

## **STAKEHOLDERS' INSIGHTS INTO CHILD AND ADOLESCENT TO PARENT VIOLENCE AND ABUSE (CAPVA): A METASYNTHESIS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

**Marial Prota and Keren Cohen**

**Abstract:** Child and adolescent to parent violence and abuse (CAPVA) is one of the more complex areas within the domestic abuse domain. There is no clear consensus about the definition of CAPVA, nor are there widely accepted policies and guidelines about how to approach it. By reanalyzing findings collected from 21 qualitative studies that included children, adolescents, and parents who have experienced CAPVA and professionals who supported them, the current metasynthesis aims to contribute to the growing body of research in the area and to move towards developing more coherent policies and professional guidelines. Current findings highlight how the cycle of CAPVA impacts and is impacted by inherent terminological contradictions, relational tensions between parents and their children, the perceived attribution of its causes, and the accessibility of support systems. The multiple interconnected factors that were found lead to a comprehensive psychosocial model of CAPVA with practical implications for related services.

**Keywords:** child and adolescent to parent violence and abuse, domestic abuse, child violence, family

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Child and adolescent to parent violence and abuse (CAPVA) is a complex social phenomenon that has gained increasing attention from both the media and academia in the past 15 years (Baker & Bonnick, 2021; Jiménez-Granado et al., 2023; Rutter et al., 2023; Toole-Anstey et al., 2023). When compared with other forms of intrafamily violence, CAPVA bears similarities in certain features and shares numerous risk elements; however, it diverges notably in its inversion of conventional familial power dynamics (Arias-Rivera et al., 2022). In fact, there is a paradoxical reversal of roles, where the primary caregiver becomes both the victim and the legal caretaker of the aggressor (Tew & Nixon, 2010).

There is no one agreed term for CAPVA, which has been referred to as “child-to-parent violence”, “filial violence”, “battered parent syndrome”, “adolescent family violence”, and “parent abuse”, among others (Burck et al., 2020; Holt, 2022; Selwyn & Meakings, 2016; Thorley & Coates, 2018). The divergence in terminology often reflects underlying epistemological differences: according to Baker and Bonnick (2021), the lack of standardised nomenclature hinders the advancement of effective policies and the development of targeted interventions. Legally, in the United Kingdom, CAPVA is not recognised as a distinct criminal offence, but falls instead under the broader category of domestic abuse; however, the UK Domestic Abuse Act 2021 only applies to perpetrators who are at least 16 years old (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021). Furthermore, CAPVA exhibits dynamics that differ substantially from other forms of domestic violence, due to the complex nature of a perpetrator–victim relationship that is also a parent–child relationship. CAPVA often engenders feelings of shame and stigma in the parent, coupled with fears of criminalisation and loss of the child (Loinaz Calvo & de Sousa, 2020).

Definitions that specify what is and is not classified under CAPVA also vary considerably. For example, Cottrell and Monk (2004, p. 1072) defined it as “any act of a child that is intended to cause physical, psychological or financial damage in order to gain control over a parent”, while for Holt (2016b, p. 1) it constituted “a pattern of behaviour [...] that uses verbal, financial, physical or emotional means to practice power and exert control over a parent”. While Holt’s definition may be more comprehensive, it is not entirely exhaustive. As can be seen in the work of Cano-Lozano et al. (2020), CAPVA is not solely driven by the desire for power and control over a parent.

Because of the difficulty of defining CAPVA, the shame that surrounds it, and victims’ desire to safeguard their children from the stigma that comes with it, CAPVA is argued to be the most underreported offence in the domestic violence spectrum (Brennan et al., 2022); it is thus particularly difficult to determine its true prevalence (Doorewaard, 2014). Nonetheless, by analysing police reports, existing data from service users, and community surveys, London’s Violence Reduction Unit were able to estimate that 40% of CAPVA victims did not report the offence to the police (Brennan et al., 2022). Brennan et al. (2022) also found that 60% of reported incidents of CAPVA involved physical violence, that 78% of all victims were female, and that 71% of perpetrators were male. They also found that 64% of CAPVA is experienced in the more

socioeconomically disadvantaged half of neighbourhoods. Furthermore, recent studies on CAPVA suggest a possible association between parent abuse and neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in young people (Burck et al., 2020). Finally, as noted above, gender plays a role in CAPVA, with male children and adolescents more frequently reported as perpetrators and more female parents reported as victims (Brennan et al., 2022). This may, however, reflect gender biases in reporting and interpreting aggressive behaviours rather than an actual difference (Baker & Bonnick, 2021).

### ***Literature Review***

Several theories have been advanced that offer insight into the development of CAPVA. In developing the family systems theory, Bowen (1966) was concerned about the ability of family members to separate their thoughts and emotions from the collective familial emotional state, with lower levels of differentiation often leading to higher emotional reactivity, which can lead to violent episodes (Erdem & Safi, 2018). Families with blurred or inappropriate boundaries often experience role reversals, where children take on responsibilities usually handled by adults, leading to stress and potential for violence; moreover, limited or distorted communication can aggravate emotional tension that can also lead to violent incidents (Thompson et al., 2019). From an attachment perspective, Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano (2023) noted that, in a dysfunctional attachment system, children may struggle to regulate emotions and might resort to abusive behaviours as a coping mechanism. Additionally, emotional dysregulation and impulse control have been regarded as risk factors for CAPVA (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Rutter, 2021; Soto et al., 2022). Research has shown that disorganised attachment (Theule et al., 2016) and avoidant or ambivalent insecure attachment (Shoar et al., 2016) are linked with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), which can lead to recurrent patterns of negativistic, defiant, disobedient, and hostile behaviour toward authority figures.

Emotional regulation also seems to be a key factor in CAPVA. Adolescents who engage in violent behaviours exhibit more challenges in recognising, articulating, comprehending, accepting, and managing their emotions, as well as in expressing their feelings (Herts et al., 2012). They also experience negative emotions with greater frequency (García-Sancho et al., 2017). As a result, they often feel misunderstood and resort to violence as a coping mechanism for situations they are emotionally ill-equipped to handle (García-Sancho et al., 2017; López-Martínez et al., 2019). The development of effective emotional regulation can be hindered by early exposure to trauma or abuse (Navas-Martínez & Cano-Lozano, 2022), which can thus predispose individuals to violent behaviours later in life (Birdsall et al., 2023).

According to Nowakowski-Sims and Rowe (2015), trauma occurs as a consequence of two or more co-existing experiences. The concept of cumulative adversity posits that particularly severe and long-lasting effects arise when adversities accumulate, especially during formative childhood years (Dong et al., 2004). Over the past twenty years, research into post-traumatic stress (e.g., Finkelhor et al., 2007b; Tseloni & Pease, 2003) has modified how the aetiology of trauma is

understood. These studies suggest that for some children, victimisation is not simply a singular, intense, event but rather a persistent condition (Finkelhor et al., 2007a). In terms of CAPVA, studies have revealed that children and adolescents who have been victimised or have witnessed violence in their families are more likely to engage in violent behaviours, including against their parents (e.g., Lyons et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2011). Research studying risk factors affecting youth incarcerated for child-to-parent violence found that 50.7% of the examined sample had been physically abused as a child, while 63.8% had witnessed serious violence (Armstrong et al., 2018). In a more recent large scale study involving 1,559 adolescents from two provinces in southern Spain, Navas-Martínez and Cano-Lozano (2022) found that of those who had perpetrated CAPVA, 63.4% had also experienced some type of violence within the family.

An additional explanation for the consistent link between CAPVA and prior experiences of domestic abuse can be found in social learning theories of aggression (Bandura, 1973), which posit that domestic abuse can trigger CAPVA through modelling (e.g., internalization and then imitation of aggressive behaviours), perceived reinforcement (e.g., effectivity of violent responses), and changes to perceptions of normative behaviours (e.g., seeing violent responses as legitimate). In a recent study, Li et al. (2021) provided more support for the assumption that the link between experiencing domestic violence and CAPVA is related to a change of norms rather than to direct learning through modelling. In their study, they found that among young people, the direct link between experiencing parental violence and CAPVA was weak and borderline insignificant, while the mediating effect of having accepting attitudes towards violence was significant. Su et al. (2010), on the other hand, suggested that experiencing or witnessing domestic violence as a child reinforces the instrumental use of violence: the child comes to perceive violence as an acceptable means of expressing frustration or exerting control.

While early studies (e.g., Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Peek et al., 1985) showed inconsistent links between parenting and child-to-parent aggression, more recent research (Cuervo, 2023; Suárez-Relinque et al., 2019) has identified parenting style as a pivotal risk factor. In particular, styles that are too permissive, too authoritarian, or highly controlling can influence a child's emotional development and coping abilities, and can have a notable connection to child-to-mother violence (Zhang et al., 2019). Similarly, communication patterns in families have also been found to contribute to CAPVA: according to Jiménez et al. (2019), a prevalence of punitive, derogatory, and suppressive communication in families often perpetuates negative emotional states and behaviours, including aggression and violence towards parents.

With various theories attributing the development of CAPVA to parenting and family dynamics, and in the context of societal norms that attribute the ultimate child-rearing responsibility to parents, Holt (2016) identified a victim-blaming mindset, which delegitimises parental experiences of abuse, heightening the emotional and psychological trauma they induce. Burck et al. (2020) suggested that accusations of failed parenting not only serve to delegitimise parents' experiences but also further entrench parents in a cycle of shame and guilt. Moreover, parents' statutory responsibility to offer a secure home for their children exacerbates an already

complicated situation. Parents find themselves in an untenable position where eviction or abandonment of their abusive children not only attracts societal disapproval but also contravenes established legal frameworks (Coogan, 2011). Burck et al. (2020) noted that these legal and moral obligations, and the fear of societal or legal repercussions, limit the ability of parents to take decisive action.

Considering the conceptual, practical, and psychosocial complexity of CAPVA, the current research aims to adopt a metasynthesis approach, assembling and synthesising the views of parents, children, and professionals on CAPVA and its context. In essence, a metasynthesis is a qualitative secondary analysis of existing findings; ultimately, it is an interpretive rather than an aggregative work (Noblit & Hare, 1988), seeking to build, develop, and refine theories, increasing our understanding of a topic while retaining the richness and uniqueness of the original studies (Thorne et al., 2004). The metasynthesis presented in this study aims to integrate and synthesise findings from multiple qualitative studies, leading to a comprehensive and robust understanding of CAPVA (Lachal et al., 2017). Moreover, by combining the perspectives and experiences of diverse stakeholders, the current metasynthesis could also reveal overarching themes, commonalities, and divergences that might not be apparent in individual studies (Sim & Mengshoel, 2022). Finally, this synthesis of previous studies will also help to identify gaps in knowledge and practice, informing future research.

Figure 1. *Search Keywords*

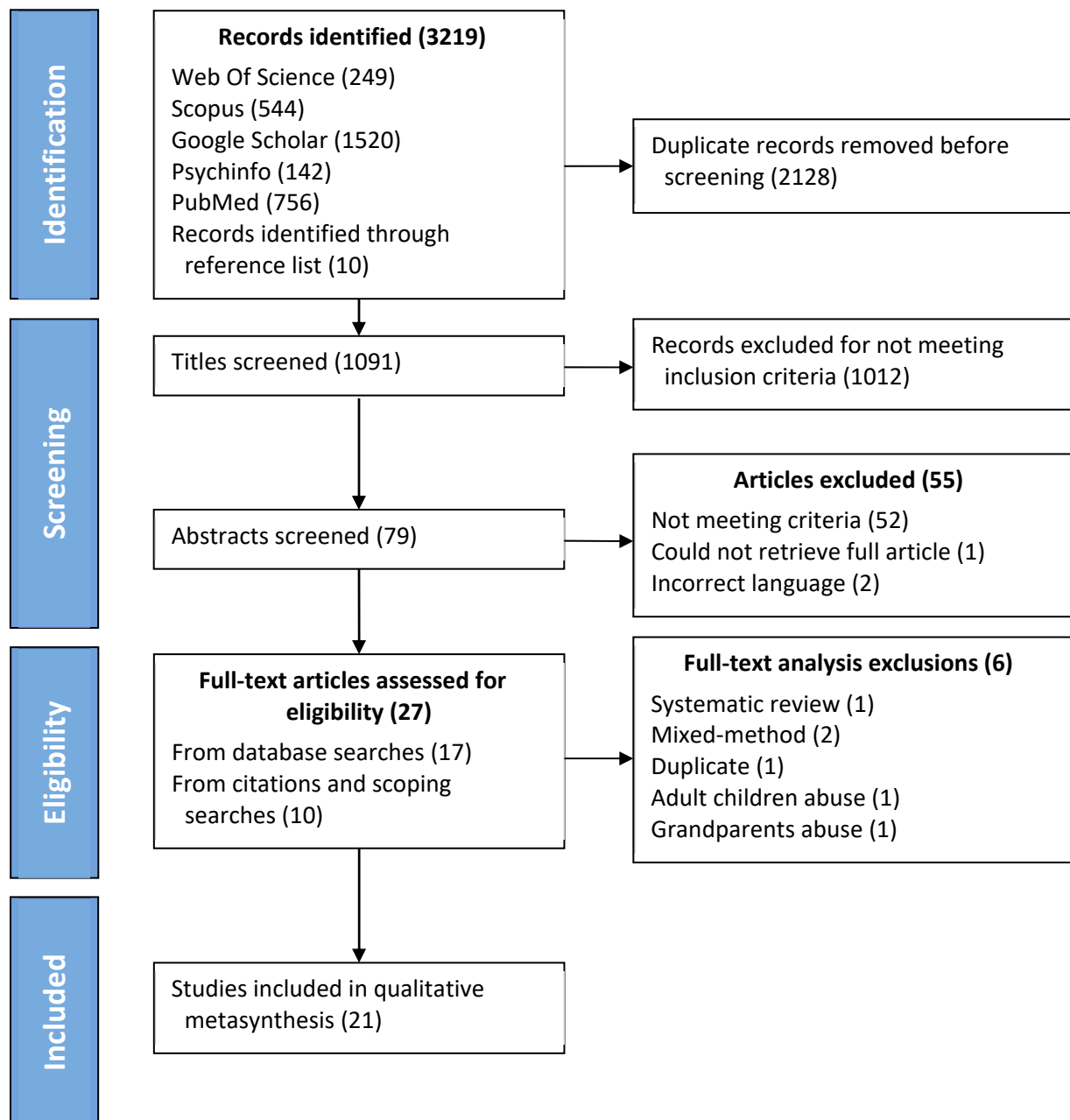
parent abuse	child-to-parent abuse
child-to-parent violence	child-to-parent aggression
youth-to-parent aggression	youth-to-parent violence
youth-to-parent abuse	youth aggression toward parents
youth violence toward parents	child-to-mother aggression
child-to-father aggression	teenage violence toward parents
adolescent-to-parent violence	adolescent-to-parent aggression
adolescent-parent abuse	adolescent aggression toward parents
adolescent violence toward parents	adolescent abuse toward parents
child-to-father violence	child-to-mother violence
child-initiated family violence	adolescent-initiated parent abuse
battered parent	violence against parents
juvenile domestic violence	adolescent family violence
youth violence in the home	teen violence toward mothers
parents abused by children	adolescent violence in the home
parent-directed aggression	violence by children against mothers
violence by child to parent	violence by adolescent to parent
aggression by child to parent	parents victimized by their children
qualitative	

## Methodology

### Selection of Studies

A comprehensive systematic search of databases (Web of Science, Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Scopus) was conducted during August 2023 in order to identify qualitative studies that have explored CAPVA. The search used a combination of keywords, as shown in Figure 1. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine the search terms. A manual search of reference lists from identified articles was also undertaken to identify additional relevant studies.

Figure 2. *Selection Process: Identification of Studies via Databases and Registers*





Studies were included if they were: qualitative, involving participants with a direct experience with CAPVA (e.g., parents, children, professionals), written in English, and available in full text online. Studies were excluded if they were not purely qualitative studies (e.g. reviews, mixed-methods), if they were not published in English, and if they focused on adult-to-child violence and abuse. Figure 2 outlines the details of the selection process.

The quality of the studies was assessed by using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP; 2023) Qualitative Checklist, which mainly involved examining the clarity of aims, methodology appropriateness, design integrity, and the relevance of the findings to CAPVA. It was found that all the studies met the core criteria outlined by the CASP checklist. There was some variability in the extent to which studies reported having adopted measures to enhance credibility or trustworthiness; however, in line with Atkins et al. (2008), it was decided to take an inclusive approach and include all selected papers in the analysis.

### ***Analysis***

This metasynthesis followed Noblit and Hare's (1988) meta-ethnographic method. As a first step, papers were read and reread. Key phrases, metaphors, ideas, and concepts from the original publications were then tabulated to serve as the "raw data" for the synthesis. Through a process of "reciprocal translation", the synthesis data were integrated and translated into one another, producing second-order themes (for further details, please see Campbell et al., 2003). These themes then formed the final major themes of the study. The themes were audited by the first author, who traced them back to the original articles to ensure that the current analysis is reflective of the original papers' findings. Any potential discrepancies emerging from the auditing were discussed, and adaptations were made as necessary.

### ***Study Characteristics***

A total of 21 studies, published from 2004 to 2023, were included. Descriptive details of the studies appear in Table 1.

As can be seen from Table 1, the studies reviewed were carried out in the United Kingdom ( $n = 12$ ), Spain ( $n = 3$ ), Australia ( $n = 3$ ), and in Trinidad and Tobago, the United States, and Canada (1 each). In terms of demographic focus, 33% ( $n = 7$ ) of the studies featured parents only (Bell, 2018; Clarke et al., 2017; Edenborough et al., 2008; Holt, 2011; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Rutter, 2021; Soto et al., 2022); 23% ( $n = 5$ ) exclusively targeted practitioners (Condry & Miles, 2012; Holt & Lewis, 2021; Holt & Retford, 2013; Nixon, 2012; O'Toole et al., 2022); 19% ( $n = 4$ ) encompassed practitioners and parents (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Messiah & Johnson, 2017; Miles & Condry, 2015; Toole-Anstey et al., 2023); 14% ( $n = 3$ ) focused on all stakeholders (Calvete et al., 2014; Gabriel et al., 2018; Shanholtz et al., 2020); one study focused on adolescents and parents (Calvete et al., 2015); and one on adolescents only (Papamichail & Bates, 2022).

Table 1. *Details of Selected Studies*

Author(s)/Date	Country	Stakeholder	Study aims and objectives	Data collection
O'Toole et al. 2022	UK	Practitioners	To delineate the scope of child-to-parent aggression (CPA), assess practitioner perspectives on its risk factors, and investigate effective interventions.	Focus groups (4)
Condry & Miles 2012	UK	Practitioners	To investigate the scope and characteristics of CAPVA, focusing on how the criminal justice system, specifically within the sector of youth justice, addresses such cases.	Semi-structured interviews
Holt & Lewis 2021	UK	Practitioners	To identify diverse discourses of child–parent violence (CPV) in policy and practice.	Post-structural policy analysis, questionnaires, and interviews
Holt & Retford 2013	UK	Practitioners	To explore practitioners' perspectives and experiences in dealing with cases of parent abuse.	Semi-structured interviews
Nixon 2012	UK	Practitioners	To address the lack of empirical research on parent abuse. It explores how professionals in youth justice, domestic violence, and child protection construct the issue, and discusses the impact of policy gaps on practice responses.	Interviews and focus groups
Miles & Condry 2015	UK	Practitioners, policymakers, parents	To increase knowledge and understanding of adolescent-to-parent violence (APV) and inform policy and practice on how to respond to and support families experiencing this form of family violence.	Semi-structured interviews
Messiah & Johnson 2017	Trinidad and Tobago	Practitioners, parents	To explore the effectiveness of third-party resolution (mediation) in cases of adolescent-to-parent abuse.	Interviews
Calvete et al. 2014	Spain	Parents, children, practitioners	To assess family characteristics, psychological traits of adolescents, and influences like peers and media. It also seeks to understand the nature of CPV, their context, and any gender differences.	Focus groups
Cottrell & Monk 2004	Canada	Practitioners, parents	To explore the phenomenon of adolescent-to-parent abuse and provide a comprehensive understanding of contributing factors, with a focus on nested ecological theory.	Interviews and focus groups
Calvete et al. 2015	Spain	Adolescents, parents	To investigate the impact of witnessing violence and the influence of disciplinary methods on CPV.	In-depth interviews
Clarke et al. 2017	UK	Parents	To explore the strategies parents employ to navigate the stress and uncertainty associated with adolescent-to-parent violence and abuse (APVA).	Interviews (IPA)
Soto et al. 2022	Spain	Parents	To investigate CPV dynamics and identify risk factors, impacts, and family environment.	Interviews (TA)
Rutter 2021	UK	Parents	To explore parental experiences of CPV when the child is under 13 and understand how parents interpret violence.	Ethno-mimetic study (one-on-one art-based sessions)



Author(s)/Date	Country	Stakeholder	Study aims and objectives	Data collection
Papamichail & Bates 2022	UK	Adolescents	To explore how adolescents' family relationships, emotions, and behaviour relate to CPV and understand adolescents' perceptions of their emotions and how these link to their CPV behaviour.	Interviews and observation
Edenborough et al. 2008	Australia	Mothers	To investigate child-to-mother violence in a high-risk geographical area, and understand mothers' perspectives and experiences on their children's violence and their views on the existing interventions.	Questionnaires with open-ended questions and interviews
Gabriel et al. 2018	UK	Parents, adolescents, practitioners	To comprehensively explore the dynamics and underlying triggers of youth-to-parent aggression and violence, while investigating family dynamics, coping strategies, gender roles, practitioner impact, and potential interventions.	Qualitative; semi-structured interviews with all stakeholders; focus groups with practitioners
Bell 2018	UK	Parents	To investigate parents' lived experiences of abuse from their adolescents, using an approach anchored in social-ecological theory; and to understand how parents conceptualise and address the abuse, and what professional support they have received.	Qualitative thematic analysis; posts on an online forum about APVA
Shanholtz et al. 2020	UK	Practitioners, parents, adolescents	To inform the development of a group therapy programme for adolescents involved in a diversion programme, focusing on APVA; and to gain insights into general experiences of APVA, associated factors, and outcomes.	Qualitative research using a community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework; semi-structured interviews
Holt 2011	UK	Parents	To examine how parents articulate their experiences dealing with their child's violent and abusive behaviour at home, as discussed on two open online message boards.	Discourse analysis of 33 opening messages posted by parents on two online message boards
Howard & Rottem 2008	Australia	Mothers	To understand the impact and the causes of male adolescent violence on mothers.	Qualitative; interviews
Toole-Anstey et al. 2023	Australia	Mothers, practitioners	To explore mothers' help-seeking behaviours in CPV, examining family and social factors using specific analytical frameworks to scrutinise interviews with mothers and practitioners.	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews

In terms of research design, 62% ( $n = 13$ ) of studies utilised semi-structured or in-depth interviews (Calvete et al., 2015; Clarke et al., 2017; Condry & Miles, 2012; Edenborough et al., 2008; Gabriel et al., 2018; Holt & Lewis, 2021; Holt & Retford, 2013; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Messiah & Johnson, 2017; Miles & Condry, 2015; Papamichail & Bates, 2022; Shanholtz et al., 2020; Soto et al., 2022; Toole-Anstey et al., 2023); 9.5% ( $n = 2$ ) of studies employed a hybrid approach, combining both interviews and focus groups (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Nixon, 2012); 9.5% ( $n = 2$ ) of studies opted exclusively for focus groups (Calvete et al., 2014; O'Toole et al., 2022); 9.5% ( $n = 2$ ) observed data posted on online forums and message boards (Bell, 2018; Holt,

2011), 5% ( $n = 1$ ) incorporated art-based interviews (Rutter, 2021), and 5% ( $n = 1$ ) included a blend of interviews and observation (Papamichail & Bates, 2022).

Regarding the target participants, studies that were practitioner-oriented encompassed professionals from a wide array of disciplines, including domestic violence organizations, youth justice boards, the police, consultant forensic psychologists, youth offending service experts, social workers, youth justice and parenting practitioners, and court professionals. Most of the responding parents were mothers, whereas the distribution of child and adolescent participants was fairly balanced between males ( $n = 17$ ) and females ( $n = 19$ ).

## Results

The metasynthesis revealed five overarching themes: causal attributions to CAPVA, the CAPVA lived experience, systems of support (access and limitations), CAPVA embedded contradictions, and CAPVA relational tensions.

### *Causal Attributions of CAPVA*

Various factors were seen to be behind the development of the violence cycle. First, most papers recount a history of exposure to earlier trauma within the context of domestic abuse. Children were exposed to partner violence; in all papers reviewed, it was violence directed towards the mothers from their partners. In some papers (e.g., Calvete et al., 2014; Papamichail & Bates, 2022), participants also indicated violence and abusive behaviours directed towards the CAPVA perpetrator children when they were younger. Calvete et al. (2015) referred to a participant whose mother “constantly humiliated her by comparing her with her brother in school performance”, telling her, “You won’t even be fit to clean public toilets” (p. 10). Experiences of neglect and loss were also reported in several papers (e.g., Calvete et al., 2014; Calvete et al., 2015; Papamichail & Bates, 2022), especially in regard to fathers being absent either physically or emotionally. As Calvete et al. (2014) argued, “What is more salient is not so much the violence that some fathers carry out against their children but instead their negligence to perform their functions as fathers” (p. 347).

Other attributed causes for the violence cycle that appeared across the papers included parenting (normally reflected in professionals’ accounts), the child’s innate temperament or an underlying mental health condition (e.g., ADHD, ASD), and the external environment (e.g., school friends, social media). In terms of parenting, some papers (e.g., Calvete et al., 2014; Holt & Retford, 2013; Miles & Condry, 2015; Nixon., 2012; Soto et al., 2022; Rutter, 2021) referenced issues in setting boundaries for children or in keeping them consistent. One participant in Calvete et al. (2014) noted:

I would have liked to be harsher with him because before, if he misbehaved ... I punished him and told him he was not going to watch TV for a week. He’d come home in the afternoon and ... later, well ... he knew I would give in. (p. 347)

Another said, “Hell, the little time I spend at home ... how am I going to punish him?” (p. 347). Another frequent cause of CAPVA, especially in parents’ accounts, was revealed by a child’s mental health diagnosis (e.g., Holt et al., 2017; Miles & Condry, 2015; Papamichail & Bates, 2022). In these circumstances, the violence was seen as expected, as normalised, or as a manifestation of the condition. Finally, in a small number of papers (e.g., Calvete et al., 2014, Cottrell & Monk, 2004), violence was attributed to outside influences including exposure to content on social media and interactions with school friends.

The attribution of the cause of the violent behaviour had a direct impact on parents, as articulated by a participant in Clarke et al.’s (2017) study:

He got diagnosed with conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder. So they kept adding D’s [disorders]. If he’d have had one more diagnosis at an earlier age maybe, he would have not been so let down later on ... I spent most of his childhood trying to prove he was ... because to most people it’s just “bad parents” ... I was almost vindicated. To me it was a relief. (p. 1427)

Indeed, for parents, the notion that they would be seen as responsible for causing the violence, especially by professionals, was a key barrier to accessing and receiving support.

### *The CAPVA Lived Experience*

At the core of the papers reviewed was a description of the cycle of violence in relation to CAPVA: all the papers described an overall atmosphere of conflict and impending threat. Messiah and Johnson (2017) noted that “persistence of conflict every day in the home was overbearing” (p. 191), to the extent that the threats of a looming attack seemed to almost take over family life, as parents did not know when the next violent incident would come or what would trigger it. A participant in Rutter’s (2021) study described this feeling: “It touches everything, that dark shadow. I find it really hard to enjoy anything fully because the worry that he’ll just flip just taints everything” (p. 1325). The issue of control seems to be central to many of the conflicts described in these papers. Several noted that parents felt that they had lost control of the situation and that they could not control their children’s behaviour. Messiah and Johnson (2017) noted that “parents saw the need to instil overprotectiveness and restriction of autonomy, due to adolescents’ disobedience and breaking of rules” (p. 192); however, as children themselves were using violence in order to assert their control over parents and family life, parents’ attempts to be more forceful led to escalation. Escalation was also described in relation to the process of a deteriorating situation from arguments to verbal violence and then to physical violence. A professional in Calvete et al.’s (2014) study noted: “In the developmental unfolding of the cases, we see that what is now physical violence did not begin as physical violence, it began with an 11-year-old child shouting or punching the wall, or slamming his fist on the table” (p. 349). There was also escalation in the severity of the attacks as the child grew older. A mother in Holt’s (2011) study noted that “each one gets worse and worse ... I am really worried where it will end” (p. 457).

### *Systems of Support: Access and Limitations*

Across all papers parents were reported as expressing deep and persistent feelings of shame and guilt. Some felt that they had failed as parents and some felt that they were being judged and criticised by others, especially social workers. Most parents hid the situation for as long as they could; accessing help was normally initiated as a last resort by a third party. A social worker in Holt and Retford (2013) noted:

It's only usually after maybe two or three months of working with someone on home visits or picking it up if Social Services are involved that you tend to find out that there's probably a little bit more going on at home. (p. 367)

The studies portray a profound mistrust of the system, which parents felt was failing them. A mother in Messiah and Johnson's (2017) study recalled her meeting with a social worker: "I felt worse off than when I went in, he made me feel like I was responsible for everything. It wasn't what he said but what he didn't say" (p. 193). Parents expressed frustration towards a system that focuses mainly on child safeguarding and parental responsibility with little consideration of the parent's suffering and risk. Experiences with police officers were mixed, with some parents facing dismissive attitudes, such as the mother in Miles and Condry's (2015) study who told a police officer:

"If he were eighteen, you wouldn't legally be allowed to bail him back to my house, having assaulted me." [Police officer:] "Well he's not eighteen is he, and you're his mother". I say, "No, you're not coming in". He says, "What type, what kind of a mother can you call yourself?" (p. 1085)

Overall, parents felt that the system was as helpless as they were. This helplessness mirrors professionals' accounts of weak policy and insufficient guidance in the area. A senior social worker in Nixon (2012) noted:

I think we are so focussed on the child, which is a good thing because that's our job and we are taught at a very early stage in our career that it's the package around the child, it's the best outcome for children, it's about the child, but then what do you do when that child is the perpetrator? That's very difficult to deal with and it doesn't sit comfortably and it makes you a bit torn in all directions. (p. 231)

In the context of limited access to formal support, parents were able to find comfort, practical advice, and support from parents' support groups. Other informal support systems, such as family and friends, varied in their accessibility, with some indicating more substantial support and others feeling that their friends and family were not able to fully understand their situation or maintain support over time. One practitioner in Condry and Miles's (2012) study noted:

I don't think there's sympathy for the parents; you know, I think if your sort of offspring is antisocial or whatever, then if it happens to you in your house, well

you’ve kind of brought it on yourself type thing. I don’t think people are, at a high level, that much interested. (p. 246)

The lack of support could lead to deep feelings of loneliness and helplessness. A participant in Holt’s (2012) study asked: “We are desperate and there just seems to be no help — where do we turn next? ... We are getting no help at the moment from anyone and are really dreading the next episode from her” (p. 457). The difficulty in accessing and providing effective support was directly linked to the contradictory qualities of CAPVA as a particular type of domestic abuse.

### ***CAPVA’s Embedded Contradictions***

Across several papers there was a discussion around the definition of CAPVA and how it is perceived by parents and professionals. In some papers it seems that there was a reluctance to define it as domestic abuse, and other terms such as “difficult behaviours” were used. A social worker in Holt and Retford (2013) noted: “The nearest we would come to is a category for ‘socially unacceptable child behaviour’, and that would be the one we would choose” (p. 367). This reluctance was common to both professionals and some parents, especially in the early stages of the violence or when children were younger. In Rutter’s (2021) study, for example, none of the mothers defined their children’s violent behaviour as abuse; they were more likely to see it as a sign that the children were being overwhelmed. It should be noted that in some papers there were professionals who did see CAPVA as abuse, including a participant in Messiah and Johnson (2017) who reflected that:

It’s definitely abuse, just because it’s not physical, we dress it up as something else.  
No, it is abuse; some parents are in turmoil emotionally and psychologically. You know what is to be living in constant threat, whether it be husband or child. (p. 194)

Indeed, various papers pointed out similarities between CAPVA and other types of domestic abuse: an underlying attempt to assert control, existing emotional and psychological abuse extending to physical abuse, living in fear at home, and hiding the abuse from others.

Alongside the similarities, however, there were key differences between CAPVA and other types of domestic abuse. At the basis of the complexity was parental responsibility. As parents are responsible for the welfare of their children and for their education, guidance, and upbringing, drawing the fault lines between victim and perpetrator seemed more challenging. Many parents still felt the need to protect their children, and some felt responsible for the children’s behaviour. “I was thinking I created a monster” (p. 193), said a mother in Messiah and Johnson’s (2017) study; Nixon (2012) noted that mothers “often felt responsible for their child’s behaviour and were reluctant to contribute to negative labelling of their child” (p. 232). The age of the children and their ability to be fully responsible for their actions is also an issue raised by both parents and professionals. In Holt and Retford’s (2013) study, it was noted that, “My first thing would be, if the police have been called on ‘999’ then it’s a crime. Conceptual framework is rather more

problematic when perpetrators are still legally children and consequently are not held criminally responsible” (p. 368). A mother in Soto et al.’s (2022) study quoted her daughter as saying:

“Get out of my life, die, I hope you get run over, I hope you get raped, die!” I said, “You don’t know what you’re saying!” ... I’m convinced that she wants ... me to feel the pain that she feels.” (p. 186)

Stuck between their parental love and responsibility and their desperate desire and attempts to stop the violent behaviour of their children, parents felt that they were in an impossible position. “Well, you can’t win”, said a mother in Clarke et al.’s (2017) study. She continued:

You try to show your son that they can’t behave like that and then the people who are meant to be helping you [social services] tell you that you aren’t looking after him properly and are going to prosecute you if you don’t take him home. It’s horrendous. (p.1428)

The complications continue. Measures that can help in other domestic violence situations, such as removing the perpetrator from the home environment, are not possible in the case of underage children. Across studies, interventions such as family or personal therapy also fell short as they required children to take responsibility and be motivated to change. As a professional in Shanholtz et al.’s (2020) study noted: “In any therapy, one barrier is motivation. [An adolescent might say] ‘I don’t need this’ and the kid doesn’t experience the need for change or perceive this particular entity as helpful” (p. 270). Parents in Clarke et al.’s (2017) study echoed a similar point, noting:

You know ideally we as a family should all meet with [multisystemic therapist] but [my son] won’t meet with her and she says try this and try that and we try it and then we have to come back and tell her what’s happened ... so you know we’re struggling to make that work really to try and get something out of that. (p. 1428)

Looking across the papers, it was difficult to find any intervention that was recognised as successful by parents, but in Edenborough et al.’s (2008) study one participant noted how mentoring did help her to some extent, saying, “It didn’t need to be professional, just someone to talk to and who was genuinely interested in him and not just a couple of one hour sessions in a clinic” (p. 469). Other accounts of anger management training and medications were reported to lead to some improvement for some but not for all; one participant in Edenborough et al. (2008) said: “Anger management counselling helped a bit, but didn’t really get to the base of the problem, and really pitted him against me/us” (p. 468). Interestingly, in Rutter (2021) a participant spoke of learning about trauma-informed approaches and how useful that had been for coping with her situation: “Learning about how trauma affects the brain ... that it’s his animal brain taking over ... I just wonder what could be different if we were told all this six years ago, when we first asked for help” (p. 1329).



### ***CAPVA's Relational Tensions***

The final theme that was found in the metasynthesis reflected the ongoing relational tension that parents and children felt in the CAPVA cycle, tension that arises from the seemingly impossible position of continuing parenting while being subjected to a child's violence. In this theme parents, children, and professionals interviewed across the studies described an ongoing movement between, on the one end, intentions and actions taken to bring the family closer, and on the other end, those that created distance, conflict, and tension, all the way to the extreme of a break in the parent–child bond. Various studies have revealed how parents framed the violent behaviour of their children in ways that helped them maintain the parent–child bond. As a mother in Calvete et al. (2014) noted, “And when they are distressed, with whom do they get upset? Whom do they mistreat? The person who is there, whom they love and whom they can trust” (p. 348). It was interesting to note that while there were only a small number of studies involving children, in those, there were indications of children's wish to maintain a loving bond with the parents; for example, in Papamichail and Bates (2022), a participant noted, “... I say I hate you to my mum ... but when I say I hate you I don't mean it. I love her a lot” (p. 6147).

Maintaining the parent–child bond in the context of CAPVA is not an easy task and alongside parents' commitment and wish to protect their children and support them, there are also mixed emotions. A participant in Edenborough et al.'s (2008) study noted, “When we were having trouble with my son it was the worst time of both our lives. There was so much stress. I felt a mixture of emotions, upset, hurt, resentful, worried and sympathy for him” (p. 468). Indeed, it seems that in the long term as children grew older and there were escalations, it was increasingly hard to maintain this bond. Studies revealed ruptures in the parent–child bond. These involved a growing physical distance between parents and children, either because children became more secluded and isolated (e.g., Soto et al., 2022 ) or because parents avoided spending time with them (e.g., Rutter, 2021). Parents' feelings of anger disrupted their bond with their children, as was noted in Soto et al.'s (2022) study: “I had to say three positive things about him, three things about his characteristics, something, and it was really hard to find them because I was so angry about what he was doing to us” (p. 186). Such violence is corrosive, and parents described how it changed their affective bonds with their child. A participant in Clarke et al. (2017) articulated:

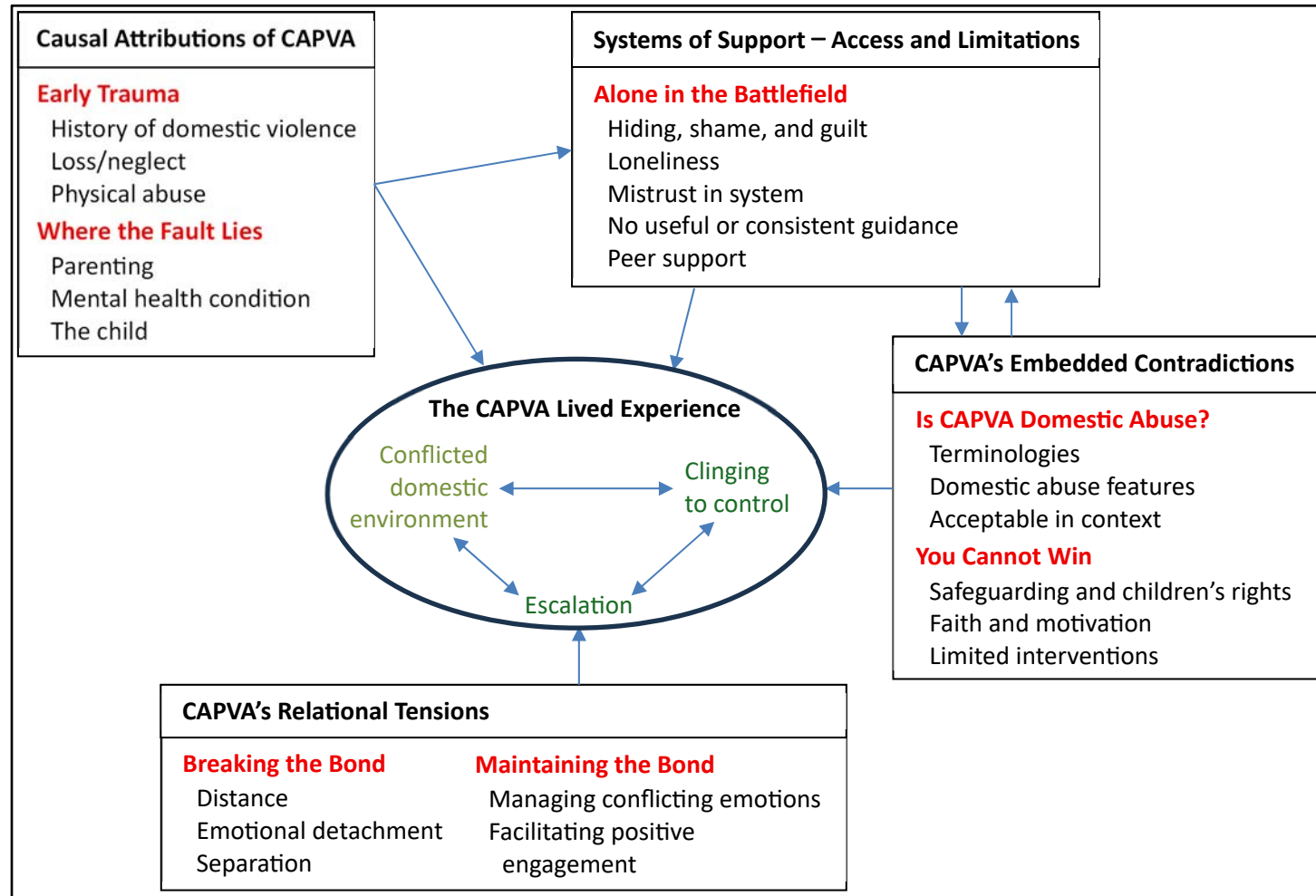
As much as I love her dearly, with what we've been through that love has really turned bitter and I know she's my daughter but that love I had for her as a baby and as a child and even as in early teenage years is slowly dwindling. (p. 1426)

Extreme instances of rupture in the parent–child bond were provided by accounts of parents who had their children leave the family house as soon as it was legally possible. A participant in Holt (2011) spoke of having “no choice but to throw him out” (p. 457). For others, the rupture was almost complete and involved a breakdown of contact and communication. As another participant in Clarke et al. (2017) explained, “I didn't talk to him for 2 weeks cos I was infuriated with him. We redecorated when he moved out the other week. It just feels like I've got to wipe him out. I can't have him at home anymore” (p. 1426).

### *A Psychosocial Model of CAPVA*

Taken together, the five themes with their subthemes created a comprehensive model accounting for CAPVA and its complexity. The model can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3. *A Psychosocial Model of CAPVA*



## Discussion

The current metasynthesis highlights multiple interconnected factors that influence the nature of parental abuse and the interventions that follow. Central to these factors are the ambiguous relationship between parents and the children who exhibit abusive behaviour, societal consequences of acknowledging this type of abuse, and the hurdles faced by parents when seeking appropriate support. Our model reveals the dynamic behind CAPVA and how it is impacted by the parents' legal and moral obligations towards their children as well as by their parental love and attachment to their children. It also reveals that parents' ability to access support and help is hindered by the lack of professional guidelines, perceptions of parental responsibility, the complex and often ambiguous boundaries between "victim" and "perpetrator", and the perceived underlying causes of CAPVA. It was also clear that the studies reviewed do not point to effective policies and practices and that parents are feeling increasingly isolated and lost.

By highlighting the complexity of CAPVA, the current metasynthesis highlights a few areas that require research, and policy and practice development. First, in line with other writers (e.g., Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Miles & Condry, 2015; Nixon, 2012), the current metasynthesis suggests the need for an agreed and consistent definition and terminology. A unified, widely accepted term for CAPVA will foster a more precise understanding and communication across all stakeholders. Clarity in terminology is not just a matter of semantics but directly influences interventions, public perceptions, and policy formulations. Standardised terms can act as the foundation upon which effective strategies and policies are built (Belcher & Palenberg, 2018). It is essential for any policies in the area to ensure both the child's well-being and safety and the parent's protection and support. This dual emphasis requires a delicate balance and nuanced understanding (Wilcox, 2012). Guidelines on how to identify CAPVA and to support affected families should also be developed. With appropriate training, such guidelines will help reduce prejudicial approaches to parents among services (e.g., police, social workers), which will in turn facilitate help-seeking behaviours.

Considering the prevalence of domestic abuse in CAPVA children's history, it may be that early preventive interventions, such as those suggested by Clarke et al. (2017), should be explored, helping children develop more adaptive emotional regulation techniques. Additionally, considering the complexity around the concepts of "victim" and "perpetrator" in the context of CAPVA, adopting a trauma-informed approach to both children and parents might be a useful framework for professionals. Such an approach is used in other contexts to reduce attitudes of blame and shame and to facilitate health seeking in other types of domestic abuse (Rutter, 2021). A comprehensive public awareness approach can contribute significantly to prevention efforts and to reducing the stigma and shame associated with being a victim of parent abuse, in addition to educating the services responsible for dealing with the victims and the children involved (Toole-Anstey et al., 2023).

Finally, considering that any intervention will be contingent upon the engagement of both young people and their parents, it is important that the voices of the children and adolescents are appropriately recorded in research. Only five of the 21 studies reviewed involved children and adolescents as participants, and only one focused exclusively on adolescents' experiences and perspectives. It is crucial for future research to focus on the experiences and needs of the children to develop more successful intervention programmes.

It should be noted that previous publications (e.g., Sim & Mengshoel, 2023) have raised concerns around the risk of eroding the essence of individual studies, and diluting the depth and richness inherent in qualitative research or losing critical contexts and core meanings. Nevertheless, the current metasynthesis delivers an exhaustive and useful review of qualitative evidence, while identifying areas for growth. Moreover, whereas previous systematic review studies in the area have mainly focused on specific interventions or measurements (e.g., Arias-Rivera et al., 2020; Ibabe, 2020; Rutter, 2023; Toole-Anstey et al., 2021), the current one is centred on stakeholder perspectives related to CAPVA. By considering the perspectives of multiple stakeholders — practitioners actively working in the field, parents at the receiving end of the violence, and children and adolescents who perpetrate it — the study offers a well-rounded understanding of CAPVA from all the sides involved (Suri, 2013). This variety allows for the creation of a more holistic picture, shedding light on aspects that might remain hidden if only one group were consulted.

In conclusion, the current study identifies CAPVA as a multifaceted and complex issue within the broader spectrum of domestic abuse, having its own unique characteristics and challenges. It clarifies how the intimate bond between parent and child often obscures the identification of abusive behaviour, and hinders seeking support and employing effective interventions. It also highlights how this inherent difficulty is exacerbated by societal misconceptions, stigma, and the lack of standardised terminology, policy, and procedures. The need for change in policy and practice is paramount, as is the need for further research that will lead to effective interventions.

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