ADOLESCENT VIOLENCE TOWARDS PARENTS: Myths and realities

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© **Natasha Bobic**
Rosemount Youth & Family Services
Marrickville, NSW
Tel: (02) 9560 4588
rosemountresearch@bigpond.com

The Australian movement against domestic violence has accomplished a great deal in the 25 years since its inception. (Laing, 2001:2) The literature in the field reflects the depth of analysis into various aspects of family violence, (Wilson, 1996:101) but falls short of encouraging debate of its other "hidden forms". (Hastie, 1998:29) With focus being on domestic violence and child abuse, (Bagshaw, et al. 2000:11) other types of family violence, such as adolescent violence towards their parents otherwise known as parental abuse, are being overlooked.

Parental abuse is often discussed at interagency meetings of social service agencies that work with families, many of whom describe it as widespread and on the increase. (Cottrell, 2001:6) There are few statistics available to either support or contradict this belief, although the available estimates indicate that "child-to-parent violence represents a significant social problem". (Brezina, 1999:416) Practitioners in the field have raised concerns about scarcity of information regarding parental abuse, as there is little clarity on the position of parental abuse on the wide spectrum of domestic / family violence, and inadequate research into ways of addressing it. This article comes in response to this gap

in information, aiming to critically synthesise research to date and stimulate future discussion of parental abuse.

INTRODUCTION

The lack of information on parental abuse reflects social attitudes which blame parents and carers for the violent behaviour of their adolescent children. "There is a profound sense of shame that will go through this behaviour – from the parents (who think) they are not able to parent properly, and from the young person" who is worried about others finding out. (Parsons, 1998:18; Parent Link, 1998)

The existing research in this unexplored field is unanimous in pointing out the overlapping nature of different forms of violence. These include reasons behind low reporting of violence, symptoms of victimisation, causal factors, perpetrators' beliefs and models of intervention. (Hastie, 1998:30)

The literature reviewed here draws on these common characteristics to emphasise the links between child abuse, witnessing of domestic violence, and adolescent aggression. (Robinson, 1994 in Downey, 1997:78) Whilst the above are not presented as predictive of each other, adolescents are seen as either victims or perpetrators, and violence is examined with a sole focus on its various forms, (Robertson, 1994 in Downey, 1997:76) without the exploration of links between different forms of violence that occur over time.

DEFINITIONS

Definitions in the area of domestic violence are undergoing constant change. Terms d*omestic* and *family* violence, and *parental abuse / violence* and *adolescent violence towards their parents,* are used interchangeably, with *domestic violence* and *adolescent violence* as being more common in the Australian literature. (Romans et al. 2000:1)

Definitions of parental abuse are scarce and difficult to arrive at. Adolescence can be a difficult time for adolescents and parents, and the dividing line between what is 'normal' and what 'challenging / abusive' adolescent behaviour can be blurry at times. In light of the similarities in issues of power and tactics used in domestic and parental abuse, most definitions of parental abuse are derived from domestic violence terminology.

Canadian literature, which appears to have the most comprehensive research on parental abuse, offers most definitions. Their *Family Violence Prevention Unit's* study with violent adolescents, their parents and service providers has developed what appears to be the most all-encompassing definition of parental abuse to date, giving equal weight to all forms of abuse. (Cottrell, 2001:3-6; TeamCares, 2001, Vis-à-vis, 1996)

Parent abuse is any act of child that is intended to cause physical, psychological and financial damage to gain power and control over a parent…the abuse normally begins with verbal abuse. (Cottrell, 2001:3)

Australian definitions are broader, and applicable to all forms of abuse. They suggest, "behaviour [of one family member] is considered to be violent if others in the family feel threatened, intimidated and controlled". (Paterson et al, 2002:90)

PREVALENCE OF PARENTAL ABUSE

As a reflection of general scarcity in information on parental abuse, and low reporting of family violence (Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 2001; Allen et al, 2002; Australian Institute of Criminology, 2001:33) there are no Australian and few overseas statistics on the prevalence of parental abuse. The Crime Bureau found that out of "606,800 victims of robbery, assault or sexual assault, only 227,000 had been reported to the police". (Carcach, 1997:1) Victim-offender relationship was identified as a significant determinant in low crime reporting. (Ibid, p.4) Australian and overseas studies on parental abuse single out shame as the main reason for parents' unwillingness to report their children's violence.

Overseas data

The USA data estimates the incidence of adolescent violence towards parents in 2-parent families to be in between 7% and 18% (Peek et al, 1985 in Downey, 1997:72) and around 29% for 1-parent families. (Livingston, 1980 in Downey, 1997:72) Canadian research

estimates that 1 in 10 parents are assaulted by their children (DeKeseredy, 1993:6) whilst this same figure is at 4% in Japan, and a relatively low 0.6% in France. (Laurent et al, 1999:21) These estimates are difficult to compare as they use different methods of data collection, different scales of measuring parental abuse and most date back to early and mid 1980s (Cornell et al, 1982; Fisher et al, 1985) when emotional violence was rarely included in estimates.

Australian data

There is no official reporting on parental abuse in Australia. In the period 1 July – 30 December 1997 the Queensland Domestic Violence Telephone Service recorded "33 calls from parents about adolescent violence", (Hastie, 1998:29) whilst Parent Line reported approximately 5% of calls in relation to parental abuse, and 2.3% in relation to violent behaviour of children in the same period. (1998)

Our attempts to obtain recent numbers of Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs) taken out by parents against children have proven fruitless. The NSW Children's Court, which hears most criminal charges against young people (Law Reform Commission; Allen et al, 2002) does not officially collect this sort of data.

Data collection is also inconsistent across different police stations. Whilst some Domestic Violence Liaison Officers in the Inner West in Sydney describe parental abuse as rare, others suggest it is a significant problem, which mainly occurs in single parent families. (Personal correspondence) Data Collection forms obtained from a police station in the

Western suburbs of Sydney report that "children under 16 who are the perpetrator of violence in the home" represent between 4-25% of the total number of domestic violence incidents. (Personal correspondence with Campsie Police Station) However, this form does not specify the victims of violence perpetrated by these young people. Thus, it is impossible to know the exact percentage of the above figure that relates to parental abuse only. This lack of information on actual incidents of parental abuse hinders the process of obtaining relatively accurate estimates of parental abuse incidents, including knowing who perpetrators and victims of this 'hidden' type of violence are.

WHO PERPETRATES THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WHOM

In contrast to the abundance of typology studies in domestic violence generally (Romans et al, 2000:484-488), there are few studies in the area of parental abuse that examine the characteristics of perpetrators and victims of parental abuse.

Gender

The few available studies found boys and girls nearly equally represented as perpetrators of parental abuse. (TeamCares 2001; Cottrell, 2001; Agnew et al, 1989; Cornell et al 1982; Paulson et al, 1990; Paterson et al, 2002) This is consistent with recent findings about the increase in girls' involvement in crime and delinquency. (Weiler, 1999)

Despite the similar gender representation, differences have been found in the type of violence boys and girls use as boys "are more likely to use physical aggression [and] girls [emotional violence]. (WHO, 2000:42)

A study into predictors of parental abuse found boys more likely to perpetrate violence against friends and strangers, including parents whilst girls who reported witnessing more parental aggression than boys (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al, 1995:379-397) were less likely to be violent towards their parents. Deviant behaviours, difficulties at school and high levels of alcohol and drug use have also been identified as predictors of adolescent violence (Ellickson et al. 2000:566) and the continuation of violence across differing developmental stages was attributed to social influences that support violent behaviours. (in Herrenkohl et al, 2001:60; Moffit, 1993)

Canadian studies indicate that abuse begins when the child is between 12 and 14 (Cottrell, 2001:7) whilst earlier USA studies estimate the peak age for violent adolescents between 15 and 17 years of age. (Evans et al, 1988; Straus et al 1988; Wilson, 1996)

Victims

Overall, mothers and female carers are more often the victims of parental abuse, with girls more likely to be violent towards their mothers than towards fathers. Data from the Australian "justice system indicates that ore mothers than fathers take out Intervention Orders against their children" (in Paterson et al, 2002:91) with physical assault by sons against mothers being the most common type of assault. (Evans et al, 1988) If emotional, financial and psychological abuse is also included, daughters are no less violent than sons. (Paulson et al, 1990 in Micucci, 1995; Weiler, 1999)

Family type

Anecdotal information suggests that parental abuse predominantly occurs within single parent families. This belief is difficult to either support or contradict due to the lack of primary research and scarce official statistics on the prevalence of parental abuse. Cottrell's Canadian study researched a sample of 45 families most of whom were one-parent families, (Cottrell, 2001:9) whereas the 1999 French study with 22 violent adolescents found 64% to be from 2-parent families and 36% from 1-parent families. (Laurent et al, 1999:21-22) The most recent Australian study with 17 mothers, victims of parental abuse reported similar numbers of single and two parent families. (Paterson et al, 2002) Labeling one type of families as the most likely victims of parental abuse is impossible until more recent research with larger sample sizes has been undertaken.

Cultural background

Wilson's literature review (1996) suggests that cultural minorities such as Hispanic display less violence towards their parents than their counterparts in Anglo-Saxon families. (Agnew et al, 1989 in Wilson, 1996:103) Paulson et al attributed this difference to parenting styles, noting that Hispanic families exhibit "religiously sanctioned parental authority which decreases assaults on parents". (1990 in Wilson, 1996:103) There is no Australian research examining this aspect of parental abuse.

Alcohol and other drugs

Whilst most studies mention alcohol and drugs, mental illness and homelessness (Macleod, 1995:111; Mak et al, 1996:15) in the context of parental abuse, none examine

it in any depth. With no clear links between adolescents' alcohol abuse and the onset of parental abuse, some research suggests that adolescent substance abuse is responsible for increasing the severity of adolescent violence. (Ibid) Although less common, some attribute adolescent violence to anger for parents' abuse of alcohol and drugs. (Cottrell, 2001:22) Generally, the influence of alcohol and drugs is mentioned as a factor in parental abuse, but considered as inadequate in itself to explain the onset of adolescent violence towards parents.

EXPLANATIONS BEHIND PARENTAL ABUSE

Risk factors

Power and control are at the heart of all forms of violence. In parental abuse, power is used as adolescents' means of control over parents. In some cases parents who had previously been victims of other forms of abuse tend to respond to adolescent violence as victims, surrendering the role of an adult. (Downey, 1997:73)

While literature's focus is on the onset of violent behaviour and its frequency, there is a rise in the number of studies that examine factors that put children and young people at risk of becoming violent and those that shield them from such experiences. These, otherwise known as risk and protective factors exist in clusters and are grouped into five domains: "individual, family, peer group, school and community, which includes both neighbourhood and larger society". (Surgeon General, 2001)

Despite acknowledging all of these risk factors, (Holcomb, 2000:264-287) research tends to mainly focus on parenting styles. The failure to see all risk factors as mutually dependant can hinder our understanding of parental abuse as a complex social issue. For instance, focusing only on parenting styles at home overlooks the fact that some bullied children at school become adolescent perpetrators at home, as a way of acting out their victimization. (Cottrell, 2001:21)

Family context

A recent French study into parental abuse examined different familial contexts which precipitate adolescent abuse towards their parents, (Laurent et al, 1999:23) identifying 3 different categories.

In the category of families with inadequate parental guidance and supervision, adolescents assumed a self-autonomous role, which often resulted in violence. (Charles, 1986 in Wilson, 1996:109; Ramsey, 1989 in Wilson, 1996:111) Cottrell's Canadian study partly attributes this to contemporary parenting styles in which an equal relationship between parents and children can at times produce an imbalance in parent-to-child relationship. "While few dispute that children's rights must be recognised, attempts to protect these rights have led to a severe crisis in leadership within families". (2001:25)

In the category of families where parents are overprotective of adolescents, the latter's struggle for autonomy and power can result in violence. Adolescents in these situations often exhibit anti-social behaviours. (Polk, 1998; Heide, 1992:11)

The last category is that of parents unable to fulfill their role where adolescents take on the responsibilities of adults. This burden can be overwhelming for some of them who resort to violence as means of rejecting the adult role.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that adolescent perpetrators of parental abuse are often victims of child abuse, bullying at school or witnesses of family violence. (Rubin, 1996) Boys are more likely to exhibit these past abuses through violence (US Department of Justice, 1997 in WHO, 2000:43) and research suggests that physical aggression by parents can play an important role in influencing adolescent violence. (Brezina, 1999:439)

LINKS BETWEEN PARENTAL AND OTHER TYPES OF VIOLENCE

The three categories of familial contexts in parental abuse suggests there is little gap between being a victim of abuse (Gelinas, 2001; Mitchell et al, 2001; Shuman et al, 1997) or a witness of violence (Brown et al, 1997; Cottrell, 2001), to becoming a perpetrator of parental abuse. Apart from parental abuse, this is also evident in cases of parricide and matricide as close to 90% of youth in North America who have killed their parents had previously been abused by them. (Heide, 1992:6)

Although the logic of linear thesis suggesting relationships between child abuse or domestic violence and parental abuse is tempting, accepting simple explanations to complex problems can be misleading. As Laing suggests "while living with violence as a

child is one risk of later perpetrating violence, it is very far from inevitable that one leads to the other". (2001:6) This belief can also negatively impact on how we as a society deal with parental abuse. Current responses to parental abuse mainly deal with perpetrators past experiences of abuse with little effort into preventing aggressive behaviours of those who are not perpetrators as yet.

Although neither child abuse nor domestic violence can be directly linked to parental and other forms of family violence, they put children and young people at risk for various adversities, such as "behavioural, emotional, physical and cognitive functioning, attitudes and long-term developmental problems." (Edleson, 1999; Kobho et al, 1996 in Mitchell, 2001:944)

Another even more detrimental consequence of the exposure to violence is the acceptance of violence as a norm in social interaction. A recent USA study found that the level of exposure to violence was the strongest correlate with intentions to engage in violent behaviours. (Barkin et al, 2001:777-778)

With this in mind, it's important to remember that exposure to violence can relate to violence on any level and not just in the familial context. Wider social influences are crucial in explaining the creation of values and beliefs that underpin the formation of violence, although the discussion of these is rarely found in literature on parental abuse.

WIDER SOCIAL INFLUENCES

The outcomes of struggles to eliminate violence can be only partial if violence is not viewed in the wider social contexts (Nash, 2000:22) which in the case of parental abuse means examining the influence of schools, media, law and the church on families with violent members.

Scapegoating only the families who are subjected to parental abuse further exacerbates the problem of family violence. It promotes feelings of shame and guilt in parents for not having a 'perfect' family, and prevents victims from disclosing and reporting violence in their homes. Policy responses are full of contradictions as we oppose all forms of violence on one hand, and are constantly attracted to violence presented in different mediums on the other. (Gelinas, 2001:221) This lack of consistency in social responses has negative consequences on efforts to eliminate violence.

The impact of social norms on violent behaviours extends to gender differences in parenting styles. An American researcher William Pollack suggests that adolescent boys' violence is their attempt at connecting with their parents and friends. "We impose on boys what I call the male-gender straitjacket, that narrow band of what's acceptably masculine expressiveness in our society" (Pollack, 2001). Social expectations of boys as tough and emotionally 'frozen' have a lot to answer for in accumulating aggression in male children.

When we peel away the layers of these young men [what we find] is that underneath this big defensive, aggressive behaviour there is often a very sad or very frightened little boy who isn't having his needs tended to." (Parsons, 1998:18)

These contradictions from within and outside the family hinder our efforts to eliminate all forms of violence and influence lack of primary prevention responses to parental abuse. This is also due to the fact that research on parental abuse is in elementary stages.

THEORY

A number of theories are used in explaining parental abuse. They fall within two schools, the psychology and the sociology. The latter plays an important role in discussions about the roots of adolescent violence towards their parents, but it is mainly the psychological perspective that underpins current responses to parental abuse.

The structural and family lenses in conjunction with conflict resolution and the notions of gender and power appear to be most commonly used in working with violent adolescents and their families. (Howley, 2000:3; Sheehan, 1997:81)

Family therapy views parental abuse as a reflection of family breakdown (Sheehan, 1997:81) and violent adolescents as often the victims of some form of violence themselves. (Robinson et al, 1994 in Downey, 1997:75) In a *psychodynamic* lens the interaction patterns within the family are examined (Sheehan, 1997:82) prior to working with adolescent feelings of rage and powerlessness, which often lead up to violence.

(Downey, 1997:71) The rage and aggression are often used to cope with parental aggression and reflect a response to a strain in family relations, as suggested *by social learning* theorists. (Brezina, 1999:418)

The *narrative therapy* (Jenkins, 1990) often underpins other perspectives (Howley, 2000:3; Sheehan, 1997:81) due to its strong political foundation which places therapy "in the context of culture, gender and power in society" (Sheehan, 1997:81-82) and examines the implications of violence on all parties. (Efran et at 1991:63)

The perspective of *disorders* is rarely mentioned (Loeber, 1990 in Sheehan, 1997:81; Kazdin, 1987 in Sheehan, 1997:81) although it is recognised that there are instances where perpetrators of parental abuse are diagnosed with ADD/ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder. (Cottrell, 2001:23) However, using these to explain parental abuse can be problematic, (Price, 1996) as it allows adolescents and parents to use the labels of disorders as justifications for violent behaviours. (Hemphill, 1996:109-118)

Intergenerational transmission of violence is very useful in explaining how forms of family violence such as child abuse can be a precursor to parental abuse. It acknowledges that aggression can be learned within the home (Tomison, 1996) but also examines the influences of social learning. Family violence can encourage adolescents to accept violence as a means to an end (Mitchell et al, 2001:945) but school, television, computer games, community violence or wider social structures reinforce violent interpersonal

relationships. The interplay of these factors is crucial in understanding the benefits of different models of intervention currently used in parental abuse.

MODELS OF INTERVENTION

In light of the secrecy surrounding parental abuse, little is known about the benefit of different models of intervention in working with its victims and perpetrators. (Wilson, 1996:102)

Although the concept of 'family' drives explanations behind parental abuse, there is little support provided to families with violent adolescents. Apart from services such as RAPS in Sydney, MATTERS in Melbourne (Howley, 2000), Anglicare's Meridian Services in South Australia, and Relationships Australia (Disney et al, 1996:11), and individual counsellors who work with violent adolescent in other services, there is little support to parents and young people dealing with parental abuse.

Family and narrative therapy appear to be most widely used by these services in addressing parental abuse. The family context is crucial in assessing the extent of adolescent-to-parent violence, as it often identifies other forms of family violence in the home, as well as that outside, and helps to 'unlearn' the patterns of violence that might be present in the home. (Wilson, 1996:107)

Individual & Group work

Individual work with victims and perpetrators of parental abuse is more common than the group work model, (Connolly et al, 1995:7) with examples of the latter found only in Canada (Cottrell, 2001) and more recently in Australia (Paterson et al, 2002). Australian group work approach by Paterson (2002) was used in a group counselling intervention program for mothers dealing with violent adolescent children. It consisted of one 6-week and two 7-week programs continued with a follow-up session that was held six weeks after each of the programs. (Paterson et al, 2002:92) Although no conclusions can be drawn about the success of this program due to its small sample size, participants thought the program had "a positive impact on their lives" (Ibid, p.95) as it provided them with the "first opportunity to talk to others and to be believed".

This isolation that parents who are victims of parental abuse feel, is reinforced by the lack of awareness about the issue, the shame attached to it, and the lack of information on behalf of the parents about best ways of dealing with it. "Regaining control begins with naming the problem and then…talking to someone and accessing counselling…" (Cottrell, 2001:39)

Working concurrently with adolescents and their families recognises both parties by allowing adolescents to take responsibility for their violent behaviour, assisting parents to acknowledge and disclose the violence without feeling ashamed and responsible for it (Sheehan, 1997:80), and assuring both parties that they are not alone in this experience. (Parsons, 1998)

However, this approach is unsafe in families where violence is still ongoing. (Micucci, 1995) In this case, researchers suggest working with parents and adolescents in separate sessions in order to "help parents prepare a plan of consequences for the child's" (Wilson, 1996:117) violent behaviour. It's only after this is implemented that joint sessions can be used to bring the balance back to the relationship. This helps parents to reverse the hierarchy of power in the family, whilst "allowing the adolescent to continue the natural struggle for independence". (Ibid, p.117)

Effect of parental abuse on the family

Micucci suggests there are five factors that are prevalent in families with abusive adolescents. These include relationship's focus on the violence which distances family members from one another; family's isolation from friends and family; labeling of adolescent as the problem; family members' biased perceptions of one another; and the avoidance of conflict by closing the channels of communication. (1995:155-157).

This 5-fold perspective offers useful insights into post-abuse relationship in these families, and is translated by Micucci into four strategies for working with violent adolescents and their parents. These include supporting parental authority by installing more confidence in parents, restoring family members' trust into one another, containing conflict and discovering and supporting strengths and competencies of parents and adolescents. (Micucci, 1995:157-160)

A fundamental aspect of therapeutic work with parental abuse is adolescents' acceptance of responsibility for violence. (Cummings et al, 1996) Narrative approach by Alan Jenkins (1990) is considered useful in this as it helps the therapist to avoid challenges of "running [these young people's] lives for them" (Emonson, 1999:3) and encourages the development of young person's understanding of responsibilities and rights, which "fosters growth of the young person's conscience". (Downey, 1997:78)

Primary prevention

Whilst working on this micro level is crucial, it is equally important to promote a wider understanding of parental abuse. This allows the families to detach themselves from the blame and understand violence as part of a wider complex array of circumstances. It additionally promotes 'help seeking' on behalf of the parents and an understanding that they are not the only ones with abusive adolescents.

The societal understanding of parental abuse and its effects and causes is important in promoting primary prevention. A great deal of international literature strongly encourages a human development and human ecology approach to violence prevention, which explores "sources of social and family support, the subjective experiences of youth and the role of gender socialisation in violence". (WHO, 2000:47) This approach strengthens social interaction and problem-solving skills, teaching youth to handle conflict without resorting to violence. (Herrenkohl et al, 2001:60)

In Australia, Relationships Australia (Disney et al, 1996:11), Partnerships Against Domestic Violence (2002), RAPS in Sydney, MATTERS in Victoria and the National Crime Prevention (2001) run programs that promote safety and non-violent relationships, targeting adolescent attitudes towards violence generally and towards parents specifically. Whilst acknowledging the importance of therapeutic approaches in addressing the parental abuse, it is important to note that equally important are primary prevention strategies which promote non-violence in parent-adolescent relationships.

CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed in this article identifies some of the complexities in current work with parental abuse. The central issue is one of raising awareness about parental abuse and helping to eliminate guilt and blame felt by parents and carers who have been abused by their adolescent children. Currently, parental abuse is peripheral in the area of family violence and there is little information about its onset, effects and the most effective ways of addressing it. Consequently, there is little support for families who struggle to understand and deal with adolescent violence.

With few official data collection mechanisms that record incidents of parental abuse and scarce research with small samples, there is little guidance to practitioners as to the most effective ways of addressing this issue. Placing a greater emphasis on public discussion of parental abuse, offering support to those who are currently affected and exploring the role of gender socialisation in adolescent aggression is clearly an urgent task. This is a

challenge for researchers, practitioners and policy makers working in the area of family violence, but also an opportunity to develop more effective ways of eliminating all forms of abuse.

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Adolescent Aggression towards Parents: Factors Associated … 3. prevalence. Parents often show a profound rejection to reporting violence of their children, which makes it impossible to know the real number of incidents of parental abuse. Mothers and fathers show a great tendency to deny the seriousness of the aggressive attacks in order to perpetuate the myth of family harmony (Harbin & Madden, 1979). Protectiveness and secretiveness about the family situation represents a way of protecting their self-image as parents (Pagani, Larocque, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2003). This report examines the youth perspective on violence, life circumstance, and the response of the justice system to a supposed growth of violence among troubled youth, based on studies in Dallas; Washington, D.C.; and San Mateo, California. Promoting healthy parenting programs. Expanding training for law enforcement. Acknowledging that those involved in the system are adolescents, not predators. Findings & Stats. Media Influence. Parent-adolescent conflicts that cause insecure and unstable feelings have a linear association with pubertal maturity. Understanding and dealing with these conflicts positively could help your child be more responsible and social (1). Here is our list of the most common problems, and their solutions that adolescents have to deal with. 1. Physical changes. Poor performance in academics and low IQ can also demotivate them. They develop the 'I'm not good enough' attitude towards life. Depression is one of the common psychological problems associated with adolescence. The stress and pressure of adolescence can create anxiety related issues, while mood swings can lead to conduct disorder or oppositional defiant disorder.