

FACING ADDICTION WITH HOPE AND
UNDERSTANDING

When Home Becomes a Battlefield: Understanding Child- to-Parent Violence in Families Navigating Addiction and Extended Dependency

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There is a particular kind of grief that families rarely speak about openly — the grief of being afraid of your own child. Not a child in the abstract, but the young adult who still sleeps down the hall, who still eats at your table, who you still love with everything you have, and who has, on more than one occasion, made you feel unsafe in your own home. This is the hidden wound of child-to-parent violence (CPV), and new research is beginning to illuminate just how many families carry it in silence.

A 2026 study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* by Burrai and colleagues offers one of the most nuanced examinations of CPV to date — and critically, it expands the lens beyond adolescence to include non-emancipated young adults, those who remain living with their parents into their twenties and sometimes beyond. This population has been largely overlooked in the literature, despite the very real and very common reality that dependency — financial, emotional, and sometimes substance-related — does not end at eighteen. For families in which addiction is part of the landscape, this research carries especially urgent meaning.

****THE INVISIBLE POPULATION IN FAMILY VIOLENCE RESEARCH****

Most research on child-to-parent violence has concentrated on teenagers, framing the phenomenon as a developmental crisis of adolescence — something families endure and eventually move past. But Burrai's study challenges this assumption directly. Grounded in an ecological framework, the research examines how individual, familial, and social risk factors **jointly** relate to CPV toward both mothers and fathers in a

non-clinical sample of non-emancipated young adults (Burrai 2026). The use of an ecological framework is significant: it refuses the easy temptation to locate the problem inside one person or one relationship, and instead asks us to look at the full constellation of pressures bearing down on a family system.

This matters enormously for families dealing with addiction. When a young adult child's substance use disorder intersects with continued residential dependence, the family system is subjected to compounding stressors — financial strain, emotional volatility, disrupted sleep, social isolation, stigma, and fear. These are not simply the backdrop to violence; according to the ecological model, they are active ingredients in it. The research asks us to hold complexity rather than assign blame, and that is precisely where genuine understanding — and genuine help — begins.

****MOTHERS, FATHERS, AND THE ASYMMETRY OF HARM****

One of the more striking dimensions of Burrai's study is its attention to both mothers and fathers as distinct targets of CPV. This distinction is not trivial. Research in this area has consistently found that mothers bear a disproportionate burden of child-to-parent violence, likely because they are more often the primary caregivers, more available, and sometimes perceived — consciously or not — as less likely to retaliate. The study's extension to fathers acknowledges that the harm is not confined to one parent, but that its character may differ depending on gender dynamics, relational history, and the specific architecture of the family.

For families navigating a loved one's addiction, this asymmetry often plays out in recognizable ways. The parent who has remained most emotionally available, most willing to absorb conflict, most reluctant to enforce boundaries — often a mother, though certainly not always — frequently becomes the target of the most intense and sustained harm. Understanding this pattern is not about assigning weakness to caregiving or strength to distance. It is about recognizing that love, expressed as

availability and persistence, can inadvertently create vulnerability. This is one of the most painful paradoxes families in recovery must sit with.

****THE ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: SEEING THE WHOLE SYSTEM****

The ecological model used in Burrai's study draws on Bronfenbrenner's classic framework, which situates individual behavior within nested layers of influence — the individual, the family, the social network, the broader cultural context. Applied to CPV in non-emancipated young adults, this framework resists the reductive narratives that families often encounter: that the young adult is simply "bad," or that the parents "enabled" the problem into existence, or that the solution is a matter of someone simply trying harder.

Instead, the ecological approach asks: What individual factors — including mental health, substance use, trauma history — converge in this young person? What patterns within the family system — communication styles, conflict resolution, history of violence, attachment injuries — create conditions in which aggression becomes a language? And what social factors — peer networks, economic precarity, cultural norms around masculinity or filial obligation — amplify or buffer these risks?

This kind of thinking is not only more accurate than single-cause explanations; it is also more compassionate. It allows families to say, *this happened because of many forces larger than any one of us*, without losing sight of the fact that harm is still harm and that it requires intervention.

****ADDICTION AS AN INTERSECTING RISK FACTOR****

While Burrai's study focuses broadly on non-emancipated young adults rather than specifically on substance-using populations, the intersection with addiction is impossible to ignore. Substance use disorders in young adults are among the most robustly documented risk factors for family

violence. The neurobiological effects of addiction — impaired impulse control, dysregulated affect, distorted threat perception — interact with the already-fraught dynamics of adult dependency to create conditions in which conflict can escalate rapidly and unpredictably.

What makes the ecological framing particularly valuable for addiction families is that it situates substance use not as a moral failing that explains everything, but as one factor among many that must be understood in context. A young adult who uses substances and who lives in a home with a history of harsh discipline, limited emotional attunement, and high family stress is navigating a very different risk landscape than one whose substance use developed in a context of secure attachment and strong family communication. The ecological model insists on this specificity. And that specificity is the foundation of effective, individualized family support.

****THE SILENCE THAT SUSTAINS THE HARM****

Perhaps the most important contribution of research like Burrari's is that it makes visible what so many families have experienced in silence. Child-to-parent violence — particularly when perpetrated by a young adult rather than an adolescent — carries tremendous stigma. Parents often feel shame, self-blame, and fear of judgment. They worry that disclosing the violence will result in legal consequences for their child, or that others will question their parenting. They may minimize what is happening, telling themselves it is not "real" violence because it is not constant, or because their child was intoxicated, or because they believe their child is suffering and deserves their protection.

All of these responses are understandable. They are expressions of love operating under impossible pressure. But silence sustains harm. When families cannot speak about what is happening in their homes, they cannot access support, cannot engage in safety planning, and cannot

begin the work of changing the relational patterns that perpetuate violence.

Organizations and practitioners working in addiction and family recovery must create space for this conversation — explicitly, without judgment, and with the recognition that parents who are experiencing violence from their children are not failures. They are people caught in a system of suffering that requires systemic, compassionate response.

****HOPE IS NOT NAIVETY****

It would be easy, reading research on child-to-parent violence, to arrive at despair. But the ecological framework that underlies Burrai's work points precisely in the opposite direction. If violence is not simply the product of a "bad" individual but rather the outcome of multiple intersecting risk factors — many of which are modifiable — then intervention is possible at multiple levels. Family therapy, individual support for the young adult, parent coaching, social support networks, economic stabilization, and addiction treatment all represent genuine points of leverage.

Families who face addiction with hope and understanding — who resist the pull toward pure confrontation or pure resignation — are not being naive. They are engaging with what the science actually says about how change happens. Change happens in relationships, in safety, in the slow reconstruction of trust, in the patient holding of complexity. It does not happen through shame, and it rarely happens through ultimatum alone.

The research is clear: the factors that create vulnerability to child-to-parent violence are largely the same factors that create vulnerability to addiction, to depression, to disengagement, to despair. And the factors that protect against all of these — secure attachment, consistent emotional support, community connection, access to professional help — are the very things that families and practitioners can actively cultivate.

This is not a counsel of passivity. Safety must always come first, and families experiencing violence need real, concrete support. But the goal of that support should not be punishment or separation for its own sake. It should be healing — for the young person, for the parents, for the family system as a whole.

****CONCLUSION****

Child-to-parent violence in non-emancipated young adults is one of the most underexamined and underacknowledged forms of family suffering in the addiction landscape. Burrai's 2026 research in **Frontiers in Psychology** offers families, clinicians, and advocates a more honest and more complete picture of how this harm develops and what might be done about it. By insisting on an ecological framework — one that takes seriously the individual, familial, and social forces at work — the research refuses both the cruelty of blame and the paralysis of helplessness.

For families navigating these waters, that refusal is itself a form of grace. It says: you are not alone in this, it is not simply your fault, and there are paths forward. Facing addiction and family violence with hope and understanding is not a soft option. It is the only option that has ever actually worked.

Works Cited

Burrai. "Individual, family, and social risk factors for child-to-parent violence in non-emancipated young adults." *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2026. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/42253584/>.

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