



Children, young people and families, Counselling and psychotherapy

When love is not enough

Chartered Psychologist Dr Joanna North explains how firm and loving boundaries can support children who engage in physical violence with their caregivers.

25 September 2025

Share this page



When 15-year-old 'Franko' resolved an argument with his parents by threatening them with a knife, they barricaded themselves in their room. Franko was an adopted child whose parents had asked him not to smoke marijuana in his bedroom, which had triggered the outburst. They lived in fear of his aggression and described themselves as prisoners in their own home. He made constant threats, demanded money, controlled when they spoke to each other and banned them from speaking with anyone about their concerns. Following the incident with the knife, the police were called, and they were able to de-escalate the situation. It was noticeable that Franko quickly responded to the authority of uniformed police.

The question of why a child's relationship with their loving parents becomes so controlling and violent is often at the forefront of my work with Adoption Support services. We have certainly seen cases of child to adult violence building over the last 20 years. For example, a

2018 survey of UK teachers undertaken by the teacher's union, NASUWT, found that one in ten teachers had been physical assaulted.

As social norms have shifted so have the dynamics between adult authority, control and children's rights to have their own voice heard. Of course, psychologists support the right of a child to have their voice heard, but when that right evolves to the threat of serious harm, *everybody's* safety is compromised. Children don't thrive on coercive strategies. Being allowed to be violent without intervention simply suggests to the child that they are doing the right thing. In the words of Maya Angelou - 'If we know better, we can do better.'

So how do we meet child to adult violence in a way that keeps everyone surviving and thriving? In my many years of work in this area, I have found that desperate children often resort to violence and aggression, as a hopeful attempt to keep themselves safe. Violence, unfortunately, has power and works by frightening a child's 'opponents' (those assigned to their care, including teachers, adoptive parents and foster parents) into submission. And it often works, in the short term.

The focus of my work over the last 30 years has been psychotherapy with children and families. I wrote my doctoral thesis on failing adoption as an attempt to look at what helps children recover from adversity without seeing violence as a solution. So often, placements crash and burn with children re-entering the care system. Although there are no formal records of adoptions that fail - it is reported by social workers to be in the region of 20 per cent.

There is a model however, that helps children and families to survive and thrive.

Hope through non-violent resistance

Developed in 2004, the Non-Violent Resistance model proposed by Haim Omer is renowned globally and has been researched and tested in hundreds of scenarios. It is one of the most effective frameworks to help us to help families when a child is violently out of control. His latest book *Revolution in Parent Violence* launched this year, gives us a new opportunity to look at areas where professionals have had meaningful outcomes from using the model across a wide range of situations.

The first step of the NVR model is to place emphasis on parents and their own personal development. This means encouraging determination and patience to insist that they will not engage with escalating violence but instead, face the natural fear that this creates.

This is where carers and parents are presented with the idea that they must and are able to manage all the reactions that are inevitable in the face of aggression such as avoidance, compliance or a corresponding fight that matches that of the child. At the heart of NVR is the key principle that we can control our *own* behaviour but the hope that we can control others is simply an illusion.

NVR's core pillars

The core pillars of the Non-Violent Resistance model include regaining adult authority, not engaging with or accelerating or mirroring the violence, eliciting community support and increasing parental presence. A major outcome when violence from the child takes over in the home is that parental authority and presence are erased. Parents and carers often shrink from asking for support from friends and relatives or school because they are ashamed of the dilemma in which they find themselves. Violence thrives on isolation and not only do parents feel isolated but so does the child. In my view, children who already feel insecure and are trying to make themselves feel safe through coercive control, feel *more* alone and *less* safe during violent episodes. It does not work for anyone.

The NVR model seeks to increase awareness for parents that being hooked into violence either by avoidance or their own aggressive response is simply not going to work. Parents and carers are then invited to collectively make the announcement to the young person that violence is no longer accepted in their home and that they will create a plan together to change this.

The young person is invited through a carefully planned 'sit in' or time together to share their own ideas about how aggression can be reduced. Connection, although withdrawn from violence, is then increased through small, relational events that are planned on a regular basis – these may be positive texts, going out for coffee and walks or gaming together. Even knocking on the child's door to say 'hello, are you OK?' counts.

It's important to stress that parental presence is not dependent on goods or costly items. The model is a reintroduction of the caring connection that gets erased when violence takes over and care becomes blocked. Equally, however, parents can reset their boundaries by refusing to engage with orders and taboos that have been set up by the child to which they have formerly conformed.

This does not mean a reduction in duty of care, but it does mean a refusal to engage with orders from the child for goods and services. Phones for example, aren't automatically expected to be paid for, but they may be agreed upon as part of a pattern of new behaviour. Equally important, is creating a pattern of connection in the home and reinforcing the message that talking and understanding takes priority and aggression is not accepted. Haim Omer refers to parents setting the loving limit and becoming an anchor for their child. This supports families to settle and interact with each other effectively. Love for the child is made explicit alongside the refusal to accept violence in the home.

A need for compassion

Looked After Children in the UK need extra sensitivity when creating loving boundaries. As many professionals are aware, there is potential for lethal consequences when a duty of care is eroded. Often a child is so reactive to attachment that they find violent control to be the best way to keep themselves safe. They need a compassionate response to this instinct. There

are many children in care in the UK who struggle with Reactive Attachment Disorder and have experienced disorganised and threatening primary care in infancy from adults who struggle to care for themselves and their children. These children can feel deeply misunderstood and isolated and of course have experienced trauma.

Their attempts to engage the interest of adults are often based on their fear and the effects of early trauma. It is almost as if normal parental love has become a lethal weapon. Many of these children have underlying conditions such as Learning Difficulties or Foetal Alcohol Syndrome which makes self-regulation a challenge for the rest of their lives. They need the care and attention of particularly dedicated adults, and they need to feel that adults can anchor them in a safe and regulated life. This is where the use of NVR has been key in helping such troubled children experience loving care and good boundaries from adults who are not afraid of their desperate and violent communications.

Small steps forward

As for Franko, Social Workers referred the parents for NVR training after the police were called. Franko needed to have a felt sense that his parents knew better and would show *him* how to do better. The family made small steps forward and the parents noted it was especially helpful that they broke the taboo of speaking to anyone else about their concerns. Franko's Head of Year had frequent conversations with his pupil about violence not being an option. This loosened his control over his parents. Franko's adopted Mum was able to refuse his nightly orders for specific foods for him to eat in his room and announced that she was no longer a takeout service and wished them to eat together with a meal that they all enjoyed. This was a strong but meaningful attempt at connection.

She invited Franko to shop with her at the supermarket rather than engage in the ritual he had dictated, which was sending her off with a list for luxury ultra processed foods. Instead, shopping turned into a jointly shared task and afterwards they were able to go for coffee together. Franko's Dad spoke with him about his phone, rewording the implied contract that it was Franko's property. His Dad pointed out that it was a privilege and a gift from him and that the phone would be topped up each week when he demonstrated that he at least tried not to engage in shouting and swearing at them. They were advised to keep the goals very small at first so as not to overwhelm Franko.

All of this took place over the course of many months, and Franko often had to be reminded of the new rules. They had to find ways to assert their authority and make a loving connection with him, but they began to believe that they were able to do this and felt confident and empowered rather than afraid. There were further outbursts, but they learned not to engage with these and to step back and remind their son that they could not engage with violence, but they were willing to speak about his frustrations when he was ready to sit with them.

They continued to be supported by Franko's school and his grandparents who were helped not to get cross with him but to support him to make a change. In short, they could re-set the loving limit for their son, and they could also connect with him again.

Passive and indulgent parenting often happens with the mistaken belief that it makes children happy. In fact, reasonable expectations and an experience of the loving limit helps children feel secure and happy and gives them the opportunity to discover their *own* version of self-control in our information-loaded, often chaotic society.

NVR is a clear anchor for us all as we navigate the storm of self-regulation and learning to say 'stop' to what is not right. As psychologists in the endeavour of helping our fellow human beings to reflect and problem solve and live together more effectively, NVR is a crucial part of the scaffolding to assist people in changing this problem. Giving parents the permission to say 'No' to violence and imagine a life without tolerating this is a vital first step.

- See also our '[Parenting](#)' collection.

Related articles



From mythical idealisation to political and personal reality

05 October 2017

Dr Joanna North, winner of the Society's Award for Distinguished Contributions to Professional Psychology; what lessons can be drawn from 10 years of running an Ofsted-registered adoption support agency?

Children, young people and families

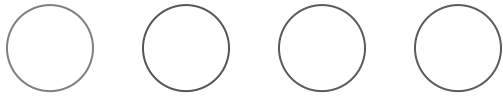


Adoption and trauma

10 September 2020

Dominic McSherry on a debate and a journal special issue.

**Children, young people and families,
Violence and trauma**



Legal

[Accessibility](#)

[Cookie information](#)

[Modern Slavery Act Statement](#)

[Privacy policy](#)

[Terms of use](#)

About us

[About the BPS](#)

[Become a member](#)

[Member benefits](#)

[My BPS](#)

Help and support

[Get on a directory](#)

[Join a network](#)

[FAQs](#)

[Diversity and inclusion](#)

The British Psychological Society is a charity registered in England and Wales, Registration Number : 229642 and a charity registered in Scotland, Registration Number : SC039452 - VAT Registration Number : 283 2609 94

© Copyright 2000-2025 The British Psychological Society