

Parent Abuse:

An issue that comes up fairly frequently in my work with families is parental abuse. This is the abuse of a parent by a young adult or teenager. It is surprisingly common and is characterised by aggressive behaviour, verbal abuse, tantrums, threats, defiance, silence, and a number of other behaviours designed to control, exploit, or dominate the parent(s). Many parents (most often mothers) will tell me about the difficulty they experience with their young adult or teen – how they continually make life difficult for them, show no respect, and are basically a law unto themselves.

Abuse (which can be defined as various displays of disrespect, disregard, and aggression) involves such things as bursting into occasional violence or tantrums that scare or frighten the parent; using foul and abusive language when they do not get their way; slamming doors and walking out of conversations; not giving up and gradually wearing the parent down with their arguing and demands for explanations; defying general rules of behaviour; standing face-to-face with a parent in a threatening manner; manipulating the parent with ‘Jeckyl & Hyde’ type behaviour; sulking in a mood for long periods; hinting at suicide; etc.

The parent is usually confronted with a battery of tactics aimed at keeping the parent on the back foot typically with a host of exaggerated and false accusations against the character of the parent. These may include accusing the parent of being a bad parent; of not loving them; of being paranoid; of being entirely unfair; of picking on them; of being crazy or weird; of being so unlike other parents; etc.

It is quite extraordinary how the sets of behaviours displayed by abusive young adults or teen’s follows a fairly set pattern and is often entirely predictable. It is almost as if they all read from the same parental-abuse manual. It is as if there is a section on “Non-verbal behaviour that unsettles your parent.” Or “The power of occasional violence.” More seriously though, all of this kind of behaviour can be devastating for the parents involved.

The issue of parental abuse becomes serious when it involves threats to the parent; blatant and chronic defiance; and begins to take over family life. Many abusive young adults or teens gradually begin to dominate family life with on-going distressing scenes of aggression or abuse. The parents become worn out from trying to hold their ground and the other siblings come to despise the problem ‘child’ and even the parents for not being able to stop the cycle. Family life erodes away under the stress of trying to deal with this behaviour. It often then culminates in questions about “kicking” him/her out or, from the young adults self-absorbed point of view, “being rejected by parents that do not love me!”.

The simple truth is that many abusive young adults want to accrue all the benefits of being a member of a family without carrying any of the responsibilities. In rejecting the responsibilities and code of conduct for normally family living the young woman or man is, in effect, choosing to reject the family but is unable to admit it.

One of the most important things for parents in these situations to realise is that the issue is all about power and control. What the young person is seeking is control over the parent, by almost whatever means. Abuse continues because the gains accrued by

using aggressive and defiant behaviour far outweighs the costs. The control acquired far outweighs the control that is lost. The unpleasant thing about a lot of abusive behaviour is that, for people who are brazen enough to use it, it works. Teens and young adults gradually learn that their behaviour gets them what they want and, over a period of years, it becomes automatic.

I am unable to get into a discussion here as to the many causes of such behaviour but let me focus on a couple of things that may be helpful to you if you find yourself in this situation. The first thing you have to realise is that abusive behaviour is a fairly predictable set of tactics used to gain a particular outcome. It is vital that you see this behaviour as entirely within your child's control and not a consequence of a short fuse or personality problem. You will notice that virtually all abusive young adults can turn it on or off at will. I have never met an aggressive young teen or adult who is not capable of being socially charming when it suits them. Most of these young people are actually quite skilled socially. So, remember, their behaviour is chosen and goal-oriented.

The second thing to remember is that most skilled abusive people focus on their 'opponents' weakness. In fact emotional abuse occurs when someone uses their knowledge of another's weakness to exploit or control them. So ask yourself this: What is your weakness as a parent that they exploit? Nine times out of ten the weakness is what you will have always considered to be your strength: your devotion to being a good and responsible parent! In trying to be a good and responsible parent you will have probably given your life to loving and caring for your child and tuning into what he/she needs. This however has become your Achilles Heel and your controlling young adult targets it every time with accusations that cripple you at every turn: "You are so mean and selfish", they say. "You are a useless and pathetic parent". "None of my friends have to put up with this". "What is wrong with you"? The barrage can be endless and it hits at your vulnerability every time. You so desperately want them to love you and accept you as a parent that they play on it every time. Dare I say it, in your goodness you look weak!

Your weakness is that you become unstable when you are rejected or accused or being bad. You begin to doubt yourself, and in that doubting the abusive young man or woman can take you to the cleaners! Don't doubt yourself for one minute. Just notice how you fear their rejection and how much you try to make them happy. Your job is not to make them happy, your job is to show them that you have self-respect and conviction. Your job is to show that you can tolerate their rejection of you a hundred times over. You are then focused on building lasting character and not meeting transient needs.