

Long-Term Effects of the Step-Up Program on Parent Participants

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Abstract

Long-Term Effects of the Step-Up Program on Parent Participants

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Background: Child-to-parent abuse (CPA) is a unique form of family violence defined as a pattern of behavior by a child or adolescent that uses verbal, financial, physical, or emotional means to practice power and exert control over a parent. Compared to other types of family abuse, relatively few resources are available to assist families experiencing CPA, though some CPA-specific intervention programs have been developed. Step-Up is a family-level group format CPA intervention program administered by the juvenile justice system in King County, Washington. Step-Up is designed to facilitate healthy parent-child relationships and stop adolescents' violent behavior. In general, qualitative and long-term research is lacking on CPA intervention programs, and it is unknown how parents perceive the effects of Step-Up after program completion.

Methods: Fifteen parents who completed Step-Up with their adolescent child between one and eight years ago participated in semi-structured telephone or in-person interviews. Study participants were asked about their perceptions of the effects of Step-Up participation, how they and their child have used skills taught in the program, which program components or features were most and least helpful, and their perceptions of their child's involvement in the juvenile justice system related to domestic violence.

Results: Parents expressed largely positive effects of participating in Step-Up, including decreased violent behavior by their adolescents and improved parent-child relationships. Participants described how specific program components, dynamics related to program format, and dynamics specific to the group setting impacted behavior change in their adolescent.

Conclusions: In order to benefit program participants in the future, Step-Up program staff should pay increased attention to group dynamics and how they affect each specific family, as well as offer some follow-up to program participation to help adolescents sustain positive behavior change.

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INTRODUCTION

Abuse and violence within families are complex phenomena that take many forms including child abuse, intimate partner abuse, elder abuse, and sibling abuse. Child-to-parent abuse is the type of family violence most recently identified as a social problem requiring attention (Holt, 2013). Child-to-parent abuse (CPA) is defined as a pattern of behavior by a child or adolescent that uses verbal, financial, physical, or emotional means to practice power and exert control over a parent (Cottrell, 2001). CPA is inherently different from other types of family violence and abuse because of the unique power dynamics at play; the parent as victim and child as perpetrator shatters the typical victim/perpetrator mold and presents legal issues that are not as salient in other family violence situations. Though family violence remains a taboo topic and victims continue to experience stigma, parents who experience CPA are at an even greater disadvantage because of these unique factors.

Literature Overview

Compared to other types of family violence, research on CPA is limited. The CPA research literature is primarily made up of community-based surveys, criminal justice samples, clinical samples, and program evaluations (Holt, 2013). Community-based surveys are the ideal method for establishing prevalence rates of CPA, though most research of this type is based on outdated data and definitions of CPA differ between studies. Most research on CPA prevalence focuses on physical violence, likely because it is the most obvious form of abuse and often develops in succession after verbal/emotional abuse (Holt, 2013).

In prevalence studies CPA is most commonly operationalized as a binary measure of physical violence in the last twelve months, and prevalence rates from large-scale community-based surveys are generally in the range of 5% to 10% (Peek, Fischer, & Kidwell, 1985; Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Paulson, Coombs, & Landsverk, 1990; Browne & Hamilton, 1998; Ulman & Straus, 2003; Pagani et al., 2004; Pagani et al., 2009; Elliot, Cunningham, Colangelo, Gelles, 2011; Calvete, Orue, & Gamez-Guadiz, 2012; Jaureguizar, Ibabe, & Straus, 2013). Because many parents may be unwilling to admit they have

experienced CPA, it is likely that true prevalence rates are higher than those reported. Unfortunately, surveys with the largest sample sizes in the United States are from the 1970s, and so accurate current prevalence rates are unknown.

Risk Factors for CPA

Most CPA research has been focused on identifying risk and protective factors for CPA within a family. Many of these studies focus on sociodemographic characteristics of perpetrators and victims, though some research has been done on higher-level factors, including family dynamics, peer influence, structural factors, and societal messages and gender roles, (Hong, Kral, Espelage, & Allen-Meares, 2012; Holt, 2013). In terms of gender, CPA perpetrators within the juvenile justice system or receiving psychiatric care are most likely to be male (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Laurent & Derry, 1999; Kethineni, 2004; Walsh & Kreinert, 2007; Snyder & McCurley, 2008; Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2010; Routt & Anderson, 2011), though studies conducted in the general population often find no differences in prevalence by perpetrator gender (Agnew & Huguley, 1985; Paulson et al., 1990; Pagani et al., 2004). This discrepancy is likely due to male youth perpetrators using more severe forms of violence or being perceived as more threatening, resulting in increased treatment provider or law enforcement involvement (Brezina, 1999; Holt, 2013). Though males have historically been overrepresented in the juvenile justice system, this gender gap is decreasing due to increasing rates of female-perpetrated simple assaults (Puzzanchera, 2013). With very few exceptions, findings from clinical, criminal justice, and community-based studies consistently show that mothers are more likely to be victims of CPA than fathers (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Paulson, 1990; Kethineni, 2004; Gebo, 2007; Snyder & McCurley, 2008; Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2010; Routt & Anderson, 2011; Hong et al., 2012; Holt, 2013; Fawzi, Fawzi, & Fouad, 2013).

It has consistently been found that the risk of CPA increases as children move into adolescence, but age of peak abuse varies by study type and country, and ranges from 12 to 16 years old (Hong et al., 2012; Holt, 2013). The primary finding regarding perpetrator race/ethnicity is that white youths are at an increased risk of committing CPA when compared to other ethnic groups (Agnew and Huguley, 1985; Snyder & McCurley, 2008; Walsh & Kreinert, 2009; Routt & Anderson, 2011), though some studies have found no difference between ethnic groups (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Paulson et al., 1990). There is also

evidence that perpetrator gender and race interact to affect risk of CPA perpetration; one study found white females were much more likely to perpetrate CPA than black females (Kennedy, Edmonds, Dann, & Burnett, 2010). These findings are complicated by differences in study populations and methodological issues related to race and ethnicity categorization.

There is also mixed evidence related to whether CPA is more prevalent among specific socioeconomic classes, often operationalized as a combination of parent income, education, and occupation. Researchers have most commonly found that there is no significant relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and CPA (Peek et al., 1985; Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Paulson et al., 1990; Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2010), though some studies have found higher rates of CPA in families of higher SES. For example, in a community-based survey, Paulson et al. (1990) found a non-statistically significant trend that families of higher perceived social status were at an increased risk of CPA, while Nock and Kazdin (2002) found a similar relationship in a clinical sample. This is contrary to rates of other types of family violence and youth misbehavior, which tend to increase among people of lower SES; studies that show higher risk of CPA among families of higher socioeconomic class may simply reflect the ability of these families to seek help for CPA (Holt, 2013). In a qualitative study, Cottrell and Monk (2004) identified low SES as a risk factor of CPA among parents in Canada; they found youth of lower SES lacked opportunities available to their peers, which increased stress and consequently risk of CPA. It is possible that families of lower socioeconomic status experience greater stress that puts them at risk for increased family instability and conflict (Hong et al., 2012), yet these factors may affect likelihood of CPA differently because they do not affect the child (uniquely situated as the perpetrator) in the same way they affect the parent (Peek et al., 1985). Regardless of whether or not there is a true relationship between SES and CPA, researchers agree that CPA undoubtedly occurs in families of all SES levels.

Hong et al.'s (2012) application of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to CPA is particularly useful in conceptualizing the range of risk and protective factors. Ecological systems theory differentiates between factors at the micro-level (settings and interactions immediate to youth), meso-level (link between two or more microsystems in which youth is embedded), exo-level (setting and interactions that do not directly affect youth but that influence the microsystem), macro-level (broader society and culture that subsequently impacts immediate systems), and chronosystem-level (consistency

or change in youth and environment over the lifecourse). Holt's (2013) book similarly outlines intrapersonal, interpersonal, intrafamilial, and structural explanations of CPA, based on the identification of numerous risk factors.

Effects of CPA

CPA often results in a wide range of impacts on the parent victim(s) and their relationships outside of the family, other family members, and on the child perpetrator him or herself. Parents are sometimes physically harmed due to CPA, though detrimental emotional impacts are most often parents' primary concern (Holt, 2013). The complex emotional landscape of CPA is characterized by interactions between fear, concern and worry, betrayal, self-blame and shame, denial, loss of trust and resentment, loss and grief, social isolation, and hopelessness and despair (Cottrell, 2001; Holt, 2013). Children who are abusive towards their parent(s) are often also abusive toward sibling(s), and CPA may contribute to conflict between parents, often exacerbating already problematic family interactions (Holt, 2013). Some parents have reported that CPA detrimentally affects their relationships outside of the home and contributes to social isolation (Jackson, 2003; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Holt, 2009). Other negative impacts identified relate to parents' mental health, increased stress at work, and financial costs resulting from CPA (Cottrell, 2001; Paterson, 2002; Howard & Rottem, 2008; Holt, 2009).

CPA Intervention Programs

Compared to other types of family abuse, relatively few resources are available to assist families experiencing CPA (Pagani et al., 2009; Holt, 2013). Families dealing with CPA often utilize services designed generally for violent and aggressive youth, and most CPA intervention programs specifically fall primarily under the purview of juvenile justice and social service systems. Interventionists use a variety of theories to inform the development of CPA programs, including social learning theories, cognitive-behavioral theories, family system theories, stress theories, and communication theories, and some programs utilize a combination of these (Rybski, 1998; Holt, 2013). Holt (2013) asserts that this is especially important since current CPA causal models include a multitude of factors, many of which are not well established with evidence.

Specific programs designed to address CPA include Step-Up (the focus of the current research), Breaking the Cycle, Who's in Charge?, Break4Change, and Stopping Aggression and Antisocial Behavior in Families (Holt, 2013). CPA programs can generally be categorized as family interventions, group interventions (parents only or parents and youth together), or individual interventions, and no research to date has compared the effectiveness of these three types (Holt, 2013). Step-Up was the first program implemented in the United States to deal with CPA (Routt & Anderson, 2011). CPA program evaluation data are limited and marked by methodological deficiencies, including inadequate or absent control groups, lack of long-term follow-up, and small sample sizes. In general, there is a paucity of both long-term and qualitative research on the effects of programs designed to address CPA (Holt, 2013).

There are no documented programs designed to prevent CPA specifically, though families in which abuse is less severe often attend treatment programs in hopes that they can prevent future abuse and subsequent harm. Programs to increase awareness of CPA and change attitudes regarding violence towards women and authority figures in schools and communities may be beneficial in the prevention of CPA, though limited funding often prevents the development and funding of these types of programs (Holt, 2013).

Perceptions of Juvenile Justice System Involvement

Participation in a CPA intervention program is often one of many components of an adolescent's involvement with the juvenile justice system. Research on parent perceptions of their child's juvenile justice system experience specifically related to domestic violence is very limited. Buel (2002) argues that the juvenile justice system is an appropriate provider of CPA treatment programs since juvenile domestic violence is prevalent and juvenile justice system programs can provide an appropriate mix of rehabilitation and punishment.

Bradshaw, Glaser, Calhoun, and Bates (2006) conducted a survey of parents of juvenile offenders in the southeastern United States to examine a range of beliefs and parenting practices, including their perception of the juvenile justice system. All parents reported high levels of perceived support by the system, and higher levels of perceived support were associated with less feelings of

adequacy as a parent, but also less hopelessness. Webster et al.'s (2008) study consisted of interviews with parents of justice-involved youth in California covering their experiences with and perspectives of the system. One major theme that emerged in this study was powerlessness; parents perceived their own powerlessness, the way systems perpetuates their powerlessness, and the ultimate powerlessness of the system and parents to influence change in the child. Holt (2009) conducted qualitative research in the United Kingdom on parents' experiences with the juvenile justice system due to CPA. She discusses the issuance of Parenting Orders to parents who have been abused by their children and argues they are an inappropriate response because they are used to fault the parent and do not help remedy the problematic relationship.

In 2012, Justice for Families and the DataCenter released a report summarizing the views of parents with justice system-involved youth in nine states across the United States. Their research shows that parents often have overwhelmingly negative experiences related to their child's system involvement, influenced primarily by unfair, harsh practices and lack of effective communication. Parents also perceived their youth's juvenile justice system involvement as a direct pathway to adult criminal justice system involvement, instead of a bypass to more supportive services. Parents reported negative mental and emotional impacts, and court-related payments, unpaid time off work, and the cost of phone calls to their child in detention caused economic hardships for families.

Step-Up Program Description

Step-Up is a program in King County, Washington serving families in which a youth has committed acts of domestic violence against a parent. The program aims to facilitate healthy parent-child relationships and decrease the risk of recidivism. Step-Up serves a combination of youth who have been charged with domestic violence and are on probation or diversion and youth who are referred from providers within the community, including mental health providers, youth and family counseling services, domestic violence survivor agencies, and school guidance counselors. Step-Up is designed for adolescents who initiate violent behavior against family members, as opposed to reacting to violence directed at them, and exhibit a pattern of violent behavior (Routt & Anderson, 2011). Step-Up participants

are not necessarily representative of families experiencing CPA in King County, as not all families are eligible, able, and willing to participate.

Step-Up was started in 1997 as part of a plan to address the emerging problem of child-to-parent abuse evident in King County's juvenile justice system (Routt & Anderson, 2011). In 1996, 316 juveniles (63% of all juveniles charged with domestic violence) in King County were charged with domestic violence against a parent (Routt & Anderson, 2011). The program was designed by two social workers within King County's juvenile justice system, Lily Anderson and Greg Routt, who still run the program. Step-Up was pilot tested and has been refined over time to be even more relevant to families experiencing adolescent-to-parent violence (Routt & Anderson, 2011). Anderson and Routt wrote a program curriculum, and the program has been implemented in many other states and countries. It is unknown how many places offer Step-Up, but program developers send out the curriculum to interested jurisdictions multiple times a month. They have conducted trainings and keep in touch with program staff in Lucas County, Ohio, DuPage and Cook Counties, Illinois, and Lowndes County, Georgia. It is also offered throughout the United Kingdom and in Adelaide and Perth, Australia. In King County, Step-Up has been affected by numerous budget shortfalls since its inception but is currently funded by King County's Mental Illness and Drug Dependency (MIDD) Action Plan.

The primary goal of Step-Up is to stop the cycle of family violence by establishing safety, trust, and respect in the family (King County Step-Up Program, 2014). According to the program website, "parents learn how to keep family members safe, how to effectively respond when their teen is violent or abusive, along with skills to support their youth in using respectful behaviors. Parents gain skills that help them reestablish authority with their teen and promote mutual respect and problem solving" (King County Step-Up Program, 2014). Step-Up was designed with the understanding of adolescent aggression through the lens of several theoretical constructs including social learning theory, social information processing, and coercive family processes (Bandura, 1973; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Patterson, Dishion, & Bank, 1984). The program uses a cognitive-behavioral, skills-based treatment model approach. Program developers also utilized a restorative justice framework consisting of accountability, empathy, and relationship restoration (Robinson, 2011). Step-Up's design is based partly on the Duluth Model antiviolence approach used for intimate partner violence, with guiding principles of safety for the victim

and accountability for abusive actions (Ptacek, 2010). Research supports the effectiveness of group treatment approaches for aggressive youth (Lochman, Powell, Boxmeyer, Deming, & Young, 2007). Holt (2013) points out the value of theoretical plurality in parent abuse interventions because of the various complexities and wide range of risk and protective factors associated with parent abuse.

In Step-Up, youth perpetrators and their parent(s) attend weekly 90-minute group sessions for 21 weeks. A skills-based curriculum is used to teach youth to replace violent behavior with respectful behavior and help parents to focus on safety planning and the development of parenting skills to support youth behavior change. Two facilitators (who are also the program developers) run each Step-Up session. Parents and teens each receive their own workbook in which all program materials are located. At each session, youth and their parent(s) meet in a large group with other participating families. Every youth sets a weekly behavior goal for themselves and verbally reports on their progress the next week during a process called check-in. Participants use abuse and respect wheels (Figure 1) to label behaviors they used throughout the week, and facilitators and other group participants provide feedback and suggestions for making positive changes. After evaluating their behavior for the previous week, each youth sets a new goal for the upcoming week. Participants learn to use time-outs to remove themselves from intense situations that may otherwise lead to violence, and record their experiences on a time-out log, then talk about it with the group. Participants also engage in group activities and role-playing to practice specific tools and communication techniques. Periodically, facilitators break the group into separate youth and parent groups to focus on different educational topics or teach specific skills. Another component of Step-Up is the development of a safety plan specific to each family.

To formally complete the program, each family must complete at least 21 sessions, and each youth must write a “responsibility letter” and an “empathy letter” and read them aloud to the group during their last session. Youth write their responsibility letters to the person they were violent towards during incident leading to their Step-Up participation. In these letters, youth describe the violent incident and precipitating factors, how they could have handled the situation differently, and how their behavior impacted the other person. The empathy letter is written from the viewpoint of the person they acted violently towards, and in this letter they describe the event and how it impacted them. The responsibility and empathy letters are based on the restorative justice aspect of Step-Up and function as a culmination

of much of what youth learn during their time in the program. The letters incorporate cognitive-behavioral aspects, awareness of feelings, knowledge of respectful communication, and the development of empathy. Step-Up was originally designed to be a closed program, with all participants beginning and ending at the same time, but a rolling admission model is currently used in King County. There are pros and cons to this approach, but rolling admission is employed to decrease wait times and increase program access for adolescents who are court-mandated to attend.

Evaluations of the Step-Up Program

Scarce funding has limited the ability of Step-Up to conduct a large-scale program evaluation with a well-matched control group, but preliminary evaluations and anecdotal evidence provisionally support the effectiveness of Step-Up in reducing violent behavior and improving the quality of parent-child relationships. One evaluation completed by an outside research firm in 2005 found decreased rates of recidivism (felonies and domestic violence offenses) at 12 and 18 months among youth who completed Step-Up and were referred from probation and a comparison group of youth on probation, but not among youth referred from a diversion program (Organization Research Services, 2005). When compared to participants who dropped out after attending at least four program sessions, program completers had lower recidivism rates of both domestic violence and other types of offenses. Evaluators also examined various short-term teen and parent outcomes and found considerable improvements regarding teen perpetration of violent and abusive behavior, use of respectful communication, use of conflict resolution skills, and development of empathy over the course of the program. They also found parents improved their ability to resolve conflicts with their teens, set limits with their teens, consistently apply punishment, and ultimately support their teen's behavior change. In 2013, another evaluation of Step-Up was completed in DuPage County, Illinois. This evaluation also showed reductions in youth problematic behaviors and arrests within six months of program completion (Ryan, Helton, & Chiu, 2013).

Though these evaluations provide some valuable findings regarding the effect of Step-Up on participants, they are both limited by inadequate control groups and lack of long-term follow-up. Little is known about the sustained effects of the program on parent participants, including from a qualitative participant perspective. The current research study aims to fill this gap. Parents are currently not regularly followed up after their participation in Step-Up ends. It is hoped that the results produced by this study will

be helpful to Step-Up program developers for informing program improvements in the future, understanding what is currently working well from parents' perspectives, and supplementing future summative program evaluations. Because Step-Up is primarily a mandated program for youth and their parent(s) through King County's juvenile justice system, Step-Up administrators were also interested in learning how parents view their child's whole experience in the juvenile justice system.

Research Questions

- 1) How do parent participants perceive the effects of Step-Up program participation after program completion?
- 2) How have parents and their children used skills taught in Step-Up since program completion?
- 3) What components or features of Step-Up were most and least helpful for parents and adolescents?
- 4) How do parents perceive their child's involvement in the juvenile justice system related to domestic violence?

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, there were no a priori hypotheses and a grounded theory methodology was used, as described below.

Conceptual Model

The Step-Up conceptual model (Figure 2) was developed based on themes that emerged from study participant interviews and was partly informed by the theory of planned behavior and social cognitive theory; the qualitative data analysis process is described below. From left to right, the model illustrates: 1) factors specific to the adolescent and factors related to the adolescent's family and home environment that are both related to CPA prevalence and affected by the occurrence of CPA; 2) details regarding the problem of CPA within each family; 3) impacts on the family, affected by both CPA and other factors; 4) CPA resulting in Step-Up program participation, defined by specific program components, program dynamics, and group setting dynamics; 5) the parent's role in their child's behavior change and the child's own motivation to change, both independent from and affected by Step-Up participation; 6)

affecting the role of program participation in parent's and child's change in attitudes and knowledge and the learning of new skills, in the context of a supportive social environment created in Step-Up; 7) leading to the adoption of skills; 8) and finally resulting in Step-Up's listed ultimate outcomes. The Step-Up conceptual model and supporting theory is based on parents' reported experiences in the program and how participating in Step-Up ultimately affected their relationship with their adolescent, years after program completion.

METHODS

Participant Selection

The target population for this study was parent participants who completed the Step-Up program with a child at any time in the past. Step-Up personnel contacted all eligible participants (described below) by phone or email to ask their consent for the principal investigator (PI) to contact them, give them detailed information about the study, and invite them to participate. Program staff gave the PI contact information for all potential participants who were willing to be contacted. The PI then contacted each potential participant by telephone to explain the study purpose, procedures, and all required consent elements. The PI obtained verbal informed consent over the telephone to conduct an audio-recorded one in-person or telephone interview. Interviews were then scheduled at a mutually agreed upon time and place.

The primary inclusion criterion was that the parent and their child completed the Step-Up program in King County. It was imperative that participants had completed the entire Step-Up program so the researcher could be sure participants in the current study were fully exposed to all program sessions and materials. It was not required that parents had attended every session with their child, but the parent did have to be listed as a contact in the child's program record and heavily involved with the child's participation in Step-Up; this was decided at the discretion of program staff who initially contacted potential participants. Besides the above criteria, participants had to be willing and able to participate in one interview in English. There were no other inclusion or exclusion criteria.

It was originally intended that the study sample include only parent participants who completed the program between one and four years ago, so parents would have had time to see effects of the program but also have clear memories of their time in Step-Up. The inclusion criteria were expanded because of high numbers of past participants who were unreachable by email or phone. Step-Up does not purposely keep up-to-date contact information of past program participants, so parents who did not maintain contact with program staff and those who changed phone numbers and email addresses often were less likely to be successfully contacted by program staff.

Step-Up program staff attempted to contact a total of 80 past parent participants who completed Step-Up between 2010 and 2013, 13 of which they were able to reach (16%). Step-Up staff also contacted an unknown number of participants from 2006 to 2009; four parents from this group were reachable. This was done in the interest of increasing sample size. Out of all parents who were reachable, everyone agreed to be contacted by the PI. Step-Up staff gave the PI contact information for 17 potential participants, 13 from 2010 to 2013 and four from 2006 to 2009. One potential participant who finished Step-Up in 2011 did not respond to the PI's phone calls and emails, and one who completed in 2008 did not participate because the quota of 15 participants had already been reached.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of one semi-structured interview with each study participant conducted by the PI. Participants self-reported all information, and the PI did not access Step-Up program records. The creation of the interview guide was a collaborative process with Step-Up program staff and thesis committee members. After reviewing the literature and talking to program staff about their ideas for the study, the PI drafted an initial interview guide and elicited feedback from program staff and thesis committee members. Suggested questions were added and existing questions were refined. Program staff and all committee members approved the final interview guide. This process helped to ensure the interviews would provide information relevant to program staff and other professionals in the field.

The interview guide was designed to be semi-structured so participants could expand on topics they thought were important to discuss. The PI asked all participants the same primary list of questions but over time adapted questions and added new ones as appropriate (see Appendix 2 for Interview Guide). The interviews covered a range of topics including whether abusive behavior was still occurring, which program skills parents and their child were using or had used, and which components of the program they perceived as most and least effective. Other topics included perceived cultural appropriateness of the program and (if appropriate) global impression of juvenile justice system impact on their son/daughter (including detention, probation, and diversion). Participants were also asked about the conditions that led to their participation in Step-Up in order to help the PI contextualize their program participation.

After obtaining verbal informed consent over the phone, the PI and participant scheduled time for an interview. Study participants were given several options for interview location, but because of scheduling and distance constraints all interviews but one were conducted over the telephone, with the PI at a secure location in her home to ensure participant privacy and confidentiality. The PI conducted the one in-person interview in a church at which a Step-Up group is held. Interviews were an average of 64 minutes in length, and from 39 to 119 minutes.

Before starting interviews, the PI attended two Step-Up sessions to gain a basic understanding of how program staff and participants interact and what the program looks like in action. The PI called (or met) each participant for his or her interview at the agreed-upon time. The PI again summarized the study purpose and procedures and reminded each participant how their privacy and confidentiality would be protected. Participants were also reminded of the voluntary nature of the study and that they could discontinue participation at any time. Each participant was again given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and the PI answered all questions before starting the interview. The PI personally interviewed each study participant and digitally audio-recorded all interviews. Procedures were put in place to give information regarding available resources to participants still experiencing abuse, but this was not an issue for any participants. Interviews were conducted between March and April of 2014.

The interview audio files were uploaded from the digital audio recorder to a secure online file storage system used at the University of Washington. The PI transcribed each interview verbatim while excluding all participant identifiers, including names. The PI checked each transcript for accuracy and then deleted each interview audio file. Participant privacy and confidentiality were protected during all study procedures. Participant identifiers were recorded with study identification numbers in only one location, a password-protected spreadsheet, accessible only by the PI. The identifying link was broken after verification of transcript accuracy. Interview transcripts were imported into and analyzed with Dedoose, a web-based qualitative data analysis program (Dedoose, 2014). Dedoose is accessed via username and password login. The University of Washington's Human Subjects Division approved all study procedures under an expedited review process.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using grounded theory methodology, a technique in which theory is derived through data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This methodology was chosen because qualitative research on the effects of CPA program participation on parents is limited and it serves to give a voice to Step-Up parent participants without any preconceived theories about their experiences during and after Step-Up participation. In addition, this methodology is considered appropriate for populations that are often underrepresented, as is true of the study population (Daly, 1992).

Grounded theory analysis begins with open coding, in which the researcher examines, conceptualizes, and categorizes text, resulting in a number of codes. After open coding, axial coding begins and is the process in which the researcher explores and develops hypotheses about relationships between and within code categories, resulting in more well-defined and complex categories. The final step is selective coding, during which the relationships between categories is further integrated and refined (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

After importing all 15 interview transcripts into Dedoose, the PI read each interview several times and started the process of open coding. Codes were applied to discrete ideas, events, experiences, and explanations given by study participants related to the various interview questions and other topics; at first, virtually all interview text was coded. Some codes were purely descriptive (for example, descriptions of who violent behavior was targeted at), and some represented more complex and abstract concepts (for example, the range of group dynamics at play in Step-Up). The code list was refined throughout the process and overly specific codes or those that only applied to a small number of interviews were either eliminated or combined into a higher-level code. Throughout the process of open coding, the PI kept notes summarizing each code and the range of concepts it represented, as well as which codes were split or combined into others. After all interviews were open coded, the PI examined the list of codes and grouped similar and related codes into categories that are represented by boxes on the conceptual model (Figure 2). Codes were further refined, combined, and separated as needed to conceive logical and organized conceptual models that also represent the entire scope of interview topics. Codes that were unrelated to CPA or the main research questions were discarded. The final hierarchy of codes is summarized in the conceptual model (Figure 2).

Basic information about participant and youth demographics, the situation leading to Step-Up participation, and youth involvement in the juvenile justice system was ascertained from the interview transcripts. To summarize these variables, basic descriptive statistics including counts, means, and ranges were calculated.

RESULTS

Participants

A description of the study participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Participant Characteristics

Interviewee (N=15):	Count (%)
Mother	11 (73%)
Father	2 (13%)
Both mother and father	2 (13%)
Index youth - female	4 (27%)
Single-mother family	7 (47%)
Parent Attended Step-Up:	
Mother only	8 (53%)
Father only	1 (7%)
Both mother and father	6 (40%)
Police called before incident leading to SU	12 (80%)
Detention for incident leading to SU	12 (80%)
Diversion*	9 (75%)
Charge*	2 (17%)
Unknown*	1 (8%)
	Mean (SD)
Index youth age at completion (years)	16.2 (1.6)
Years since completion	3.6 (1.96)

*N=12

Study participants were all parents who had completed Step-Up with their child between 2006 and 2013. Two-thirds of participants completed the program between 2010 and 2012. It is unknown whether any study participants attended Step-Up at the same time, though it is likely. The youths' ages at completion of Step-Up ranged from 12 to 18 years, and 60% (n=9) were either 16 or 17 years old. Seventy-three percent (n=11) of child participants were male. Seventy-three percent (n=11) of parents interviewed were mothers, 13% were fathers (n=2), and two couples of mothers and fathers were interviewed together. Because of limited data from the father in each of these interviews, these two interviews were still counted as single interviews. In some families, both parents attended Step-Up, while in others only one parent attended. Every interview took place with at least one parent who attended Step-Up, though four fathers who attended Step-Up were not interviewed. One mother who was interviewed had attended the program with two sons. Almost half of participants were single mothers

(n=7), with varying levels of involvement from their children's fathers. One-third of families (n=5) had experienced a recent divorce. Race and ethnicity data were not captured.

Twenty percent of parents (n=3) attended the program with their sons/daughters but were not court ordered to attend. These participants were referred to the program by an individual or family therapist or found the program through online searching. All 12 index youth who were required to attend Step-Up had been involved in situations in which police officers were called in reference to their violent behaviors, and then were detained from a few hours to three days. Nine of these youth (75%) entered diversion programs, while 17% (n=2) were charged with crimes; one parent was unsure which outcome was true for her son.

Precipitating CPA Leading to Step-Up Participation

The left side of the Step-Up conceptual model (Figure 2) shows the problem of CPA within each family and factors contributing to and related to the problem of CPA, eventually resulting in Step-Up program involvement. Participants were not directly asked whether their child exhibited certain behaviors or targeted certain people, so it is possible specific types of violence are underreported. Parents reported a range of violent behavior by their adolescents, and every participant reported verbal/emotional abuse. Parents described arguments during which there was screaming, name-calling, and disrespectful speech by their children.

Nearly all parents (80%) reported property damage that resulted in broken or severely damaged objects, some of significant value. Five parents (33%) reported that their child threatened them, two specifically with knives. Two other parents reported their child used objects as weapons by throwing them during intense arguments. Only one mother reported financially abusive behavior; she described how her son would take money from her purse during times of financial instability.

Every parent reported their child was violent in some way towards their mother, and one-third reported violence toward their father; this group is 42% of the twelve total youth whose fathers were mentioned as being in their lives. Parents reported violent behavior toward siblings by six (46%) out of the 13 youth specifically reported as having siblings. Only three parents (20%) reported their child was violent

towards people outside of their family. According to their parents, some adolescents were remorseful after violent episodes, while others minimized or denied their behavior.

Violence severity and chronicity also varied among adolescents, and seven (47%) were categorized as exhibiting severe or chronic violent behavior. Just over half of participants specifically described their child's behavior as explosive or out-of-control, though not all of these adolescents were severely or chronically violent. The PI defined violent behavior as severe or chronic if one or more of the following criteria were present: frequent episodes involving physical violence, specific threat with weapon, physical violence causing injury, use of objects as weapons, and violence directed at a wide range of people (including siblings and people outside of the family). As mentioned earlier, details surrounding violent behavior were not specifically ascertained, so it is possible some severe or chronic violent behavior was not reported to the PI.

In general, parents who reported physical violence from their adolescents described a progression from verbal and emotional abuse to physical aggression and posturing, including property damage, before leading to physical violence directed at people. Two mothers described how their sons started standing up to them more physically as their size increased during puberty. Four mothers with tumultuous relationships with their children's father said they believed their children developed abusive tendencies by mirroring their father's behavior toward them. Parents concurred that violence had developed over time and reached a severity outside their comfort level by the time they started participating in Step-Up. One mother said, "Most people have been through quite a bit by the time they get there. There's a need for that resilience and...overcoming..." (PT05).

Other Factors

Throughout the course of the interviews, parents described many factors related to CPA and how these factors affected prevalence of CPA but were also affected by their child's behavior. The PI categorized these factors as either specific to the adolescent or part of the adolescent's family/home environment. Parents were not specifically asked about these factors, so it is possible certain issues went unmentioned and are not captured here.

Adolescent-Specific

No participants noted adolescent drug and alcohol use as a major factor in their child's behavior. Some recreational marijuana and alcohol use by adolescents was reported, and some parents mentioned that drug or alcohol use by their adolescent did contribute to family conflicts.

Over half of parents (n=9) discussed their adolescents' mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Six parents (40%) specifically mentioned their child having a history of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and two parents mentioned significant learning disabilities in their adolescents. Mental health issues ranged in severity, and the adolescents with the most severe issues typically had traumatic childhood experiences including domestic violence victimization.

Almost three-quarters of participants talked about other behavior issues their children had, greatly ranging in severity. Parents reported their children left their home for the night without permission, drove cars without having a license, and were generally out of control. Two parents that reported their child stole items or cars either from strangers or family members. Over half of parents (n=9) talked about issues their children had in school, ranging from refusal to complete assignments, acting out, engaging in fights, being bullied, truancy, suspensions, and expulsions. Two parents' children had such difficulty in traditional public schools that they attended numerous alternative schools.

Family/Home Environment

Varying levels of family conflict and dysfunction were reported, often including parental conflict and issues with the adolescents' siblings. Over half of parents (n=8) talked about a variety of major life events and disruptions that affected them and their children leading up to their participation in Step-Up. Five mothers (33%) mentioned recent divorces preceding their youth's violent behavior, four of which were marked by considerable conflict between parents. Two mothers reported extremely abusive past relationships with their children's fathers, including physical abuse, and these women described the separation from and reemergence of these men in their children's lives. The two other mothers who were recently divorced reported significant verbal and emotional abuse by their children's fathers. Three parents had adopted their child, and two reported that their child experienced trauma or considerable

difficulties as a result of the situation leading up to their adoption. Other events reported include a father's death and homelessness.

The PI did not directly ask about the presence of financial stressors, but ascertained this information indirectly from the interview transcripts. One-third of participants (n=5) seemed to have financial stressors in their lives. Some parents openly talked about their financial problems, and one described a struggle with homelessness. Other parents mentioned the fact that there are no costs associated with attending Step-Up as an important factor, suggesting cost may be a barrier to accessing other services (including family therapy, specialized support at school, etc.) for some families. Though everyday needs may be met, there may be barriers to receiving adequate or high-quality care, and so these parents were categorized as having financial stressors.

Study participants reported a range of supports outside of Step-Up; some parents had strong formal and informal support while others reported very little. Formal supports include individual and family therapy, support groups, and specialized services at their child's school. Informal supports include emotional and instrumental support by friends, family, and fellow church members.

Impacts on Family

About half of parents interviewed (n=8) talked about the ways in which CPA within the home and the other factors discussed above, including adolescents' mental health issues and other supports available, impacted them and their families. Many parents reported negative emotional impacts due to their child's violent and abusive behavior, including fear of their child, despair about their situation, and shame. Some parents whose children exhibited severe or chronic violent behavior described how their child's behavior caused them extreme stress that greatly affected their lives. Two parents acknowledged that their children were emotionally impacted by their conflicts as well. One mother said, "It was [later] important to him not to [be violent]. Nobody was happy during all this, it's not like he was happy when all this was going on" (PT14).

Parents reported concern and worry that their child's violent behavior would continue to escalate and extend outside of the home to intimate partners, friends, and acquaintances. A few parents specifically mentioned they were concerned their child would end up in the adult criminal justice system.

One mother explained, “[T]hat’s why I was worried, that was my main thing, I didn’t wanna see anything go on that was going to be detrimental for [him] for the rest of [his] life” (PT05).

Step-Up Program Participation

Moving from the problem of CPA within a family to Step-Up program participation, the next section of the conceptual model (Figure 2) shows specific Step-Up program components, program dynamics, and dynamics specific to the group setting. The following sections describe study participants’ feedback on the program components and dynamics.

Step-Up Program Components

Step-Up program components refer to specific modules, lessons, and exercises that make up the program. As described above, Step-Up consists of 21 sessions, during which a range of topics are covered and various education methods are used. Parents were asked about specific program components and how useful they were to them and their children.

Check-In

Check-in and goal setting was consistently talked about as a very useful component of Step-Up. Parents talked about how adolescents were asked to evaluate their week and progress towards their goal, and how this process promoted accountability to the entire group. One mother explained,

“It’s about you wanting to set goals and working on those for yourself. And they allow you to... each would have a realistic goal that we wanted to set, and making that public commitment that we’re gonna do it actually helps” (PT09).

Parents felt check-in was their opportunity to have a space to communicate about their issues specifically and appreciated the feedback they received during check-in to help them work on any continuing conflicts.

“[The facilitator] gave us an opportunity in front of the class, ‘How was this week?’ And so I’d share something, and then...right on the spot a quick little counseling session, you know, just a quick one. And so...I really liked that part” (PT03).

Respect and Abuse Wheels

During check-in, families are encouraged to use the abuse and respect wheels (Figure 1) to define behavior they have used during the previous week. Parents reported the wheels were very simple and helpful in understanding what constitutes abusive and respectful behavior.

“There was the wheel you could look at for behaviors, which was visual. And you could...just focus in on it rather than having a lot of elaborate speech...it was just real basic and it was visual right in front of you. And it made you stop and think about your actions” (PT04).

A few parents noted that their adolescents often did not acknowledge their abusive behavior but started to realize how abusive they were when they described their behavior in front of the group.

Learning of Tools and Techniques

A major component of Step-Up is the learning of specific tools and techniques to help reinforce other skills learned (including de-escalation and effective communication). Parents largely found these techniques useful and appreciated how the facilitators helped make the tools applicable to specific situations going on in each household. One parent appreciated that the program was structured yet “self-directed in terms of what [participants] wanted to work on” (PT09). One mother described a situation in which a Step-Up facilitator helped her design a fair and effective consequence for her son’s disrespectful behavior, as “just some good suggestions that were helpful on a day-to-day basis” (PT04). Parents also found tools for de-escalation were especially useful. The Step-Up curriculum includes some role-play scenarios to allow participants to practice specific communication techniques; parents thought the communication techniques were important to learn but expressed mixed feelings about these role-play scenarios. Many felt they were useful, while others felt they were “painful” or “pointless” (PT07, PT01).

Workbook

Because Step-Up groups can grow to be quite large, sometimes there is not much time in a session to follow the curriculum lessons after check-in. Parents overwhelmingly found check-in, even those of their peers, to be useful, but a few people mentioned they would have liked to cover more of the workbook. A few parents described the workbook as a reference they have gone back to since completing Step-Up.

Responsibility and Empathy Letters

Almost half of participants (n=7) specifically mentioned the responsibility and empathy letters their child wrote, and they talked about the importance of the letter-writing process as well as the presentation to the group. A few parents talked about how their child had considerable difficulty (both technical and emotional) writing their letters, but everyone who talked about it thought it was a valuable exercise. The

letter writing and presentation by the child was often mentioned as significantly contributing to the development of specific skills including accountability for behavior, making amends, and effective communication. Parents found the careful analysis of the past situation increased their child's accountability for their behavior and empathy for their parent(s). They felt the letter-writing process helped their teens gain perspective and create a plan for changing their behavior in the future. One mother described it as "very healing" (PT05). The presentation of the letters during group was cited as important because it elicited public recognition of abuse, and parents felt it was a fitting end to the program. One mother described the impact of the letter writing on her son:

"[Y]ou have to write in detail about what happened, and I think it was really helpful for him to write that. I think it was holding him accountable, not just saying it, but having to write it down and really think through what happened that day, I think was helpful to him in taking accountability, making amends. And just seeing the pieces of it, that it didn't have to be that bad, and also that it was a culmination of a lot of really abusive behavior that had happened" (PT07).

Some parents described seeing other youth in their group present their letters with less sincerity and understanding of how their actions affected others yet could have been prevented.

Program Dynamics

Throughout the course of their interviews, parents talked about a wide range of dynamics important to their experience in Step-Up. These dynamics are not specific to Step-Up content but are related to the program format.

Logistics

According to King County juvenile probation officers, the length of Step-Up is sometimes seen as a deterrent to program referral (Anonymous, 2013). The PI asked participants about the appropriateness of program length to better understand participants' perception of this issue. Many parents said their child felt it was too long and were difficult to keep engaged. Only two parents reported the length did feel too long but also acknowledged that they likely needed that length of time to realize the full benefits. One father explained,

"So you go once a week for an hour and a half, it takes you a while before you even figure out what you're supposed to do, how you're supposed to interact with this group...and before you even feel open enough to participate. I didn't want it to go on so long, but I don't see how it could've been more effective, or even as effective in less time" (PT15).

All other parents felt the length was appropriate and important in establishing consistency. According to one mother,

“Twenty-one weeks does seem like a long time, but if you think about it...Look at how long it took you to get to the spot where you’re needing that type of assistance...versus the amount of time that you’re going to be there...to improve your life so you’re not living like that anymore, then 21 weeks isn’t really anything at all...So it’s all about perspective” (PT05).

Four parents interviewed (27%) voluntarily attended Step-Up for longer than 21 weeks because they felt they were still benefiting from their participation.

Program location was the main grievance parents reported about program convenience. Parents reported having to drive far during rush-hour traffic to get to Step-Up, and some parents had difficulty attending because of work schedules and travel. Despite these minor annoyances, parents still felt the program was worth attending. A few parents noted that driving to the program with their child became valuable in itself because it allowed them more time to communicate at a critical time, and some families created routines of going out to eat together before or after attending Step-Up. One mother said, “That drive became really therapeutic...It really got us to have some time together that we would’ve never had, never would’ve made the time for. She never would’ve wanted to be with me consciously” (PT10).

All participants who mentioned the consistency of attending Step-Up every week (n=8) stressed the value in this aspect of the program. When asked about the length, one mother said, “It is great because...it’s a routine, and we actually got to the point where we looked forward to it” (PT08). A few parents who were having especially hard times with their adolescents also expressed this sentiment. Parents mentioned that the weekly consistency along with the goal-setting homework were very important factors in their adolescent’s behavior change.

Family-Level Intervention

Nine participants (60%) talked specifically about the benefits related to the inclusion of both parents and adolescents; in some families, both parents attended, and in others, siblings periodically came. Parents acknowledged that their family issues were not just the child’s problem, but often related to whole-family communication patterns. One mother explained that, “the whole family needed an intervention” (PT13). Participants also talked about the importance of all family members receiving the same tools and information; one mother said, “I feel like if we can all be on the same page, in the same

place, even though we may react differently, it was important to me that we all had this opportunity because it's a really good foundation" (PT05).

Two mothers who were divorced and had tumultuous relationships with their child(ren)'s father noted that it may have been better for their children if their ex-husbands were also involved in Step-Up.

One mother explained,

"[Their dad] was not involved in our therapeutic process...And so, while we ended up moving forward, he didn't move forward in that way. And so he's living life the way he knows how to live it, and we're living our lives the way we know how to live it, and there's a difference" (PT05).

Atmosphere

Parents largely described the atmosphere of Step-Up as marked by open space for communication, safety, trust, and support. During times of conflict when parents and adolescents were not communicating effectively, Step-Up was described as place where open communication could occur.

"During the week I'd think, 'I can't wait to go to class so we can talk about this in a safe environment.' Because I felt like I couldn't talk to him myself but if we were in a group like that, we could talk about it" (PT03).

When conflicts arose during the program, program facilitators would often help participants reframe their communication to minimize judging, blaming, and interruptions. One mother explained how she and her daughter were able to fully express themselves at Step-Up in ways they were unable to at home:

"Both...kids and...parents got to tell their side of the story. And I think it helped that the kid was able to say how they were feeling about the situation and how they were processing it. And the parents were able to [do the same]. And it was in an environment where they could say everything out loud without anything escalating into a fight or anything like that. They were allowed to finish what they were saying" (PT11).

Parents described how each family sharing personal details about their lives and struggles contributed to the development of a nonjudgmental and trusting atmosphere. According to one mother, "I felt safe. I felt what happened in that room stayed in that room" (PT03).

Parents described Step-Up as a place of support at a time when they were lacking support from other sources. Though not formally structured to be a support group, several parents compared Step-Up to other support groups they had participated in and were very grateful for this aspect of the program.

While talking about her feelings towards other parents in the group, one mother described that she "empathize[d] with their problems and felt a real kind of kinship and wanted them to succeed" (PT07) .

One mother described discomfort and embarrassment at the beginning of the program that later dissipated:

“We went to our first Step Up meeting and it was just incredibly awkward and I was really embarrassed to be there and my son was just completely miserable...For me, and for my son, it got a lot better. It seemed like people...were really uncomfortable when they first came to the program. It’s really hard, you know, you’re talking to people about this really taboo subject and you don’t know them, and nobody wants to really speak up and engage...But we got used to it. It was just awkward and kinda embarrassing” (PT07).

This participant later talked about how regardless of how awkward the group format sometimes felt, it was an effective way to get a group of strangers talking about a very difficult subject.

Group Facilitators

Study participants credited much of their positive experiences in Step-Up to the skill and sincere support of the group facilitators. Parents appreciated how the facilitators were able to apply program concepts and techniques to their family’s specific situation and help them find practical, manageable solutions, despite serving numerous families at one time. Participants also described how the facilitators were effective at engaging adolescents who were often shutdown emotionally and managing complex group dynamics. A few parents talked about how their adolescents appreciated how the facilitators acted as neutral parties and did not overvalue parents’ points of view just because they were adults. Parents also commented on the need for two facilitators, and not just one, to handle a large group. Overall, parent participants valued the facilitators’ feedback and trusted them wholeheartedly as social work professionals. One mother summarized her feelings:

“[They] were just incredibly empathetic. They were able to push forward in a way that I really respected. It was like, ‘ugh nobody wants to do this,’ but they would just...gently and with a great deal of humanity and empathy. They were completely non-judgmental, I never felt judged by them...They just wanted to help, and they really competent at it” (PT07).

Flexibility and Adaptation

Participants often talked about flexibility by the group facilitators and adaptations made in order to better serve specific families. One mother said, “I always felt like they went above and beyond and they really care about the kids that are in the program and the families” (PT02). The facilitators often made themselves available to group participants and sometimes met or consulted with parents who had ongoing struggles throughout the week. For a few study participants, flexibility and adaptations made by the program facilitators were vital to their family’s success in the program. For example, one mother’s

daughter did not do well in the group setting and so they attended individual family sessions outside of the group setting. This setup is not typical and is dependent on resources available, but may work best for certain families. Another mother described accommodations made for her son who had learning disabilities and trouble with reading and writing portions of the program. A few families had to miss sessions because of work schedules or other issues, and they were able to attend the full 21 sessions by making up their missed sessions at the end. Facilitators also allow families who want to attend more than 21 sessions to continue coming; this was very important for families who felt they still needed extra support at the end of the program.

Willingness to Attend

Parents discussed their adolescent's and their own willingness to attend Step-Up and how that affected their participation and progress. Most parents reported that their adolescents were hard to engage at first but eventually participated in Step-Up activities willingly and with effort. One mother attended with a son who had considerable difficulty engaging in the program and they still experiences major conflicts and struggles. Often adolescents who were unwilling to engage in Step-Up initially were in denial about or minimized their abusive behavior.

Most parents were willing and happy to attend Step-Up, as they felt relieved they had found a program for CPA specifically, but a few parents expressed initial hesitancy and doubt that it would work for their child. One father explained,

“When I started the program...I was very resistant. And you always feel like you know, ‘I shouldn’t have to be part of this.’ And I think everyone in the room probably feels that way. But then you realize you’re there for a reason that’s really why everyone is there” (PT15).

Some parents acknowledged that Step-Up required hard emotional work and that they often would have preferred not to go, but were glad they had gone in the end. Only three study participants (20%) attended Step-Up voluntarily with their children; the rest were court-ordered to attend. Some participants felt it was a positive thing that participation in Step-Up was mandatory, and they reported they or their children likely would not have ended up going if it was voluntary.

Practicality

About a quarter of participants (n=4) commended the practicality of tools they learned in Step-Up and the focus on feasible and relevant weekly goals. One mother explained “[I]n dealing with the here and now, just one week at a time, with some goals, specific behavior to work on...I think [it is] ideal” (PT04). A few parents compared it to theory-heavy counseling and expressed that they felt the use of skill-based problem solving was most appropriate for their family’s issues. Though participants were not specifically asked about practicality of lessons, no parents commented that what they learned in Step-Up was not practical.

Group Setting Dynamics

A major subset of program dynamics that participants discussed are dynamics related specifically to the group makeup, interaction, and diversity. Many of these issues relate directly to dynamics discussed in the above section.

Common Experiences

As described by study participants, a major contributor to the positive atmosphere in Step-Up described above is the sharing of common experiences among participants. Almost all participants (n=13) mentioned the importance of being in a group with other families who have experienced similar situations. Parents commonly reported finding comfort in hearing from other families who were having similar experiences and problems. Parents reported relief when they “hear[d] everyone else’s stories and [got] that this happens in other families” (PT12). As explained by one mother, “To know that you’re not alone, to hear and see that there are struggles...inside of other families, it’s not that you feel better, it’s just that you know that you’re not alone” (PT05). A few parents described how their children enjoyed taking on supportive roles for other adolescent participants as they progressed through the program.

Though parents most often talked about how they felt supported by sharing common experiences, a few parents also mentioned how beneficial it was for their child to meet other adolescents with similar issues. One mother explained how she perceived her son’s reaction to being in Step-Up with similar kids:

“I think he learned a lot by listening to what was going on in other people’s lives. I think he felt less like a freak a little bit. Without really ever admitting it, I think he really did feel like such a terrible person for what he was doing...Then suddenly he’s in a room with...other kids who had done similar things who seemed pretty human to us, so I think it was a relief” (PT07).

Besides providing support, sometimes hearing other families' stories served to help adolescents see their own behavior more objectively. Several parents described how their children were in denial or minimized their abusive actions until hearing others' stories and realizing similarities with their own. One mother explained,

“[T]he main thing for me was being able to see her observe children that were being as disrespectful and going through some of the stuff that she was going through and her being able to see that. Honestly that was the thing that really began to change her, her being able to see that there were kids out there that were doing what she was doing, but it was like she couldn't see that she was doing it...I think that was the thing that clicked in her and made her kinda calm down in that aspect of our relationship” (PT08).

Other Program Participants

Besides sharing common experiences, study participants described other benefits of interacting with other families. They talked about witnessing others' progress or lack thereof and gaining needed perspective on their own situations. Parents liked how they were able to learn from other families' check-ins and stories about challenges and successes using new skills. It was rare for study participants to talk negatively about sharing group time with other participants. Two participants whose own youth had not been severely or chronically violent expressed frustration over witnessing other youth in the program who they felt lacked initiative and made little progress. These parents were upset by how they saw other youth behave during the program and they felt the group periodically got a bit out of control as a result, though they still reported some benefits from the group format.

Many parents, even those whose adolescent displayed severe or chronic violent behavior, found that their family benefited from hearing other families' stories that were worse than their own. They described gaining perspective and felt encouraged that they could address their own family issues. One father described witnessing this in his son:

“[What registered for him was] seeing what some of these other kids were doing to their parents. I remember there was one kid there that was just tormenting his mother verbally. And it made him feel like, ‘ugh I don't ever want to be like that kid.’ And he realized what he did was bad, and so consequently he stopped. ‘I never want to be that way, feel that way...it was like reverse peer pressure. Here's other kids, the same age as I am, and they're gonna really mess up their lives. I don't want to be like that. I don't have to be like that” (PT01).

Another father talked about how his son reconsidered his own behavior after hearing other youths' stories:

“As I have often said to him...you know...you have a really good family situation, you want for very little or nothing, we do fun things, you know, don't blow it.’ (laughs) So I think he could see

some of the kids around him were from really challenging situations...they faced challenges he never had to think about. And so that made him think you know, 'that makes my acting out even less logical than it is on its face'" (PT15).

On the other hand, one mother whose adolescent was extremely aggressive felt this feature of the program was not helpful to her son and that he was less engaged when the group was made up of less violent teens from backgrounds very different from his own. For this participant, this group setting dynamic was a disadvantage but she acknowledged it would be difficult for program facilitators to control this without changing the format of Step-Up.

Feedback

Almost all parents (n=13) talked about the value in hearing feedback from other group participants because they represented a neutral, objective viewpoint. Participants talked about how their adolescents benefited from both peer-to-peer feedback and feedback from other parents. One mother reported her son responded to peer feedback because it "made it like it wasn't all the old people telling him what to do" (PT12). Regarding the importance of peer-to-peer interaction, one mother explained,

"I think that's the magic of the program, is that it's kids on kids. Once in a while parents would speak up, but it's really better when the parents just kinda stayed quiet and let the kids do the talking. And...[the facilitators] would...try to keep the kids as the focus" (PT14).

As mentioned above, another mother talked about how certain adolescents were more able to label abusive behavior when they observed it in other youth:

"And with...peer-to-peer...they might be doing similar things, and yet you'd find that they would be correcting each other. Saying you know, 'hey, maybe you could do this or maybe you could do that.' They'd hear about someone doing something similar, and it was like, 'oh no. Hey that's not cool.' So it was kinda different, it was a good self-growth process for them" (PT05).

One father described his surprise at seeing how impactful other parents' feedback could be on adolescent participants:

"The thing that struck me... that had a really powerful impact that I didn't think it would, was that kids kinda get called to the carpet for their behavior that week. And parents around the table are encouraged or certainly allowed to talk about that. And at first I was kinda like, 'that's not my business, that's their kid, I should keep quiet,' and I was a little reluctant. And I also know that...parents...are feeling judged and feeling hurt and exposed and so I was pretty sensitive to that...But the surprising outcome was that kids were easier to take it, and by it I mean suggestions or comments or even almost reprimand from other people...And when those people call them out, I think they can hear it a little better. Because it doesn't feel as much like a personal attack, it just feels like an objective third party saying 'I'm observing this, I'm hearing this story. And what you did wasn't the right thing for you to do'" (PT15).

Group Size

There is no set size for Step-Up groups, so group size fluctuates with demand and length of time participants stay in the program. Participants were asked about the size of their group when they attended Step-Up and if they felt it was an appropriate size. Participants' estimates of the size of their Step-Up group ranged from ten to 30, but most parents said their group usually had between 15 and 25 participants. Parents either felt this was just the right size or slightly too large, but one mother preferred larger groups because she felt more comfortable when the attention was spread out to multiple families.

Level of Participation

Several parents talked about varied tendencies of participants to share and contribute to the group; they reported this differed based on situational factors as well as participant personalities. One mother found it most beneficial for everyone when there was open and honest sharing and explained, "It's all voluntary, so there's a lot of privacy if you want it...[T]he shared stories were the most helpful, but you can't make it happen. Maybe you could encourage it more, but some people just aren't comfortable sharing" (PT14). She also noticed her own son was more willing to talk about his week at check-in when he had not used violent behavior that week.

Diversity

Many parents talked about their Step-Up group being a very diverse mix of families and most found this to be a very valuable aspect of the program. One mother explained, "[I]t helped us see, 'oh this is a problem'...it's never just one story. It's all these different demographics that are experiencing, for whatever reason, kids who cannot manage to deal without a physical manifestation of their anger" (PT07). Parents talked about being exposed to other families' situations very different from their own which led to a greater understanding of specific situations and dynamics.

In order to explore the program's cultural competency, participants were asked whether or not they felt Step-Up was respectful of their values and cultural background. All participants reported the program was respectful of and appropriate for people from diverse backgrounds and religions, regardless of whether or not they considered themselves religious. No participants reported any specific cultural needs but many reported witnessing acceptance among facilitators and other program participants.

Progression of Change

Parents described being proud and encouraged by watching their children's progression of behavior change but also stressed the hard work and effort required. Some parents talked about behavior change as a continual process that extended beyond the completion of Step-Up. One mother explained, "I think in all forms of therapy...it's not like...you've had a disease and you're cured. It's going to require a lifetime of work" (PT10).

Parental Role and Child's Motivation to Change

Adolescents' motivation to change was discussed as a major factor in their progression through the program. Many parents reported their children were hesitant to admit wrongdoing and engage at first, but became more motivated with time. Parents discussed the need for their child understand the effects of their behavior and ultimately make a decision to change. Two parents talked about how their children had contact with one of their own parents who was aggressive and violent, and this experience helped them realize they did not want to end up like that parent and subsequently choose to change their behavior. One mother described her daughter's experience with her biological mother:

"[She] said to me, 'I feel like I'm looking at a mirror. Do I act like that sometimes?' [S]eeing her birth mother...have a real meltdown. And I said to [her], 'yeah, you do, but you got some tools she never had, and you've got experiences and love and support.' And I think that was a major catalyst in making [her] take control, deciding that she didn't want to go there. And knowing she has this toolkit" (PT06).

Many parents said their child's abusive behavior slowly tapered off throughout the course of their participation in Step-Up, but sometimes did not completely stop. Parents often reported their child still sometimes used verbal abuse but no longer used physical violence. A couple parents said their sons had significant ongoing behavior issues but were unwilling to admit they had a problem and seek help.

Study participants were asked how they saw their role in supporting a positive behavior change in their child. Parents reported learning to listen to their children better and acknowledged how their reactions could exacerbate and prolong conflicts. This coincides with the discussion below on parents' increased abilities to stop situation escalation. Many parents also discussed the need to establish boundaries in their relationships. One mother described ongoing struggles with a son in this area:

“[U]nfortunately, today [his] lifestyle and preferences... I genuinely...worry...[T]here’s definitely a difference between empowering and enabling...I’m still trying to figure that one out, where to draw that line, because my compassion so much overcomes the facts most of the time” (PT05).

Just over half of parents (n=8) talked about the need to “pick [their] battles” and back off their children in certain ways to support behavior change and reduce conflict. Parents learned to take agreements less personally and emotionally disengage from certain parts of their children’s lives. Several parents talked about the value they found in learning to take a step back to allow their children to make their own mistakes and experience consequences. One father said, “I realized that...even if I know the right answer, he’s gonna make a mistake. It’s okay, provided he doesn’t hurt himself or anyone else. He’s gonna make mistakes and that’s perfectly fine” (PT01). Despite backing off, parents described still being available for support and providing unconditional love to their children. When asked about her role in her daughter’s behavior change, one mother said,

“...[L]etting her know that I’m here... There’s no argument that we can ever have that I would ever just turn my back on her. And that’s just how I am with all of my kids. I love them and just letting them know that I’m here for them” (PT08).

Role of Other Factors

Parents often described their participation in Step-Up as one vital factor in their children’s process of behavior change, but also talked about multiple other factors, including changes in living arrangements (moving out on own or into other parent’s home), prayer, and other supports like individual counseling. Almost all parents (n=13) talked about their child’s behavior change as impacted by the process of maturation. Several parents observed that their children did not fully incorporate skills from Step-Up until some time after ending the program, and they attributed this to the process of maturation. One-third of participants (n=5) specifically said that their relationship with their child improved considerably when their child moved out of their household and subsequently created some distance between them.

Skills Learned

Parents described how Step-Up program participation eventually led to the adoption of new skills to prevent and reduce the harm caused by CPA. The successful utilization of these skills within each family reflects the stated ultimate outcomes of Step-Up, on the right side of the conceptual model (Figure

2). Both the ability to de-escalate a situation and improved communication and were skills parents talked about most during their interviews. De-escalation was vital to diffusing situations until parents and adolescents were able to communicate calmly and effectively. The effective use of these skills led to improved conflict resolution. One mother described how she and her daughter used de-escalation and communication skills to resolve conflicts:

“[O]ne of the things...I learned from Step Up was to really analyze the situation, like ‘what am I wanting? And what are my needs that are at play here? What are her needs, and how do they mesh together or not?’ So it was...dynamic, and the two of us would look into the situations, and...I was able to also sometimes say, ‘this isn’t working for me...I need some time to cool down myself.’...So she and I would wait until things had settled down, and it might be the following day even, and then say, ‘look at what happened, and what could we both do differently?’” (PT06).

De-Escalation

Every participant talked about how participating in Step-Up helped they and their children develop skills to stop the escalation of conflicts into disrespectful or abusive behaviors. One mother talked about how her daughter had established a cycle of abusive and remorseful behavior before starting Step-Up:

“Typically she wasn’t able to learn from her prior actions, so there was a cycle, over and over and over again, and I think the whole process of being in Step Up helped her recognize that there were other ways of doing that stuff” (PT06).

In Step-Up, parents and adolescents learn how to recognize the warning signs that their anger is escalating, manage their emotions, and then remove themselves from the situation; this is called taking a time-out in the program. Taking time-outs requires self-awareness and discipline, and this was a very valuable skill for most parents. Parents described how their teens learned to initiate time-outs on their own and would often go to their bedroom, go on a walk, or call a friend to calm down. One mother described her daughter’s realizations:

“[She learned to think] ‘I don’t have to be the effect of what my feelings are. I can learn the signals and take action in order to be in better control of myself.’ I think that was probably the one thing I felt really impacted her the most” (PT11).

A few parents talked about effort required on their part to respect their child’s decision to separate and how this was sometimes difficult to do; a father said,

“I think...what we learned was that when they had to go away to their safe place, we would step away...I guess that’s what I learned the biggest was that it didn’t have to be figured out right then and there. It’s okay to let everybody cool down and then revisit it at another time” (PT01).

Some parents reported challenges using time-outs because of difficulty managing their own emotions, and one mother described how she and her son would sometimes “get stuck” in a time-out and avoid

dealing with the root of the conflict. For the most part, de-escalation was viewed as a very important skill and used extensively by participants to prevent major conflicts, and many parents reported that they and their child had successfully integrated this skill into their normal communication pattern.

Conflict Resolution

Almost half of parents (n=7) talked about gaining skills in conflict resolution and problem solving. Parents learned how to effectively see situations not only from their own perspective but also their child's, and this contributed to more civil conflict resolution. Parents acknowledged this was not an easy skill to learn and one mother noted, "it doesn't come naturally" (PT14). Some participants talked about learning to accept that some disagreements are inevitable yet still manageable.

Communication

The development of conflict resolution skills was closely related to parents' experiences refining their communication skills. They reported learning to be better listeners, which helped them see their child's point of view more clearly. The development of effective communication skills was vital to the development of all other skills parents discussed. One mother expressed that Step-Up "gave [her] a voice" (PT13). Besides the Step-Up program sessions being a space for open communication, as described above, participants also learned skills to improve their communication at home and in high-intensity situations. Respectful and effective communication continues to be a struggle for many parents and their children, but the majority of participants felt participating in Step-Up did improve their communication. A few parents described times during which they were progressing into an argument and their adolescent independently initiated using respectful communication skills from Step-Up. A couple parents also talked about sometimes communicating with their teen in writing during specific situations to ensure clear communication and prevent nagging.

Parents described Step-Up exercises in which they and their adolescents practice assertive communication, listening, repeating what they heard, and exchanging words back and forth until both parties can come to a common understanding of the situation. According to one mother, "I would say...we all learned a lot...listening to each other, being more present. What I got out of the program are seeing things more through his eyes" (PT12). Another mother explained, "I would say [we] use [assertive

communication] a lot...He's...more respectful and more, in a subtle way he...learned that we can both have opposing points of view that are both valid" (PT07). Though parents found direct and open communication to be very difficult and frustrating at times, they this was very helpful in getting to the root of conflicts. Parents found it most difficult to use effective communication skills during situations that escalated quickly.

Accountability and Making Amends

As described earlier, the letters written and presented by youth participants were very important in encouraging the development of accountability for one's own behavior. Parents talked about how when their adolescents started Step-Up, they had a very difficult time being accountable for their abusive behavior, especially when it was explosive, and often blamed whomever they were in conflict with. Parents described how their adolescents became more able to acknowledge when they made a mistake and sincerely apologize for it, regardless of what the precipitating factors of the event were. One father said,

"[D]ealing with your own consequences was something he learned. By doing what he did caused him to go through all the issues and realize that by him pushing his mom made it his fault, no matter how much of the arguing was going on, he did not have the right to do what he did" (PT01).

One mother described a similar awareness in her daughter:

"She took responsibility for the incident. She wrote a very responsible letter talking about 'this is what I did, these are the problems I caused,' just really...owned the behavior. Finally, it wasn't like 'somebody else made me do this. If you hadn't done this, then I wouldn't have to,' you know. It shifted from that to 'yeah I did this and I shouldn't have,' ...just kinda took responsibility I guess. And that was really relieving" (PT11).

Another mother described how she modeled holding herself accountable for her behavior by acknowledging when she made mistakes and talking to her son about what she could do to improve.

Expressing accountability for behavior was still a challenge for some adolescents, and a few parents offered explanations for this, including victimization by peers or other family members.

Adolescents who learned to take accountability for their behavior were then more able and likely to make amends with whomever their behavior affected. Parents talked about how their adolescents developed skills in actively making amends, as opposed to simply apologizing and hoping the conflict would dissipate. Step-Up participants learn to negotiate terms of making amends, and one mother stressed the importance of making amends soon after a conflict:

"[G]oing through the process of how to repair the wall or how to engage the parent in helping, but really having the responsibility on the kid to make up for the damage they caused, and also as soon as possible, to do that, rather than letting long periods of time go before making amends. That was a good strong point...Or we'd discuss, and ask the kid, 'what do you think would be a good thing to kind of correct the situation or for you to do that would make your parents feel better about the situation or make you feel better?' And a lot of times it was the repair, and that type of thing." (PT04)

Effective Consequences

Though delivering effective consequences was not a major issue for some parents, a few study participants talked about how they were able to better develop this parenting skill through their participation in Step-Up. One mother gave an example of how a Step-Up facilitator guided her through the process of delivering a fair yet loving consequence:

"[The facilitator] would mediate a little bit in terms of helping that process, and offering I think very reasonable and fair consequences...And having consequences that would engage the child instead of isolate them. Like for example...have that child do something for the family, like serve dinner for a couple nights, you know do something special like that, something that would be kinda in service to the other person but good for the whole family" (PT04).

Respectful Behavior

Almost half of participants (n=7) discussed how their youth learned to identify their own behavior as respectful or not and change the way they treated others. Parents described how their adolescents became more appreciative of them and more aware of how their actions affected others. Parents did credit participation in Step-Up with some of these changes but also acknowledged that growing maturity likely played a role. A few parents mentioned that sometimes adolescents who grew up in particularly dysfunctional households had little knowledge of what truly respectful behavior even looked like before Step-Up. According to one mother,

"It's not like it used to be. It used to be really bad, like the word respect was...a foreign word. And it's not so foreign anymore. It's just about helping them understand what their ideas are of respect and redirecting things when it's just completely unreasonable" (PT05).

Participants sometimes reported they were able to use skills learned in Step-Up related to communication and conflict resolution with other people in their lives, including other children, spouses or partners, and people encountered at jobs.

Least and Most Effective Program Features

When asked which specific program components or features were most and least effective for them, parents talked about both specific program components and aspects of the group setting and atmosphere. Thirteen parents gave specific answers when asked what they thought was most helpful for them. The weekly check-in was most often cited as the most helpful program component (n=7), while parents also felt the sharing of common experiences (n=5) and creation of a space for communication (n=4) were helpful. Though many parents agreed that these features and components were helpful, there was variation in why. When asked what about the program was least helpful for them, only seven participants gave specific answers; everyone else reported everything was helpful or they were unable to think of a response. Parents reported the least helpful aspect of the program was challenging group dynamics (n=4) and the least helpful program component was the workbook and scripted exercises (n=3). The range of responses given highlights the benefits of the use of multiple program components in Step-Up. Even though the workbook exercises and scripts were ineffective for many people, some participants reported they were very helpful.

Parents were also asked what about Step-Up they perceived to be most and least effective for their adolescent children. Parents acknowledged that their children may have a different opinion, but almost all (n=14) still felt able to hypothesize what helped most. Like their parents, adolescents were affected by hearing other participants' stories for multiple reasons (n=7). Adolescents often shared common experiences but also benefited from hearing stories that were more extreme than their own, according to their parents. Parents also reported their children benefited from relationships with the group facilitators (n=3) and the way the group format promoted accountability for behavior (n=5). Most parents could not pinpoint what they thought was least effective for their children, but those parents who did answer most often named the workbook and scripted exercises (n=3).

Ultimate Step-Up Outcomes

Overall, the experiences of study participants reflect the stated ultimate outcomes of Step-Up. Parents overwhelmingly reported that they currently feel safe in their homes and that they and their child are able to successfully resolve conflicts without violence occurring. Participants reported making amends with their child and being able to mentally move past their prior violent behavior.

Current Life and Parent-Child Relationship

Many participants reported their children had progressed into adulthood and were in higher education or employed at jobs they enjoyed. Parents commented on their children's strong work ethic, drive, and self-direction. Over half of parents (n=9) said their children currently live in their household, and some of those had moved out and then back into their parent's home. Most parents reported they were in close contact with their child; only a few said they rarely talked. In general, parents were proud of the lives their children have chosen and pleased with their current relationships. Every parent reported his or her adolescent did not have any criminal justice system involvement related to domestic violence since the incident leading to Step-Up participation.

Continuing Struggles

Some parents reported continuing struggles with their children, mostly in the form of frequent arguments and disrespectful behavior, though most parents conveyed it felt like part of a more normal parent-child relationship and was not too troubling. One mother explained, "I think that, you know it's just like anything. Issues develop over years, and having [the time in Step-Up] is great, it keeps you on course for a while, but some of the disrespectful behaviors slip back in" (PT04). Another mother echoed:

"I think I'd probably like to see...some sort of aftercare...[to] just talk about what's going on. Because I really feel like after the intensive stuff, and then no responsibility, no check-ins or anything, and no support after that. It's hard for kids and it's easy for them to slide back into behavior. So that was a little bit of a struggle after the fact" (PT11).

Only one mother reported she continued to have considerable struggles with her son. She explained her inability to change his behavior, despite her efforts:

"And you try to figure out where you could've fixed whatever, and you find a few things along the way, but then also find that maybe it wasn't all you...I'll never give up, but I constantly try to find different...and new ways, different words and different opportunities and times to try to open up

that positive and keep him on the up and up. But you can't walk in somebody else's shoes for them" (PT05).

According to their parents, some adolescents continue to go to counseling or seek other supportive services to help manage their emotions and behaviors.

Recommendations for Step-Up

Study participants were asked about limitations of Step-Up and recommendations for program improvement. Overall, parents reported being very happy with the content and format of Step-Up and had few suggestions about parts they would change. Parents most often reported as a suggestion that some type of follow-up sessions or resource be available to participants after completing Step-Up. As described above, some parents saw disrespectful behaviors reemerge after Step-Up was completed, and thought a series of refresher courses would be helpful in solidifying respectful behaviors. Parents noted that behaviors were harder to maintain without the support network and public accountability for the past week's behavior.

Program location was an inconvenience for many parents, and some wished Step-Up was offered at different locations, specifically within Seattle city limits. A few parents felt the group became too large at times and suggested splitting the group up may benefit participants. The only topics parents mentioned that they would have liked more content on are how to best address abusive behavior towards siblings and how to decrease the risk of violence extending outside of the family to acquaintances and romantic partners.

No parents interviewed said they deliberately kept in touch with any other parents or families they met at Step-Up. A few parents wished they could know how other families from their group were doing, and one couple thought it would be useful if someone facilitated a way for Step-Up participants to stay in contact after program completion to continue to provide support to each other.

Participants supported program sustainment and expansion, if possible. One mother said, "I think it's a program that's needed and should be expanded...in other places, because our kids are floundering...I think it's needed for kids to know how to behave" (PT02). Some participants mentioned conditions that should be met to promote continued quality, and several parents expressed the

importance of trained professionals and social workers specifically as program facilitators. One mother felt it was important that the facilitators always be able to adapt the program sessions to the needs of the families in the group.

Prevention

One-third of parents talked about the need for program availability earlier before problematic behaviors become abusive. Three mothers specifically supported Step-Up or a similar program being enacted in schools and targeted towards youth at risk of violence, before behavior has escalated out of control. One mother said,

“It seems too bad it has to get...almost too far, and it’s a lot more work when it gets to the point of someone being arrested. If it could be a step before that, where things get escalated and there’s a lot of tension or something, but it isn’t to that...emergency level” (PT04).

Another mother expressed her support for the values taught in Step-Up reaching an even broader audience of adolescents:

“[I]t’s just so relevant...[I]t’s not just about domestic violence, it’s really about communication, problem solving, conflict resolution, which really goes into everything in the world. I think if young people were raised in such a way that they understood early on what is abusive behavior, I think we’d really see a drop. Because I think a lot of young people don’t even know that they’re on the abuse wheel” (PT10).

Juvenile Justice System Involvement

The PI talked to study participants about the complexities of their children’s experiences with the juvenile justice system in order to put Step-Up participation in the context of this process. These experiences are not shown in the Step-Up conceptual model. Participants were asked specifically about experiences with law enforcement, detention, and diversion or probation.

Law Enforcement

Washington State law RCW 10.31.100 (Washington State Legislature) dictates that a police officer who responds to a domestic violence call must make an arrest and take any adolescent aged 16 or older into custody, regardless of violence severity. For adolescents aged 15 and younger, police officers have discretion regarding whether or not a charge is made. As described by study participants, some parents call the police but do not want their child arrested, and for them this law causes undue turmoil.

Twelve of the fifteen participants (80%) had called the police for the incident directly leading to Step-Up participation, and the other three had called the police at other points before because of their children's behavior. Two of these three mothers refused to call the police knowing their sons may be taken away, while the other one was willing but happened to be referred to Step-Up in another way. Parents who reported apprehension towards calling the police reported feeling scared for their child to experience juvenile detention and possibly have a criminal record.

Several parents reported repercussions to their relationship with their child resulting from their calling the police. One mother explained, "[I]t also damages the relationship between parent [and] child more...because the kids feel horrible being in this situation and being arrested, and then they really have deeply hard feelings against the parents for getting them arrested..." (PT04).

Out of the parents that did call the police, about one-third reported they had anticipated and planned for calling the police as their child's behavior began to escalate. One mother had even approached her local police department to discuss with them what would happen if she had to call because of her son's violent behavior. She reported a very positive experience with the police officers who answered her eventual call. Other parents said it was an impulsive decision that grew out of the violent incident. Several parents described using police calls as warnings to their adolescents to improve their behavior. One father expressed his opinion on the importance of calling the police because of his son's violence:

"[T]here are people that have said it was terrible for [my wife] to call, 'how could you put your son through this?' And honestly, it had to be done. 20/20 hindsight, my wife is saying she wouldn't have done that, but I'm thinking, 'no, it needed to be done because it made him stop and think.'...[Our kids] can do wrong and they need to realize that because when they grow up, if he did what he did to someone else, his boss, he could go to jail, he could lose his job. He could hurt his wife and all that. He's gotta learn that you can't do stuff like that...I'm not glad that it happened...but I can't say that anything that we did was wrong. He had to learn his lesson" (PT01).

Like he and his wife, a few other participants reported they and their spouse disagreed on whether or not calling the police was necessary before the incident occurred or beneficial afterwards.

Regarding the specific police officers' response to their child's violent behavior, parents had very mixed opinions. Parents lived in various municipalities in the Seattle metropolitan area, and parents in smaller jurisdictions tended to report more positive experiences, though this was not true for all participants. Some parents described interactions with the police during which they and their families

were treated respectfully and informed of exactly what would happen; parents also reported the police call and response as a “crucial” step in initiating a behavior change in their child. A couple parents who had called the police multiple times reported different officers approached the situation very differently.

Several parents were very unhappy with how their child’s situation was handled and described the police officers as confrontational, aggressive, and lacking basic interpersonal skills. One mother described her decision to call the cops as “the biggest mistake [she] made” (PT14). She expressed her fears and disappointment with their response:

“I said ‘I don’t want you going anywhere near him.’ I was afraid that he’d get in their face and they’d shoot him. This was right after there had been a couple incidents with...cops....They were like ‘oh we’re gonna get him, we’ll take him in,’ and I’m like, ‘that’s not why I called, you know.’ Lesson learned” (PT14).

Three mothers specifically expressed that they wished crisis intervention services were available instead of having to depend on law enforcement personnel to diffuse the situation. They regretted that their adolescents were treated like criminals during what they saw as out-of-control family conflicts.

Some parents felt remorseful about calling the police on their child and being technically responsible for their child being detained. One mother described her moral and financial dilemmas she faced each time she had to decide whether or not to call them:

“[I]t was kinda tough. I mean, when you have to go to that extent to have the police show up, you don’t know what they’re going to do...[I]t takes a lot of courage to do that, because obviously as a parent you don’t want your child going to jail, but when you make that call and there’s something wrong going on, that’s always a possibility. That’s really scary, because you’re not only dealing with the fact that your child could possibly be locked up...But...[you]...are contemplating the fact...[that you would be] responsible for all the court fines and costs, jail time, the therapy that they’re gonna have to go through, everything that goes along with that... appointments with attorneys, time in court. So it really does...[put] quite a bit on a parent to have to get to that point” (PT05).

Detention

After the police call and response, all youth (n=12) were taken to a juvenile detention facility. Most adolescents stayed in detention for one day, though two stayed as long as three days. Parents were asked about their adolescents’ experience, and overall parents reported the experience was difficult for their child (n=11) but ultimately had positive results. A few parents felt their child should have stayed in a facility closer to their home instead of being taken to King County’s main juvenile detention center, as it added complication and stress for the whole family. One mother described her unfortunate situation in

which there was a communication breakdown and her son was sent home with his father without her knowledge.

According to their parents, adolescents described detention as horrible (n=3), boring (n=2), and filthy (n=2), and two adolescents expressed empathy for other youth in detention with longer sentences. A couple parents felt the whole experience was overly traumatic for their children, though others viewed it as a positive experience and vital catalyst for change. Parents reported feeling concern about their child returning home from detention, for a variety of reasons including fear and needing time away from their child. About one-quarter of parents (n=4) talked about knowing their child would be angry with them for getting them in trouble and were nervous to have them back in their home. Two of these parents approved their child's return home in an effort to preserve their relationship with their child, even though they would have preferred they stay in detention longer. According to one mother,

“[T]he judge said ‘okay he's going home with you.’ And I was kind of shocked that he didn't want to keep him longer, I don't know. and I'm like ‘oh my gosh, it's still just a slap on his hand’...I was so scared to bring him back home, I didn't feel prepared to bring him back home after. Because my kid, I called 911 and then my son is in the courtroom, like ‘you stupid [bleep], you got me in here,’ so I was kind of scared to bring home that night, that day...I'm sure I could've said, ‘I don't want to bring him home, you can keep him,’ but I'm not going to say that” (PT03).

Two mothers specifically asked that their daughters not come home right away, and subsequently they stayed in detention longer than one night. One explained, “I wanted them to keep her as long as possible, I really did. I thought that that would help...And I needed the break honestly” (PT08).

Diversion and Probation Processes

After detention, youth were put through either a diversion (n=9) or probation process (n=2). These classifications appear so be somewhat arbitrary as the two adolescents charged for domestic violence were not involved in incidents of greater severity than those put on diversion; these youth were not categorized as severely or chronically violent. Since data on race, ethnicity, and other demographic factors were not collected, it is unknown if there are other factors that were related to these decisions. In general, parents reported attending Step-Up was their child's sole requirement of diversion, and they appreciated the availability of a program that was so specific to the core issue; for example, parents felt community service was too unrelated to their violence. Parents did not feel diversion offered many

supports or resources but still felt it was a satisfactory process. A few parents specifically talked about their positive experiences attending the Community Accountability Board. One mother said,

“I think it’s really a good...[I]t involves community members [who] try to listen to both sides. And they try to do something they think will be based on where everyone’s coming from will be helpful. I think it’s a great system and I felt like they just worked...Diversion... is a really good thing, more humane” (PT12).

Two parents felt the entire court processing took too long, though they realized resource issues were likely to blame. One father whose son waited very long for his sentence still felt positive about the requirement of Step-Up, “I did want there to be a consequence that I wasn’t gonna have to deliver, because I knew I was gonna have a hard time giving a consequence that was gonna have the right impact” (PT15). All parents who brought up their interactions with judges reported positive experiences and felt they were fair.

Support Available

Parents were asked their opinion on whether or not their experience with the juvenile justice system was a supportive process. Most parents reported support besides Step-Up was minimal, and some felt this adequate for their family’s situation, while others felt they needed more. Two parents whose children were placed on probation talked about outstanding support from various professionals.

Two mothers specifically brought up the evident biases and lack of support in the juvenile justice system that disadvantages ethnic minorities and people with low incomes. One mother explained,

“[W]e had really good experience...Of course you know we waltz in there with our expensive white lawyer, and everyone else in the place is like fifteen, black, with a baby waiting in line for a public defender. So that’s...really sorta stark, it’s just an unfair system. It’s probably 99% minority. So that part’s ugly. Those kids...I can’t imagine why they should be there...Other than the depressing bit of it, it was fairly supportive. But I mean, easy for us to say. I don’t know that those 15 year old black kids had the same experience that we did...There’s tons missing, like more public defenders, more people who have the least bit understanding for kids. I mean, it’s just...awful. Here we are, [my husband], me, and [him]. No one else had parents with them. They didn’t have parents, they had kids with them...It doesn’t give you a lot of hope for any of them. Because they don’t have the support system outside. Family or lawyers or all the things we were able to afford. It’s...not a fair system. And chances are, you can’t mandate those kids to go to Step Up because they don’t have a way to get there” (PT14).

Another mother who happened to be an employee of the Department of Corrections felt similarly:

“And I think a lot of...families caught up in this situation feel helpless and...don’t understand the system. They don’t understand the courts or what’s happening or how to have a voice in it, and feel intimidated...and I didn’t, just because I had been working in the system for 30 years. And even then, it was a horrible, just a really emotional turmoil time” (PT06).

Another mother who is African-American also acknowledged the need to address the high numbers of African-American youth in the justice system:

“I think that for the most part [the staff in the court system] understood and...did what they could to try to keep her out of the system...I appreciate that because we don't need another young black youth in the court system” (PT08).

Despite some parents viewing their child's experience with the juvenile justice system as positive and necessary, many still expressed frustration with the state of the juvenile justice system in general and the tendency to treat youth as criminals when they would most benefit from support and guidance. One mother said,

“Some [kids] come out [of detention] okay, but I think it's a very destructive way to teach our children. You know, lock them all up in one place, when they're so young...I think lessons need to be learned, but as a system...we lock people up for everything...And it's really sad, because if they have no direction in life to begin with, and they're thrown in together with all these people who have serious behavior problems, what are they gonna learn? How will we as society help them to get out of this? We're basically just punishing them, we're not actually rehabilitating them...I think we lock up way too many kids...We spend a lot of time and resources that I think could better be used by educating them and promoting good health in their families. I think that's where it starts” (PT09).

DISCUSSION

Overall, parents reported participation in Step-Up was a worthwhile experience and contributed to positive behavior change in their children by providing an appropriate balance of practical skill-building and emotional support. The program's supportive social environment seemed just as important as learning specific skills, because it gave parents the chance to practice skills without feeling judged and to discuss ongoing challenges with other families going through similar situations. One mother commented, “I thought that it was structured enough that my son had to learn about boundaries, which was an incredibly important skill for him. But I also felt that it was loving” (PT02). Another mother described the changes she saw in her son and how she was impacted emotionally:

“When you're a parent and you're watching your child hurt so much that they're putting holes in the walls, using angry words, saying some of the things that they say...and you wake up one morning and realize that your life isn't really so much like that anymore. Even though there are things that could be better, there's not any more of that fear, and that 'oh my god, are we ever going to get through this?' feeling. You feel like a miracle has happened” (PT05).

Parents reported the weekly check-in was the most effective component of Step-Up for them. Check-in was likely favored because it combines numerous skills, including the ability to recognize abusive and respectful behavior, open communication, conflict resolution, and accountability for behavior, and is also directly related to the family's specific issues. Despite commonalities in responses however, participants also had differing opinions of many program components and dynamics, highlighting the importance of multi-component interventions for CPA.

Parents had mixed feelings about the program workbook and specific role-play exercises. For families lacking communication and conflict resolution skills, these exercises are vital to skill development but cannot necessarily stand on their own to prompt behavior change. The group environment encouraged adolescents' recognition of abusive behavior and accountability to the group, both of which increased motivation for behavior change in adolescents. One father explained,

“[M]ore than anything else, and we did the workbook and all the exercises...[M]ost of them, for my son's situation... were pointless. The I statements, some of these other things...I don't think it registered as much as seeing what some of these other kids were doing to their parents” (PT01).

Study results point to many benefits of Step-Up's unique parent-child dyad group format, and it seems family-level group CPA interventions may benefit participants in ways not possible with other formats. Other findings regarding group dynamics in Step-Up were less clear. Group dynamics at play are dependent on the families participating in Step-Up at any given time, and one point of differing opinions among participants was the inclusion of families with varied violence severity in each group. Because of program logistics and resource constraints, this feature is an integral part of program operation but does not affect each family in the same way. The use of rolling admission in Step-Up is another program feature that affected parents differently. Many parents found it beneficial and encouraging to witness other families' progression through the program, but some parents found group dynamics changed with the addition and removal of specific families. This sometimes had negative impacts on adolescents' engagement and willingness to open up. Some families may benefit from attending individual family sessions or more homogenous groups, but scarce program resources limit this capability.

The families represented in the current study are atypical in their experience of CPA because of their participation in a CPA-specific program, but despite this access, many parents had ongoing needs at the end of the program. The most consistently reported recommendation for program improvement was

the inclusion of a follow-up or aftercare component, and parents felt this would be useful to promoting sustained behavior change in their adolescents. Parents may also benefit from informal follow-up with other families from their group.

Study results show there is room for improvement in law enforcement officers' response to domestic violence by adolescents as some parents felt officers did not respond in a respectful and humane way. Since CPA presents unique legal and moral challenges, specialized training for law enforcement officials may help increase consideration and sensitivity during incidents involving CPA. Before making the decision to call the police, many parents were unaware of crisis resources besides local law enforcement, signifying a need for increased development of these resources as well as public awareness of resources that are available. While most parents felt supported by the juvenile justice system, parents discussed disparities in access to resources based on family race and income. Even though Step-Up is available free of cost to all eligible families, program logistics make it difficult for families to attend who lack time, childcare, or transportation. In this way, study participants are advantaged in ways many families experiencing CPA in King County are not, and future efforts should include increased program accessibility for all eligible families.

The conceptual model developed in this study was adapted from the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 2002; DiClemente, Salazar, & Crosby, 2013) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2004; DiClemente, Salazar, & Crosby, 2013). According to the theory of planned behavior, an adolescent's decision to use abusive or respectful behavior is affected by their attitude towards the behavior (whether or not they believe it is warranted), subjective norms (whether or not abusive behavior is accepted by people of importance to them), and their perceived control over their behavior. From this perspective, Step-Up participation helps adolescents learn that their abusive behavior is not warranted, that it negatively impacts others, and that it is not morally or legally acceptable. They also learn that it is within their control to replace abusive behavior with respectful behavior. According to the theory, these factors together converge to lead to a positive change in behavior. Social cognitive theory is evident in Step-Up in the use of modeling and role-play, the understanding of consequences of abusive behavior, and group dynamics that reward respectful behavior.

Limitations and Strengths

Though this study fills a considerable gap in the CPA literature, it is marked by several limitations. The study sample is not representative of all parents who participate in the Step-Up program as only parents who completed the Step-Up program with their daughter/son were eligible to participate. Families may stop attending the program because they are not realizing benefits or do not like the program for a variety of reasons. For this reason, it is likely that study participants have a more beneficial view of Step-Up than those who did not complete the program. Also, some participants who completed the program could not be reached by Step-Up staff and it is unknown how they may differ from participants who were successfully contacted. Despite efforts by the PI and Step-Up personnel to communicate that the current research was independent of the Step-Up program, study participants may have been less willing to be fully honest about negative experiences in the program because they were initially contacted by Step-Up staff. In order to mitigate this possibility, participants were ensured their responses would be kept confidential and that there would be no way for Step-Up staff to connect any specific responses to them. Finally, as one might expect, parents who completed the program further in the past had more difficulty remembering specific details of program components and features. Though interviewing parents years after program completion may allow them to have perspective they did not have during the program, they may also misremember certain details or overestimate benefits of their participation. It was common for parents to report they did not remember certain details or parts of the program, indicating that they were being honest in their reporting.

A significant strength of the study is that it adds to the limited data on the effectiveness of CPA programs. To date, no qualitative studies have been carried out on the Step-Up program, and these findings can be used to supplement existing and future program evaluations. The study sample was diverse in terms of family experience with CPA and contextual factors. This study also adds to the literature on parent perceptions of juvenile justice participation specifically related to domestic violence.

Implications

The current study documents the perceptions of a heterogeneous group of parents who participated in Step-Up in King County, Washington. Despite differences in study participants' experiences with CPA, a number of common themes emerged from the qualitative data, and study results generally support this family-level group CPA intervention. Future research should more closely investigate variation in perceived program benefit by family-, parent-, and adolescent-level factors. In order to benefit program participants in the future, Step-Up program staff should pay increased attention to group dynamics and how they affect each specific family, as well as offer some follow-up to program participation to help adolescents sustain positive behavior change.

APPENDICES

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Appendix 1 Email language to potential participants

Dear Parent,

We're contacting you because you and your youth completed the Step Up program with us in the past. A graduate student named Julia Correll, from the University of Washington, is working with us to talk to parents who have participated in Step-Up about lasting effects of the program. She is interested in interviewing you and other parents about the effects of Step-Up and what you have taken away from the program to help us learn more about long-term program outcomes.

Please let us know if you are willing to have Julia contact you to talk further. If you agree, you are in no way obligated to be interviewed but Julia will call you to explain the interview to you and set up a time to meet, if you wish.

Thank you,
Lily Anderson, MSW and Greg Routt, MA
Step-Up Program

Appendix 2 Interview guide

I am going to start with some general questions about how things have been going since you left Step-Up, then ask some questions about the program specifically. If you don't understand something I say, just let me know and I'll try to explain myself better. And if there are any questions you don't want to answer, just let me know and we can skip them.

Would you please tell me when you completed the Step Up Program? What were some of your general impressions about being in the program?

Would you please tell me a bit about what originally brought you to the Step Up Program and what was going on with you and your son or daughter at the time?

Overall, how would you say things have been going between you and your youth since ending Step-Up?
Probe: How has the quality of your relationship been since ending Step-Up?

Is any violence or abuse occurring now?

If yes: Use the behavior checklist (attached form).

We want to know if any of these behaviors have been used in an abusive or intimidating way specifically.

After completed with checklist:

Do you notice any continuing triggers for problem behavior?

What happens when your youth acts this way? How do you respond?

How does the situation end?

Are there any safety issues?

If no: Do you and your youth have any continuing challenges?

Has your youth had any law enforcement or criminal justice involvement since ending Step-Up?

If yes: Was it related to domestic violence or other types of charges?

Are you and your youth using any skills you learned in Step-Up?

Probes: Some examples of skills used in Step-Up are respectful communication, problem solving together, talking about feelings, separating when things get escalated (time-out, safety plan), making amends, taking responsibility for behavior, etc.

Which ones? When and how?

How do you think you've contributed to changes in your youth? (if applicable)

What do you think was most helpful about Step-Up for your teen? For you?

Are there parts of the program that you think were not very effective for your teen? For you?

Probe: Any idea why? Do you think there's anything about your specific situation or your family's characteristics that affected this?

Are there any issues that were not addressed in Step-Up but you wish would have been covered?

Probe: Do you have any suggested improvements to Step-Up?

Have any of your other relationships been affected by your participation in Step-Up?

Probes: How? This could include relationships with a partner or spouse, other children (if you have any), extended family, friends, and neighbors, for example.

Have you experienced any unexpected effects of the program?

Do you feel Step-Up was culturally appropriate?

Probes: Do you think the program was relevant to your life and where you come from? Are there changes that could be made to Step-Up to make it more relevant to you and your family? This might involve aspects of your religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, location, etc.

My next questions are about your experience dealing with your youth's behavior in general (not related to participating in Step-Up).

Have you experienced any health effects related to dealing with this issue? How have those changed over the course of the program and since then?

Have you had any financial issues related to dealing with your youth's behavior?

Have you received support around this issue from sources besides Step-Up?

Probes: This may be formal or institutional support or personal support networks.

Have you used resources besides SU to address this issue?

Have you kept in touch with any contacts made at Step-Up?

Looking back at your youth's whole experience with the court system (if applicable), how do you think it impacted them? This includes police response and court response once your youth came into the system.

Did you call the police as a result of the abuse?

If yes: What did you think about the police response when you called? Was it helpful?

Did your youth go to detention?

If yes: For how long? How do you think that experience impacted them?

Was the court system involvement a support to you?

If yes: How?

If no: How could you have been better helped by the court?

That is my last planned question.

Is there anything else you think is important for me to know about your experience with Step-Up or dealing with these issues in general?

Appendix 3 Verbal informed consent language

Hi [Name], My name is Julia Correll and I am a graduate student at the University of Washington. I was told by Lily and Greg at Step-Up that you are okay with me contacting you to talk about possibly setting up an interview. Is now an okay time to talk?

I am going to describe the project to you and what would be expected if you agree to participate. If you have any questions along the way, please stop me and ask.

This is a research study designed to look at the long-term effects of participating in Step-Up. I am interested in interviewing parents who have participated in Step-Up with their youth and have completed the program within the past one to two years. I'd like to meet with you for one in-person interview. This interview is completely voluntary and you will not experience any disadvantages if you decide not to participate. You can decide you don't want to participate at any time, and if you decide to do the interview, you can choose not to answer any specific questions. During the interview, I will ask questions about how things have been with your son or daughter since you completed Step-Up, your experience with Step-Up, and what parts of the program you thought were helpful, as well as those you thought could be improved.

To do the interview, we can meet at a University of Washington office in Seattle, at the Youth Services Center, at the location where you attended Step Up, or at your home. We can also complete the interview over the phone. Where we meet will depend on what is most comfortable and convenient for you. The interview would take about one hour and I'd like to audio-record it. This is just so I can make sure I hear everything you say and don't make any mistakes when taking notes. Your interview will then be transcribed, which means I will type up word for word what was said. The audio-recording will be destroyed when I am done with this study.

Anything you tell me that might allow someone to identify you (name, child's school, etc.) will be deleted from the interview transcript. I will be the only person who will know your contact information, and I will destroy this information when your interview has been fully typed up. No one from the Step Up Program will know be shown information that could be traced back to you personally.

The main risk in participating is the accidental loss of confidentiality, although all of the information you give me will be kept on a password-protected computer accessible only to the researchers working on the study. Another risk is that some people may feel uncomfortable or upset talking about their experiences with the Step-Up program and how it may or may not have helped them. You won't directly benefit from participating in this study, but some people feel good knowing they are contributing to research that may help programs in the future.

If throughout the course of the interview you report that abuse toward you involving your son or daughter is still occurring, I will give you information on resources available to you, including the police, Step-Up program staff, and King County crisis resources.

If you have any questions about the research or research participant rights, or if you think you have been harmed by participating in this study, you can contact the UW's Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098 or hsdinfo@uw.edu.

Do you have any questions about everything I just said?
Would you be willing to participate in an interview with me?

(If yes, schedule interview at mutually agreed upon time and place.)