

CoramBAAF Conversations | Child to parent violence and aggression

00:00:01 Jo Francis

Hello to everyone listening. I'm Jo Francis, Korean buffs publishing manager, and today I'm talking to Hetty Verhagen, about her new guide on child to parent violence and aggression. This is a new book in corinthe popular Parenting Matters series, which looks at a range of conditions and experiences that may affect looked after.

00:00:20 Jo Francis

Children Hetty is a lecturer at Leeds University and is in practice as a therapeutic social worker. She's also a former CoramBAAF employee.

00:00:31 Jo Francis

Yeah. So, Hetty, hello.

00:00:33 Hetty Verhagen

Hello there.

00:00:35 Jo Francis

Your new book is on. As we've said, child to parent violence and aggression. Now, not everyone will have come across this. What does it mean?

00:00:45

So what we mean with transparent finance and aggression is.

00:00:51

A child or young person who expresses.

00:00:54 Hetty Verhagen

Their distress through ways that the adults that their parents, that their carers.

00:01:02 Hetty Verhagen

Experience as violent or aggressive, so it could be actually like hiking, hiking, spitting. Yeah, but it could also be verbal aggression. It could also be kind of bullying behaviours and controlling behaviours.

00:01:12

Right.

00:01:19 Jo Francis

OK, I see. So it's it's quite a range, it's more than just what we might think of as violence, OK.

00:01:25 Hetty Verhagen

Yeah. Yeah. People often like so many people of the US have said to me, oh, my child's not, you know, my child is isn't.

00:01:34 Hetty Verhagen

Doesn't express themselves like this because I've never been hit. Plus I feel like I have to walk on egg shells around them to make sure that like incidents don't explode so that we would see that as CPV a.

00:01:45

Right.

00:01:50 Hetty Verhagen

So if when.

00:01:50

Such a.

00:01:51 Hetty Verhagen

You have to reuse the parental carer, feel that you have to adapt your behaviour around the child to avoid violence and aggression.

00:01:59 Jo Francis

And what's your professional experience in this area, you say in the book that you've come across this in your social work practise?

00:02:06 Hetty Verhagen

Yeah, I tell the story in the book of my very first independent social work visit was actually CVA.

00:02:18 Hetty Verhagen

So that that was a situation where a young person had become really dysregulated, had kind of destroyed things in the house, been very formally agree.

00:02:30 Hetty Verhagen

Threatened parents and the police have become involved and I just graduated, just landed in adoption of special guardianship support team. I volunteered to go out on this kind of crisis visit and as I was driving up, I was thinking.

00:02:34 Jo Francis

Right.

00:02:46 Hetty Verhagen

I haven't got.

00:02:46 Hetty Verhagen

Anything you know, I've I've not learned anything about this at university.

00:02:52 Hetty Verhagen

Hasn't prepared me for this and then I kind of kept coming across it and and.

00:02:59

Right.

00:02:59 Hetty Verhagen

Kept that feeling of.

00:03:01 Hetty Verhagen

You know what? What do I do? I remember a parent in those early years saying, oh, what do I do when my child comes up?

00:03:07 Hetty Verhagen

Me with a.

00:03:07 Hetty Verhagen

Chair. I remember just sitting there on, like, on their couch in the living room, thinking I don't like seeing now, what do you do?

00:03:13 Hetty Verhagen

When you was.

00:03:14 Hetty Verhagen

A chair.

00:03:15 Hetty Verhagen

So just as it's become something that I've I've been really interested in and over the years.

00:03:21 Hetty Verhagen

As my experience and my therapeutic side.

00:03:24 Hetty Verhagen

Of the work.

00:03:24 Hetty Verhagen

Develops. That's kind of where my most of my practise is, so I now tend to work a lot with families who are experiencing.

00:03:35 Jo Francis

Right. I see. And so how I mean, it sounds like obviously you you've had quite a lot of experience of this, but how common is this type of violence and aggression? I've generally but more specifically in fostered and adopted children as this is the group you focus.

00:03:48 Jo Francis

On in your book.

00:03:50 Hetty Verhagen

Yeah. So the research about kind of general population suggests it affects about two 2 to 5% of.

00:03:59 Hetty Verhagen

But in children.

00:04:02 Hetty Verhagen

Who are looked after previously looked after, and understanding that those percentages are.

00:04:07 Hetty Verhagen

A lot higher.

00:04:09 Hetty Verhagen

So for example, if we look at the cell win study into adoption disruptions, what we learned from that is that.

00:04:18 Hetty Verhagen

You know, really relatively few adoptions disrupt, but what they did find is that in that that group of people in about 1/3 of people who say, you know, we are really struggling.

00:04:30 Hetty Verhagen

You know a lot.

00:04:30 Hetty Verhagen

Of time. We're really struggling and and.

00:04:34 Hetty Verhagen

Violence and aggression was a really prominent feature in that group of people, so we we know that this is more prevalent for children who are looked after previously looked after.

00:04:39 Jo Francis

Right, right.

00:04:46 Jo Francis

Right. I see. And and you say in the book also that this childhood aggression towards parents, it's a bit of a taboo subject. So it's a sort of thing maybe we don't know how much there is because it doesn't get

talked about a lot parents and carers, they don't, they don't say anything or perhaps not until the home situation starts to get a bit difficult. Why is it such a taboo?

00:05:09 Hetty Verhagen

I think there's different reasons for that. I think. I think as a society we really struggle to think about children, as you know, being capable of this kind of behaviour. But I think people feel that others might look at them like, what are you talking about? You're scared of your five year old.

00:05:29 Jo Francis

Yes, I'm. I'm laughing but of.

00:05:30 Jo Francis

Course it's not funny.

00:05:32 Hetty Verhagen

Yeah, yeah. And and I think that's just what?

00:05:34 Hetty Verhagen

Lots of people worry about or.

00:05:37 Hetty Verhagen

I think there's also the fear that if your child behaves in these ways that maybe it reflects badly. When you as a parent.

00:05:44 Hetty Verhagen

Like you know well.

00:05:45 Hetty Verhagen

Maybe. Maybe you've been aggressive or maybe you've just not been a very good parent or maybe too permissive and you know, if you were a better parent, they wouldn't, they wouldn't behave like this. I think that is part.

00:05:56 Hetty Verhagen

Of the stigma.

00:05:57 Hetty Verhagen

And you're gonna hear a lot at all from the families that I work with. Is that people just want to protect their child's reputation. People understand, you know, doctors, foster carers, kinship care.

00:06:11 Hetty Verhagen

That it comes from the child's early experiences.

00:06:16 Hetty Verhagen

And they're just, you know, they're they're aware of everything that the child has been through, and they don't want.

00:06:20 Hetty Verhagen

Other people to.

00:06:22 Hetty Verhagen

To think badly of them. So you know the term child to parent violence and aggression could also parents. Obviously it kind of suggests that this behaviour very much happens at home.

00:06:36 Hetty Verhagen

So school might not know about it. Family and friends might never see this behaviour, you know, so I suppose.

00:06:46 Hetty Verhagen

Yeah, people might think well.

00:06:48 Hetty Verhagen

At least if.

00:06:48 Hetty Verhagen

Grandparents don't know about it. At least they won't. Don't won't blame the child or woman.

00:06:53 Jo Francis

Yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely. I I can see. I mean, it's a very difficult thing to to let this out, to start telling people about this for all sorts of reasons. But of course, this doesn't mean that people, often parents and carers, they they may not talk about this until things have got quite difficult in the in the home situation.

00:07:13 Jo Francis

Why is it so important to discuss this behaviour at an early stage?

00:07:19 Hetty Verhagen

I think like everything really, it's it's much easier.

00:07:24 Hetty Verhagen

And to think about how you can help your child with this, when when things are not at a crisis stage because then it is really hard for everybody to be everybody involved to think about, you know, what might we be?

00:07:40 Hetty Verhagen

Able to do.

00:07:42 Hetty Verhagen

You know some some families that I work with, who, you know where it is at that kind of crisis.

00:07:47 Hetty Verhagen

State they're so exhausted.

00:07:50 Hetty Verhagen

They're so they're so stressed that it's, you know, if you want to talk to people about, you know, let me tell you.

00:07:58 Hetty Verhagen

Why this is happening?

00:07:59 Hetty Verhagen

And people, because just haven't got the capacity to think about that.

00:08:02 Hetty Verhagen

I just need you to make it stop.

00:08:05 Hetty Verhagen

And also with children, if they start to see themselves as bad. Because I do this, you know that so many to all over the years have said.

00:08:14 Jo Francis

Yes. Yeah.

00:08:17 Hetty Verhagen

That to me like I'm.

00:08:19 Hetty Verhagen

A really bad person because I hurt my mum. All because you know this thing that I said to my.

00:08:24 Hetty Verhagen

Foster, carer and.

00:08:26 Hetty Verhagen

And mainly children afterwards feel really guilty and ashamed of of what they've done and what they've said and.

00:08:34 Hetty Verhagen

The consequences of everything. So if you can start talking about it and.

00:08:39 Hetty Verhagen

Thinking about you.

00:08:40 Hetty Verhagen

Can might help it out earlier on just makes.

00:08:43 Hetty Verhagen

Things a bit easier.

00:08:44 Jo Francis

Yeah, I can see it's it's sort of, it's difficult to talk about, but it's really better to get in sooner rather than later. As you say before, things become an emergency.

00:08:53 Hetty Verhagen

Yeah. And I've I've said quite a lot over the years that I wish we could just think of this as another.

00:09:00 Hetty Verhagen

Kind of parenting caring for children. Challenge like.

00:09:06 Jo Francis

Yeah. So I imagine that as you, his child parent violence, it can have a variety of causes behind it. What have you found to be some of the contributing factors in looked after children or those who've got this in their past?

00:09:20 Hetty Verhagen

That's a massive question, Joe, but.

00:09:24 Jo Francis

A few of the.

00:09:25 Jo Francis

Just a few of the contributing.

00:09:26 Hetty Verhagen

Yeah, I was going to say written a whole book about that.

00:09:29 Jo Francis

Absolutely, absolutely. Our listeners will have to buy the book to find out in, in full.

00:09:36 Hetty Verhagen

Basically, the way the the approach of this book is that it's a very child centred view of child violence and aggression, and so there's there's no blaming, there's no.

00:09:50 Hetty Verhagen

Suggesting that this is something about.

00:09:53 Hetty Verhagen

About the child's personality, we.

00:09:56 Hetty Verhagen

Really look at CPV A as an impact of traumatic experiences of earlier experiences. And what we often see with children. We've had kind of the chaos and uncertainty and.

00:10:12 Hetty Verhagen

You know the.

00:10:13 Hetty Verhagen

The trauma that looks after children often experience and even just moving from one home to the other can be such a huge traumatic experience for a child.

00:10:26 Hetty Verhagen

What we see is that lots of children have a really strong need to control their environment, so that can be a contributing factor.

00:10:31 Jo Francis

Right, yes.

00:10:35 Hetty Verhagen

Emotional immaturity can be a contributing factor, so children, who because of their their experiences and their moves, have not been able.

00:10:46 Hetty Verhagen

To kind of develop emotionally in the way that the child, who who does have that stability.

00:10:53 Hetty Verhagen

Would have been able.

00:10:53 Hetty Verhagen

To do there may be a lot younger and most than their actual chronological age, so we we might think it's quite acceptable if a toddler can hits out in frustration.

00:10:59 Jo Francis

Yes. Yeah.

00:11:05 Jo Francis

Yes, that sort of toddler tantrum thing.

00:11:07 Hetty Verhagen

Yeah, but if 10 year old does it, which 12 year old does it then? We probably judge it differently, but it might actually be that that's where they're at emotionally. Shame. Lots of children have experienced early trauma.

00:11:21

I haven't really.

00:11:22 Hetty Verhagen

The really heightened sense of shame and talk in the book about how CVA can be kind of a defence mechanism against having that really awful feeling of shame. He also thought little bit about since we issues how sensory processing issues can contribute.

00:11:26 Jo Francis

OK.

00:11:36 Jo Francis

Yes. Yeah.

00:11:43 Jo Francis

Right.

00:11:44 Hetty Verhagen

So it's really complex.

00:11:47 Jo Francis

No, absolutely. Yeah. I I can see this is there's a lot for people to consider here. Social workers, parents, carers as you.

00:11:54 Jo Francis

Way you've mentioned control issues. I can imagine this can be key for fostered and adopted children who may have had a a traumatic, chaotic early life where they very much haven't been in control. Can you talk a little bit?

00:12:08 Jo Francis

More about that.

00:12:09 Hetty Verhagen

Yeah. So I I look at CVA a.

00:12:14 Hetty Verhagen

That's often a a survival response, and for children who've who've experienced what can happen when you're not in control of your environment.

00:12:24 Hetty Verhagen

You know you you can.

00:12:25 Hetty Verhagen

Be scared you can be.

00:12:26 Hetty Verhagen

That horrible things can happen to you and to other people. Also just being moved from one place to the other. That's the that's one of the biggest ways that you can you can not be in control, isn't it? That can be really traumatic for for children so.

00:12:41 Jo Francis

Yeah, of course.

00:12:46 Hetty Verhagen

When they then go on and and then hopefully in in a much more stable, safer environment to be in control, being controlled by a parent or care.

00:12:56 Hetty Verhagen

That can feel really threatening that feeling of I'm not in control of what's happening, can feel like this is a threat. Anything might happen now. So sometimes that that kind of violent and aggressive response is like a survival response to that, that feeling of threat when you're controlled.

00:13:16 Hetty Verhagen

There's also the other side of the going with control so that it can be a.

00:13:19 Hetty Verhagen

Response to you.

00:13:20 Hetty Verhagen

Know it feels really.

00:13:21 Hetty Verhagen

Uneasy when it feels like you're you're in control of me. It can also be.

00:13:27 Hetty Verhagen

In order to feel safe, I need to feel in.

00:13:30 Hetty Verhagen

Control so the.

00:13:31 Hetty Verhagen

Children might have, really.

00:13:33 Hetty Verhagen

Like a really strict picture in the head of this is what this situation should look like, because if it looks like this, like what it's like in my hair, then it's safe. But then it's really different then something feels like why anything can happen now, but children might get quite angry and and might express that.

00:13:53 Hetty Verhagen

And given that that fear.

00:13:55 Hetty Verhagen

Through violence and aggression, when somebody's not doing what they thought should happen just because it feels really, really scaring when that happens.

00:14:05 Jo Francis

Yeah, yeah. And so different for what they may have become used to in their early years, I can see. Well, I'm sure many parents and carers will want to know what to do about CVA. And again, I'm, you know, obviously a great deal I'm sure could be said about this. Your book sets out a wide range of parenting strategies. Can you tell us a bit more?

00:14:26 Jo Francis

Well, perhaps just a few of those.

00:14:29 Hetty Verhagen

Yeah. So like I said before, it's a very child centred approach. I'm I'm not denying the impact that it has on parents, but in in this book, I've tried to really think about what can parents and carers and and also professionals who are working with.

00:14:49 Hetty Verhagen

Who express themselves through CPA? Yeah. What can they? How can they support a child? And? And there was the first stages, I think is to help a child develop an awareness of.

00:15:06 Hetty Verhagen

Of their anger, all their responses, and I sometimes call that getting to know your anger. When I work with with younger children, it's really the idea of of destigmatizing anger and aggression and violence to to kind of cut through that shame. And so children, you know, I talk in the book about.

00:15:13 Jo Francis

Right, yeah.

00:15:26 Hetty Verhagen

How can you help them to to realise actually anger itself isn't a?

00:15:29 Hetty Verhagen

Problem it's, you know.

00:15:31 Hetty Verhagen

We all get angry, so the Commission and then once they have that awareness, you know, what does it feel like when they get angry? You can start to think about. So what other ways can you express?

00:15:42 Hetty Verhagen

Stuff. We talk about sensory sensory interventions as well. So it's it's it's like a developing approach really. It's not when they do a you do B, it's more the approach it's much more.

00:16:02 Hetty Verhagen

That helping the child to understand why it's happening and what they can do differently.

00:16:08 Jo Francis

Yeah, I see.

00:16:10 Jo Francis

Outside the family group are there any sort of certain kinds of therapies or that sort of professional help that parents, carers and social workers could be thinking about? I mean, over and above the strategies that you set out?

00:16:24 Hetty Verhagen

Yeah. I think sometimes all the strategies that we talked about just now are kind of written like this is what you can do as a parent to.

00:16:34 Hetty Verhagen

A career with a child.

00:16:35 Jo Francis

Yeah, yeah.

00:16:36 Hetty Verhagen

But sometimes it.

00:16:37 Hetty Verhagen

Be really helpful actually, if somebody outside of the family, if a professional.

00:16:41 Hetty Verhagen

Can do some of that work with the child, because sometimes you've been in that kind of parenting caring relationship itself can be really triggering for a child, so sometimes you need a professional to do that, that that kind of thing. What I hear from people.

00:16:44

Right, yes.

00:17:02 Hetty Verhagen

Is that people really appreciate MVR training to talk about how to pay and finance aggression in kind of groups at.

00:17:10 Hetty Verhagen

Settings because it.

00:17:11 Jo Francis

What's a NVR? Nonviolent resistance?

00:17:15 Hetty Verhagen

Yes, no, absolutely non violent resistance. Yeah. So that's that's often delivered in a in a group setting. And people tend to find it really helpful, but also other kind of groups for parents and carers where people can talk, like, learn a bit about, you know, where does it come from?

00:17:23 Jo Francis

Right. OK.

00:17:34 Hetty Verhagen

Let let me do in this book and the people to share their experiences, because that helps destigmatize it. And then once you.

00:17:42 Hetty Verhagen

You, you know, once people feel less ashamed. It's so much easier to to start thinking about what what can do differently and the things that we often use in in adoption for shrinking should support like dyadic developmental psychotherapy, you know, DP.

00:17:50 Jo Francis

Yeah, yeah.

00:18:01 Jo Francis

Right.

00:18:03 Jo Francis

Yes, yes.

00:18:03 Hetty Verhagen

I think that can be really helpful. Also, sensory support. I write a little bit about that in the book about how if the finance aggression comes from a sensory need, we need to address that first before we start looking at.

00:18:24 Hetty Verhagen

Kind of looking at other strategies because if a child kind of crashes into people because they need that sensory input and then there's.

00:18:33 Hetty Verhagen

No kind of.

00:18:34 Hetty Verhagen

Awareness raising that's gonna change that. You know, we need to meet that sensory need first. So there's there's there's a whole.

00:18:40 Jo Francis

Yeah, but it, yeah.

00:18:42 Hetty Verhagen

Change and the final.

00:18:46 Hetty Verhagen

Chapter of of my bit of the book, because there's they also had a really great case studies written by by parents, but the final bit of my book I I kind of go through a case study and you know what might be helpful and you know we end up with this whole array of of of potentially.

00:18:53 Jo Francis

Yes, yes.

00:19:05 Hetty Verhagen

Helpful therapy strategies and support.

00:19:10 Jo Francis

It's it's about addressing it from a range of different angles. I can see in the book, and yeah, it's it's certainly it made me think about the different levels, the different ways that you can approach something from.

00:19:23 Jo Francis

Trying to cover all of the different angles basically.

00:19:26 Hetty Verhagen

Because this is something that affects a family, it's not. It's not like you've got a child with CPA, no, as a family you experience CPA.

00:19:39 Jo Francis

Yeah, yeah.

00:19:39 Hetty Verhagen

So all members of the family might need might need support.

00:19:45 Jo Francis

Finally, and perhaps following on from that, do you have any last message for parents, carers and social workers when it comes to this subject? What's the sort of thing you'd like to say to people who are in this situation?

00:19:59 Hetty Verhagen

Yes, it's it's really, really hard to find yourself in that situation. So I guess my message would be that so many families I've worked with over the years feel that they're the only ones experiencing this, and I'd like people to know that they absolutely are not. I'd also like people to know that.

00:20:20 Hetty Verhagen

This this is a developmental issue, something it's not going to stay the same. We can never predict how it's going to develop, but we know that what you've got now is not what you're going to have in five years or 10 years time.

00:20:33 Hetty Verhagen

Sometimes people look at a 7 year old and they say, Oh my gosh, how we're gonna cope if we we've got this behaviour when they're 15 or 16 and they always say well, this is developmental issues, even though we don't know what it's gonna be like when a 15 or.

00:20:42 Jo Francis

Yes. Yeah.

00:20:47 Hetty Verhagen

16 it's nothing like this.

00:20:50 Hetty Verhagen

And I have seen children, you know, move, move through CPA and.

00:20:56 Hetty Verhagen

You know, once they reach a different stage of development, they find other ways of of expressing themselves, you know, especially if if people can use some of those strategies that that we discuss.

00:21:08 Hetty Verhagen

And I think 1 message that I feel really passionate about for people to understand is that a child who expresses themselves, who expresses their distress through CVA, means the same child as the child who expresses their distress through crying, being shy.

00:21:28 Hetty Verhagen

Hiding under the table, the root cause is the same since it looks so different.

00:21:35 Hetty Verhagen

And as adults, we find it really easy to go towards that child who's hiding under the table and crying. And they're frightening. We just have this really empathetic response, like, oh, come on and let me help you and be very gentle with with, you know, we really want to help those children.

00:21:48 Jo Francis

Yeah, yeah.

00:21:55 Hetty Verhagen

The child who expresses those exact same feelings or hitting our or formal aggression or, you know, spitting at you just because of our own survival response, we're much less likely to want to go towards that child. But I think if people understand that the cause of it is exactly the same.

00:22:14 Hetty Verhagen

I think it would be much easier for people to feel their empathy, and while this is a really upset child, it's not an angry child. It's a really frightened upset, ashamed.

00:22:26 Jo Francis

Yeah. Yeah. And as a child. Who's?

00:22:27

Thank you.

00:22:29 Jo Francis

Trying to communicate with you.

00:22:30 Hetty Verhagen

Yes, the child having a really big emotion and at the moment this is the only way that they can express that emotion.

00:22:37 Jo Francis

Yeah. Ohh, that's a. That's fascinating. And thank you so much for talking to us about this subject. The, the book. I learned a great deal from working on this book. I'm sure parents, carers and social workers will also learn the same. And it's good to know that for people out there who are going through this situation that there's.

00:22:57 Jo Francis

There is hope that you can work together with the child to make progress on this. Thank you very much, Jessie.

00:23:04 Hetty Verhagen

Oh, it's been a pleasure, Joe. Thank you.