abusive toward their children in societies which
approve of such discipline methods (Durrant & Rose-Krasnor, 1995; Propper, 1990). Although
no studies have *ever* revealed the benefits of physical punishment, it is estimated that this
practice is used by 70 to 75 percent of Canadian parents--primarily against boys. In the period
between 1976 to 1993, there have been 11 government-sponsored reports which have
recommended that section 43 of the *Criminal Code* be repealed. To date, minimal progress has
occurred in this regard with the exception of certain private member's bills that have been
submitted before the House of Commons (Goulet & Rothwell, 1995).
Research suggests that children who are subjected to physical violence in the family are more likely to use aggressive behaviour against their parents during adolescence (Carlson, 1990; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell & Finlayson, 1996; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Kratcoski & Kratcoski, 1982; Libon, 1989; Livingston, 1986; Peek et al., 1985; Truscott, 1992; Ulbrich & Huber, 1981). Evidence of aggressive modelling has also been found among young children who witness wife assault, as they display high rates of externalizing behaviours such as defiance, cruelty, and aggression (Hughes, 1982; Jaffe et al., 1990; Wolfe et al., 1986).

As outlined, children who are subjected to repeated physical violence are significantly more likely to display assaultive behaviour toward their parents during adolescence. From this information, it is suggested that section 43 of the Criminal Code be repealed so that clear policies can be developed with regard to children’s rights to be protected from physical abuse. At present, a number of European countries have enacted legislation which bans the physical punishment of children, and this has resulted in a decrease in rates of child abuse and juvenile delinquency (Durrant & Rose-Krasnor, 1995). For such legislation to be successfully integrated within Canadian society, a comprehensive education and media campaign needs to be developed whereby citizens are informed about the individual and social consequences of physical abuse, and provided with alternative methods of effective child-rearing.

**Legislation of Media**

Children throughout North America are exposed to various forms of community violence, and research indicates that such experiences often lead to increased aggression (Allan et al., 1996; Coles, 1986; Marans, 1994). While some differences exist, most studies also indicate that prolonged exposure to media violence promotes imitative behaviour in youth (Centerwall, 1994; Wood et al., 1991). In Article 17 of the Convention, it is outlined that member countries should “[e]ncourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being.” From this, it is suggested that a
concerted effort be made to reduce children’s overall exposure to violent imagery through the development and implementation of strict broadcasting legislation.

**Prevention Programs**

A final approach to violence prevention involves the implementation of public education programs which are directed toward school children throughout various stages of their development. Research indicates that such interventions can be effective in changing the attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours of children with respect to their use of violence (Dunaway, 1990; Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, & Killip, 1992). These programs can reach a potentially wide audience within schools, and a variety of education methods such as public speakers, videos, theatre presentations, and group discussions may be used. It is therefore suggested that school districts and social service agencies work together to design and implement a series of programs aimed at educating young people about violence prevention.

**Intervention Programs**

While prevention methods are necessary to address the systemic nature of youth violence against parents, specific intervention strategies are also needed to intervene effectively in situations of ongoing violence. As outlined in chapter 1, recent changes to wife assault policies have shown some improvement in the way that violent men are responded to by the justice system. Compulsory intervention strategies appear to decrease rates of re-offending among violent men, and victims report higher levels of satisfaction. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that wife assault is a pervasive social crime in which victims often lack the capacity to protect themselves, or to make decisions about their safety.

An important distinction to be made between wife assault and parent assault is that while abused parents may be in physical danger, they are also deemed responsible for the well-being of their children. In addition, the juvenile justice and child welfare systems are guided by the philosophy that family unity is paramount, and therefore the act of removing an adolescent
offender from the home is actively discouraged. Finally, it should be noted that unlike situations in which adults are abused by their partners, parents of violent youth are often assumed to have the capacity to make decisions regarding their personal safety.

To address the unique dynamics that occur within situations of adolescent-to-parent assault, an integrated approach is suggested whereby various aspects of the system work together to provide support for families. First, clear policies should be developed within police agencies so that all cases of assault are responded to in a consistent manner. This approach must also reflect an awareness that physically abused parents may be reluctant to initiate reports against their children for reasons of fear, shame, or self-blame. Second, juvenile court interventions should be family treatment focused, although the protection needs of parents must always be given serious consideration. If parents are in clear physical danger, a variety of placements may be provided for youth such as temporary shelters, treatment centres, and foster homes. However, efforts should generally be made to maintain family safety through the provision of support and supervision. Finally, comprehensive services must be made available to families so that violent behaviours from youth can be addressed in a timely and thorough manner. These services for parents and youth may occur in a variety of forms such as individual and family counselling, Family Group Conferencing, family mediation, and education/support groups. Throughout, intervention approaches must reflect an awareness of the individual, intrafamilial, social, and political factors that are involved in the formation of adolescent-to-parent violence.

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14 This model was implemented as a demonstration project in Newfoundland and Labrador from 1993 to 1995 (Macleod & Campbell, 1996; Pennell & Burford, 1994). It was developed from a number of influences which include New Zealand legislation, family preservation strategies, community policing, and the Aboriginal concept of reintegrative shaming. British Columbia's CF&CS Act also provides for the use of a Family Conference hearing under section 20, but this particular provision has not yet been put into force.


Family and Child Service Act, S.B.C., c. 11. (1980).


Appendixes
Appendix 1

(Agency Letterhead)

Letter of Consent

On behalf of (name of program & agency), I consent to participate in a research study conducted by UBC Social Work graduate student Peter Monk. I understand that the purpose of this study is to obtain information from counsellors and client families about a particular form of family violence in which youth physically assault their parents.

I understand that this study consists of two main research methods. First, counsellors within our agency will participate in a three hour focus group meeting facilitated by the researcher. During this meeting, the participants will discuss various questions related to the issue of adolescent-to-parent physical assault. I agree to arrange for this meeting to take place at our agency office.

For the second part of the study, this agency will contact various families that we have been involved with to request their participation in an interview with the researcher. These families will be chosen because of their unique knowledge and understanding of adolescent-to-parent violence. If family members agree to participate, a phone number will be released to the researcher so that he may contact the family directly.

I understand that if I have any questions or concerns about this study I may contact Dr. Mary Russell at UBC School of Social Work (phone #), or Dr. Richard Spratley at UBC Research Services (phone #).

_______________________

Name
Position, Agency, Phone #
Letter of Introduction
Graduate Studies Research Topic

To: Family counsellors
From: Peter Monk, UBC School of Social Work graduate student, (phone #)

Introduction:
The purpose of this letter is to describe a research project I am conducting as part of my graduate studies. My hope is to recruit counsellors who would be willing to participate in this research. If you are interested, please contact me by phone to discuss this project further. Thanks for your time.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to gather information from counsellors about a specific form of family violence in which youth are physically assaultive toward their parents. Participation is requested from counsellors who have experience working with families that fit this criterion.

The research study is designed to explore two main questions: 1) What are the main factors contributing to adolescent physical violence toward parents? 2) What common themes of success are noted in cases where this form of violence has decreased? Information obtained through this process will hopefully lead to an increased understanding of potential prevention and intervention approaches.

Study Procedures:
For this research study, counsellors will be asked to engage in a focus group session which will be approximately three hours in length. The session will consist of various questions asked by the researcher which will be followed by in-depth discussions among the group members. The entire focus group session will be audio-taped for later transcription and analysis. All data obtained through this process will be subject to review and approval by the participants before it is included within the completed research study.
Appendix 3

Informed Consent Form

Adolescent-to-Parent Violence: A Qualitative Analysis of Emerging Themes.

Principal Investigator: Brian O'Neill, UBC School of Social Work, (phone #).
Faculty Advisor: Mary Russell, UBC School of Social Work, (phone #).
Co-Investigator: Peter Monk, UBC School of Social Work, (phone #),
course assignment and MSW graduate thesis.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to gather information from counsellors about a specific form of family violence in which youth are physically assaultive toward their parents. Participation is requested from counsellors who have experience working with families that fit this criteria.

The research study is designed to explore two main questions: 1) What are the main factors contributing to adolescent physical violence toward parents? 2) What common themes of success are noted in cases where this form of violence has decreased? Information obtained through this process will hopefully lead to an increased understanding of potential prevention and intervention approaches.

Study Procedures:
For this research study, counsellors will be asked to engage in a focus group session which will be approximately three hours in length. The session will consist of various questions asked by the researcher which will be followed by in-depth discussions among the group members. The entire focus group session will be audio-taped for later transcription and analysis. All research participants will be allowed to review the focus group audio-tapes and/or transcripts to edit them if they desire.
Confidentiality:
Confidentiality of counsellors will be maintained by using only first names throughout the interview. All audio-taped information will be transferred to a written format by the researcher and a paid transcriber. During this process, all names will be changed to pseudonyms. Any information kept on paper, audio-tape, or computer disk will be stored in a locked cabinet. All information stored on computer hard disk will be protected by the use of a security access code.

Information obtained from this study will be summarized in the completed research project. This summary will be presented in the form of commonly identified themes, although some direct quotes may also be used. Five years after publication of this research study, all raw data will be destroyed by the researcher.

Contact:
If I have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, I may contact Brian O'Neill at (phone #).

If I have any concerns about my treatment or rights as a research subject, I may contact the Director of Research Services at the University of British Columbia, Dr. Richard Spratley at (phone #).

Consent:
I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

I consent to participate in this study.

Subject Signature       Date

Position                Agency
Letter of Introduction
Graduate Studies Research Topic

To: Family Members
From: Peter Monk, UBC School of Social Work graduate student.

Introduction:
The purpose of this letter is to describe a research project I am conducting as part of my graduate studies. My hope is to recruit family members who would be willing to participate in this research. If you are interested, please indicate so to the counsellor who gave you this letter, and she or he will arrange for an initial contact between us.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to gather information from families about a specific form of family violence in which youth are physically assaultive toward their parents. Participation is requested from families who have knowledge of this particular issue.

Study Procedures:
Youth who participate in study will be interviewed separately from other family members. This meeting will occur at an agreed upon location and time, and will last for about one to two hours. The entire interview will be audio-taped. If requested, a personal counsellor may be present. For those youth who find it difficult to answer interview questions directly, written responses may be used.

All other family members will be interviewed as a group. This meeting will occur at an agreed upon location and time, and will last for about two to three hours. The entire interview will be audio-taped. If requested, a family counsellor may be present.

Thank you for your time,

Peter Monk
Informed Consent Form

*Adolescent-to-Parent Violence:*

*A Qualitative Analysis of Emerging Themes.*

**Principal Investigator:** Mary Russell, UBC School of Social Work, (phone #).

**Co-Investigator:** Peter Monk, UBC School of Social Work, (phone #),

MSW graduate thesis, School of Social Work.

**Purpose:**
The purpose of this study is to gather information about a form of family conflict in which youth are physically violent toward their parents. Families who are asked to participate in this research are chosen because of their unique knowledge and understanding of this topic.

**Study Procedures:**
Youth who participate in this study will be interviewed privately by the researcher. This meeting will occur at an agreed upon location and time, and will last for about one to two hours. The entire interview will be audio-taped. If requested, a personal counsellor may be present. For those youth who find it difficult to answer interview questions directly, written responses may be used.

All other family members will be interviewed as a group by the researcher. This meeting will occur at an agreed upon location and time, and will last for about two to three hours. The entire interview will be audio-taped. If requested, a family counsellor may be present.
Confidentiality:
Confidentiality will be maintained by using only first names throughout the interview. All audio-taped information will be transferred to a written format by the researcher and a paid transcriber. During this process, all first names will be changed to pseudonyms.

Any information kept on paper, audio-tape, or computer disk will be stored in a locked cabinet. All information stored on computer hard disk will be protected by the use of a security access code.

A summary of the information obtained from this study will be included in the completed research project. None of the participants will be identified by their real names, although various family descriptions and personal quotes may be used. Before this summary is included in the completed study, all family members will have the opportunity to review it so that any unwanted personal quotes can be edited. Five years after publication of this research study, all raw data will be destroyed by the researcher.

While confidentiality of family identity will be maintained throughout this study, it should be noted that the researcher has a legal obligation to report any information regarding child abuse to the appropriate authorities.

Contact:
If I have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, I may contact Mary Russell at (phone #).

If I have any concerns about my treatment or rights as a research subject, I may contact the Director of Research Services at the University of British Columbia, Dr. Richard Spratley at (phone #).

Consent:
I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

I consent to participate in this study.

I consent/I do not consent (please circle one) to my child's participation in this study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent/Witness Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

If I am a youth (10-18 yrs), I assent to my participation in this research study:

| Youth Signature | Date |
Appendix 6

Interview Guide

Focus Groups
- explain research process, clarify any questions/concerns.
- introductions (name, experience, qualifications, approx. # cases)
- what characteristics are common in cases where adolescent-to-parent violence occurs?
- what factors decrease the occurrence of adolescent violence toward parents?
  process: open questions>then probe>then be directive

Parent Interviews
- explain research process, clarify any questions/concerns.
- what do you think is going on when your son/daughter has been violent toward you?
- what has helped to decrease the violence toward you?
  process: open questions>then probe>then be directive

Youth Interviews
- explain research process, clarify any questions/concerns.
- what do you think is going on when you have been violent toward your parent(s)?
- what has helped to decrease the violence?
  process: open questions>then probe>then be directive

Hypothesis

**Sex Role**
- is it a factor, how?
- different for boys/girls?
- different for mom/dad?

**Abusive Parenting**
- is it a factor, how?
- what type, when, who?
- motivation?

**Attachment Issues**
- is it a factor, how?
- how close is family?
- does this relate to guilt?

**Resource & Definitional Power**
- is it a factor, how?
- how did it develop?
- size, age, gender?

**Rewards & Consequences**
- is it a factor, how?
- how do R&C patterns form?

**Minimization/Denial**

**Limited Intervention**