

Domineering teenagers. Are mothers losing the battle?

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Violence in families is on the increase, and it's not only between spouses or partners. Increasingly, mothers in particular are reporting that they are being abused by their adolescent or adult sons, and sometimes even by their daughters.

It is generally accepted that teenagers can be emotional roller coasters. But what's 'normal' teenage behaviour and when is it something else? It is easy to put aggression down to the teenage hormonal rush and natural urge to rebel, until it gets too far out of hand. And when it does, parents feel helpless and don't know what to do. Even when their teens or young adults are violent, parents are usually reluctant to call the police. Living with this kind of behaviour can lead to depression or anxiety, with all their psychological and physical symptoms, and even family breakdown.

If there is distance between parents, one or the other may turn to a child, often of the opposite sex, for emotional comfort. They share thoughts, feelings and decision-making with the child that they should be sharing with their partner, and can even form an alliance with the child against the other parent. This also contributes to the child feeling inappropriately special in the family. Divorced parents are particularly at risk of this, especially if they don't have other adult supports.

If this happens between a mother and her son, he may take on the persona of a partner and father and assume a self-autonomous role that he is not ready for. He may start to exercise control over his mother and/or others in the family. Mum may then try to control her sons' behaviour, but it is too late. The adolescent boy will make decisions in direct opposition to what his parents want, eg dropping out of school or underage drinking. If mothers continue to object, their sons may shift from ignoring them to actively enforcing their own will over others through rage.

What if your teenager is running the household

Depending on how serious the situation is you can certainly start to set boundaries around how you expect to be treated, along with consequences that you are able and prepared to carry out. You may or may not be able to influence how your teenager behaves elsewhere, but you can try to make sure that your rules apply in your own home.

To set boundaries we need to identify the behaviour that is not acceptable, let the teenager know that this is the case, and let them know that there will be consequences. If he or she is willing, you may be able to negotiate a consequence with them. If not, come up with your own consequence and let them know that you will apply it. Then if the rule is broken, you must apply the consequence. So it is important that it will affect them without affecting you. Be matter of fact and firm without being over emotional. Remember, if your teenager's behaviour is already entrenched and he has been getting what he wants, he is unlikely to be motivated to change it. You will need to provide strong consequences.

If your teenager has already been violent, is threatening violence, or if you are afraid that he (or she) might in the future, then you need to take tougher action. Safety is the first consideration. We are all familiar with domestic violence when it is inflicted by one spouse or partner on another. Abuse or violence by an adolescent or adult child against a parent or other family member is another form of domestic violence. Any form of physical assault is hard to justify and is an offence. If your teenager or young adult child uses their physical strength against another, then they have to be prepared for adult consequences. There are other behaviours that are also inexcusable. These include controlling your freedom in and outside the home, subjecting you to a barrage of verbal and emotional abuse, damaging your property etc. If necessary, let your offspring know that you are prepared to call the police if someone's safety or freedom is at risk. You can obtain an apprehended violence order if the behaviour persists.

For information and practical support on how to proceed with an apprehended violence order, contact your local police and ask for the Domestic Violence Liaison Officer.

For individual support and counselling, Think Twice Counselling in Mittagong specialises in counselling for all relationships, including abusive or violent family relationships.