

PARENT ABUSE: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE ADEQUACY OF A YOUTH JUSTICE RESPONSE

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Abstract

This short paper draws on data from a recent study which explored parents' experiences of the youth justice process, including their own receipt of a Parenting Order as a result of their child's involvement in offending. Whilst talking about their experiences, both mothers and fathers described experiences of 'parent abuse' and, drawing on extracts from these accounts, this paper reflects on the appropriateness of a dominant youth justice policy agenda - realised through the Parenting Order – in responding to such experiences. In doing so, it questions what alternatives there may be for responding adequately to 'parent abuse' and suggests that a new conceptualisation of the issue is necessary before adequate support and resources can be put in place for such parents and their families.

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Introduction: the youth justice approach to ‘parent abuse’

While much research has been produced concerning both ‘young offenders’ and their parents, these issues have been framed in very particular ways. In particular, the youth justice framework has tended to frame the ‘problem’ of youth crime in terms of offending within the public domain: thugs on the street, knife/gun/gang crime and ‘anti-social behaviour’ (indeed, the legal definition of anti-social behaviour in the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998* stipulates its behaviour towards persons ‘...not of the same household’). In political, legal and popular discourse, parents are overwhelmingly positioned as contributory agents to their child’s actions and, in many cases, positioned in tandem with them through constructions of ‘problem families’². Dominant research paradigms have reinforced this view in the relentless production of ‘risk factor’ research which has isolated a bewildering array of parenting ‘behaviours’ and ‘characteristics’ which are seen as contributing to youth crime (e.g. Farrington, 1978, 1996, 2002; Anderson et al, 2001; Schaffer et al, 2008). Furthermore, this approach has found particular expression in a raft of New Labour legislative measures, such as Parenting Contracts and, even more punitively, Parenting Orders. Parenting Orders constitute a court order issued to parents whose children have been involved in, or are at risk of, offending. Parenting Orders are issued to parents in the youth court, often at the same time as their child’s receipt of a sentence, and evidence suggests that, as well as wide geographical variations in their issuing, they are predominantly issued to mothers, lone parents and those who are unemployed (Ghate and Ramella, 2002). The order lasts up to 12 months and involves a compulsory condition of the parents’ attendance at a ‘parenting skills’ programme with the aim of eliminating the ‘parenting deficit’ which, it is implied, has contributed to the child’s offence(s) (Goldson and Jamieson, 2002), a response which neatly avoids ‘the long term, intergenerational and embedded problems of poverty, social exclusion and inequality’ which are characteristic of many of these parents and their families’ lives (Jamieson, 2005: 184).

However, the dominance of this discourse, and the institutional and legal practices which reinforce it, ignores the possibility of parents experiencing abuse at the hands of their own children, within their own homes. This issue is frequently omitted from research which explores ‘parenting and youth crime’ and, of the limited research which has explored this issue, the focus has been on quantitative correlates and statistical significances of *what kind* of parent is most likely to experience abuse from *what kind* of child. For example, in their literature review of ‘parent abuse’ (which is defined as physical, mental, emotional or financial abuse targeted towards a parent), Kennair and Mellor (2007) suggest that mothers, those heading lone-parent families, and those experiencing high levels of stress are more likely to experience abuse from their children. In turn, the abusive child is more likely to be older (i.e. adolescent), have witnessed or experienced family abuse and/or violence and display significantly more oppositional and/or aggressive behaviour than her/his peers (Kennair and Mellor, 2007). Such research in this area has tended to focus specifically on aggression and violence in the home (e.g. Jackson, 2003; Stewart et al, 2006), producing the inevitable (and unhelpful) notion of ‘battered parents syndrome’ (Harbin and Madden, 1979). Furthermore, such research has come mainly from

² For example, in relation to increased knife crime and young people, recent headlines include ‘Youth Crime: Greedy rude adults “fuelling teen violence”’ (Guardian, 2008); ‘Blair warns over problem families’ (BBC, 2007); ‘Brown targets problem families’ (BBC, 2008).

Canada and Oceania and has been primarily positioned within a discourse of 'delinquency' rather than 'family violence' which, as Downey (1997) suggests, may explain the limited support responses to this problem from health and social services.

While some recent work examining New Labour's youth justice measures has, in passing, identified the existence of parent abuse (e.g. Squires and Stephen, 2005; Nixon and Hunter, 2009), there has been little debate regarding how such parents might be supported and what a policy framework which might enable this should look like. The following discussion, which also involves reflecting on some data which emerged 'in passing', aims to highlight the inadequacy of dominant youth justice responses to parent abuse. However, the discussion also reflects on whether alternative frameworks, such as those which frame the problem as a 'domestic violence' issue or a 'child protection' issue, are able to offer a more suitable alternative.

Methods

The data presented derive from a research study which aimed to investigate the experiences of parents whose children were involved in the youth justice system and who had received a Parenting Order (see Holt, 2009, for summary of findings). Fifteen mothers and two fathers were recruited through four YOTs and were interviewed using a narrative interview technique, whereby parents were asked to describe what had happened, regarding their child's involvement in the youth justice system and their subsequent receipt of a Parenting Order. Discourse analysis (see Willig, 2008) enabled an examination of the ways in which experienced events were constructed by parents, enabling an exploration of what these constructions mean for parents' subjectivities and practices. The data discussed below is in no way meant to be a comprehensive analysis of their experiences. Twelve of the parents discussed experiences of parent abuse, and this paper draws on key extracts which aim to open out a dialogue concerning the ways in which such experiences might begin to be conceptualised and to help suggest the ways in which a policy framework might take shape.

'Parent abuse': anti-social behaviour in the home?

When considering what we mean by 'parent abuse', the experiences discussed by parents clearly do not constitute 'one-off' events, as John's³ experience illustrates:

John: 'If I go for a bath, I have to take my wallet and everything with me. I've noticed that he's been waiting for me to go for a bath or something and I've checked my wallet and thought hang about, I've had more than that, and he's been into my wallet and taken money from that as well. Its, well, its just making it absolutely difficult...it makes me wonder how they expect me...to cope, to carry on with a normal life, when he's treating me like that.'

John's experience was typical of the accounts offered by many mothers and fathers, in that the abuse he experienced constituted a continual social process which needed

³ All names are pseudonyms to protect participants' and their families' identities.

to be managed by the parent on a day-to-day basis. In many ways, it takes on the characteristics of ‘anti-social behaviour’ in its production of social harm – except that ‘anti-social behaviour’ can only be applied to those ‘not of the same household’ (see earlier). It is perhaps worth reflecting on whether the experiences of anxiety, depression and continual stress which were described by many of these parents resulted from the lack of any language from which to *articulate* such experiences and seek a remedy for them. Furthermore, like anti-social behaviour, the anxiety and stress appears to come not only from the behaviour itself, but its continual threat in the home, as experienced by Maddie:

Maddie: ‘He’ll scream and shout at me, awful abuse, absolutely awful abuse, he’ll throw things at me, he’ll punch holes in doors, he’ll threaten to hit me, and this’ll be all in front of my three little ones.’

Maddie’s extract highlights the questionability of any policy that suggests that parents, particularly mothers, will be able to exert any kind of will over their adolescent sons in such situations – and yet that is what the Parenting Order is asking parents (primarily mothers) to do. Furthermore, much research (e.g. Ghatge and Hazell, 2002) has found that experiencing everyday stress will shape a parent’s ability to ‘parent effectively’ (whatever that is intended to mean), and experiences of continual threat certainly constitute such stress. One way this might manifest is through the manner in which continued ‘parent abuse’ might shape a parent’s confidence in their own parenting abilities. Many of the mothers, particularly lone mothers, described experiencing assault at the hands of their teenage sons and a recurrent theme was the damage that this did to the mother’s own confidence in parenting:

June: ‘I want to get back my strength as a parent, more confident in my parenting. My son sees me as a weak parent – he’s seen me being attacked, he’s attacked me, he’s seen me going into a snivelling mess. I want to get back where he looks at me and says yes, this is a strong parent.’

However, the question of how to frame such experiences and subsequently respond to them is a tricky one. Clearly, there is a problem with invoking parental responsibility measures – such as the stipulation of a parenting programme – in such cases since such a response leaves unquestioned both the wider structural gendered power relations which operate both within the family and within institutional youth justice practices. But what might be the alternatives?

‘Parent abuse’: a question of ‘domestic violence’?

A ‘domestic violence’ framework does acknowledge the gendered power relations of such experiences of abuse (Wilcox, 2006). However, experiences of ‘parent abuse’ present two very specific differences: firstly, the parent’s responsibility towards the child means that the options available for the parent to respond to their abuse (such as leaving the family home) are severely curtailed (Kennair and Mellor, 2007), particularly for mothers who are frequently the primary carers (Stewart et al, 2006). Secondly, the parents are likely to have more economic and social resources than the

child (Paterson et al, 2002), which is likely to make the balance of power between parent and child a particularly complex one.

Furthermore, dominant understandings of domestic violence tend to ignore the ‘ongoing’ nature of abuse (Harwin and Barron, 2000) meaning that formal social agencies can only respond in ‘crisis’ incidents. In cases where a parent (or, more usually in cases of assault, the mother) might respond to such incidents by, for example, calling the police to instigate the Crime Support Unit’s domestic violence strategy, this does not necessarily mean that a ‘domestic violence’ support response will follow. Certainly in the case of Kim, who did report her son to the police for assault, a youth justice response took precedence and Kim received a Parenting Order as a consequence. She had not yet received any parenting support at the time of the interview, but when asked what she anticipated as ‘support’, she responded:

Kim: ‘I know Neil [her parenting co-ordinator] said something about they’re gonna teach me not to be scared of David [her son]. Cos that’s the bit that worries me, because David knows he can do whatever and I won’t do nothing. I won’t stop him, sort of thing, cos I’m scared of what he’ll do to me.’

As this extract illustrates, while a youth justice framework dominates, the support Kim receives will always be framed in terms of how *she* can be changed: it is Kim who is problematised and so must be the transformative agent in dealing with her son’s abusive behaviour. She must be taught ‘not to be scared of’ her son because this is preventing her from being able to set boundaries and manage her son’s behaviour, like all ‘good parents’ should.

Furthermore, Kim’s experiences illustrate the ways in which the dominance of a youth justice framework filters down into practice ‘on the ground’, evident in the extract above and below, where Kim continues her narrative after being asked how effective she thought the measure would be in coping with her son:

Kim: ‘Well, my main issue is trying not to be scared of David [her son], that’s what needs to be sorted. Cos I mean, they asked me if I’d ground David, does he stick to that, I said “no, he’ll climb out a window or”, and he [her parenting practitioner] says “well if you stand in front of your door, and he’s coming towards you, what would you do?” I said “I’d move”. I said “in fact I wouldn’t even stand in front of the door”. That I’d just let him go.’

In both extracts, Kim’s experiences of her son’s violent behaviour was framed in terms of its impact on her own parenting abilities, thus justifying the need for ‘parenting support’ as a remedy, and this framing clearly extends beyond political and judicial discourse into practitioner practice. Given that it is the YOTs who must recommend the Parenting Order in the first place (although there is mixed evidence as to whether the magistrates take up such recommendations – see Phoenix, 2007 and Hancock, 2000), there certainly exists a question mark as to whether Parenting Orders are being recommended because of, or in spite of, parent abuse in the home, and indeed whether they are being recommended because there is nothing else available in response to such cases.

However, even if a response was made in practice which operated within a framework of ‘domestic violence’, this does not mean that such a response would be appropriate. It would mean that the parent is positioned as a ‘victim’ in relation to her/his child (the implications of which might be glimpsed from June’s extract earlier) and it would involve increased criminalisation of adolescent behaviour and an intervention into family life which is likely produce an adversarial form to family relations. Furthermore, one must also reflect on the question of whether the young person in question has, in turn, experienced abuse⁴ and whether such a strategy is the most appropriate way of responding to people who remain ‘children’.

When ‘parent abuse’ becomes ‘family abuse’: a child protection response?

The question of *who* should be the focus of protection is certainly ambiguous in cases of parent abuse: as Davies and Krane (2006) acknowledge, child protection responses and domestic violence responses are already typically estranged from each other in cases of father-to-mother abuse, since each response will focus on the needs of a different ‘client’. Of course, in cases of both ‘father-to-mother abuse’ and ‘parent abuse’, it is not only adults who experience abuse in their own home. In the present study, many parents also described the difficulties faced by other family members, particularly younger siblings and the impact this had. In some cases, this included the other children’s avoidance of the family home, leaving the parent with even less support to help them manage the situation, such as in the case of Robert:

Robert: ‘She’s [his daughter] deciding to spend a lot of time at her friends. I mean she’s phoning me nearly every day now, “do you mind if I stay at my friend Kelly’s again tonight and go to school with her in the morning?” I mean Daniel [his son], he is affecting her life as well now. Which I don’t think is right. I mean, this is her home as well. Why should she be pushed out?’

Researcher: ‘And is he like that with his sister as well?’

Robert: ‘Yeah, oh yeah. He even hits her and that. I mean, I’ve spoken to social services about this but all of a sudden, they’ve just gone quiet, as if they don’t want to know anymore. I’m basically left on my own, that’s how I feel.’

Despite Robert’s attempts to engage with Social Services and elicit a response which might operate within an agenda of Safeguarding Children, the absence of any response at all was keenly felt. Certainly, almost all of the parents interviewed had been requesting help from a number of agencies (e.g. social services, education, mental health) for a number of years, and many reported that the only support they received came in the form of a Parenting Order, which came far too late to make any difference. Again, it may well be that there is no other option available, since the usual options (for example, the operation of the *Working Together to Safeguard*

⁴ While the author was not able to access the case histories of the young people involved, interviews with the parents did not suggest any indication of childhood abuse, although parents certainly evoked narratives of loss, particularly of the absent parent, when attempting to make sense of their child’s offending behaviour outside of the home.

Children (Department of Health et al, 1999) guidelines) were designed to apply in cases where the ‘abuser’ is an adult (and even then, there is little evidence of the police and social services ‘working together’ in practice – see Featherstone and Peckover, 2007). Instead, the practice of infusing all aspects of local authority work, including social services, with responsibilities for crime control has been a key theme of New Labour’s youth justice policy framework (Garland, 2001; Muncie and Hughes, 2002). The consequences of such ‘criminalising’ of social policy (Crawford, 1997) can be glimpsed at in many of the parent’s extracts presented in this paper, where only a Parenting Order is offered to enable parents to learn how to manage their child’s behaviour better.

Discussion

While of course one might argue that the experiences described are specific to the Parenting Order, which produces its own particular set of complexities regarding parental responsibility and parent abuse, this paper nevertheless taps into some wider issues concerning experiences of ‘parent abuse’. After all, many of the experiences of parent abuse described had been happening for a long time, and in some cases the Parenting Order was a targeted response to it. Furthermore, given the differing judicial practices in the issuing of the Parenting Order (with some YOT-areas having issued over 800 orders to date, while others have issued none), one might also argue that there is a certain arbitrariness to the receipt of a Parenting Order, with little correlation between the Parenting Order and either the severity of the child/young person’s alleged offence(s) or any perceived ‘irresponsibility’ on the part of the parent.

It is hoped that this short paper will encourage some reflection and enable the beginning of a dialogue regarding what might be possible for parents who experience abuse in their home, at the hands of their child(ren). While this paper presents few ‘answers’, it is clear that current policy frameworks do not adequately respond to what is a particularly complex and emotive issue, and that a new conceptualisation of the problem is required. Of course, the first step in this is an acknowledgement of the existence of this problem and the need for specific research in this area, particularly in the UK where a dearth of research is pronounced. There is also a greater need for specific targeted support and resources for parents and their families which will address the social harms which they and their families are experiencing inside their homes. Furthermore, such services need to be offered *outside* of the criminal justice system and must take account of the complexities of this kind of parent abuse, in terms of age, gender and access to resources and capital, where the usual remedies and solutions offered to ‘victims of crime’ may not be appropriate. The current dominance of a policy response which instead issues parents with court orders to enable them to sort out their own alleged ‘parenting deficits’ only serves to ignore the assaults, thefts, criminal damage and other social harms which are played out *inside* the family home and the wider relations of power in which they are embedded.

It is worth adding here that the mothers’ and fathers’ accounts offered in this paper were spoken about ‘in passing’ – the parents were not specifically questioned about this issue during their interviews. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, it may be that the language is not currently available for speaking about experiences such as ‘parent abuse’. In their analysis of mothers’ accounts of living with social landlords’ anti-

social behaviour measures, Nixon and Hunter (2009) also found that mothers referred to experiences of violence perpetrated by their sons 'in an offhand way, as if it was of no real importance' (2009: 165) and, as Nixon and Hunter identify, this clearly has implications for the way in which support services can be accessed by parents and made available to them. Given the stigma attached to experiences of parenting 'difficult' or 'troubled' children (Phillips and Judge, 1998; McDonald et al, 2007) and, indeed, to experiencing any kind of abuse, particularly domestic violence (Stanko, 2003), it is possible that many parents choose not to speak about such experiences and this is undoubtedly compounded by wider discourses of blame and shame of parents for their children's problem behaviour. The experiences themselves may be conflicting and difficult to articulate, such are the cultural expectations concerning unconditional parental love and, indeed, child protection towards the parent (Jackson, 2003). Thus, while general conclusions cannot be drawn from these data, the details that have been revealed here may indicate what a great many parents are experiencing in their day-to-day lives and where both further research and new policy initiatives should be directed.

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