

Supporting Families Living with CPVA During Christmas

Are you caring for a child who can be violent, aggressive or controlling towards you?

Are you at risk of violence, harm or increased stress and anxiety during the holiday period, as a result of this?

This factsheet provides some advice for parents and caregivers, whānau or friends, and for professionals, to help you manage or support the situation more effectively.

The extra challenges at Christmas

For families living with **Child to Parent Violence and Abuse (CPVA)**, Christmas can be a time of increased fear and anxiety, with parents often unsure how they will navigate the violence through the festive season.

Changes in routine and more family time can **heighten stress and the risk of violence towards family members**, including pets. Conservative estimates suggest that **3–10% of Police family harm callouts** involve violence by a child towards a parent or other family members (Townsend, 2024).

Although CPVA can occur in any family, research suggests that prevalence is higher when there is **neurodevelopmental disability or neurodivergence** (Tempest, 2024; Townsend, 2024).

When a person's nervous system is overwhelmed, it's very hard to self-regulate

Changes to routine, the anticipation of gatherings, spending extended time with whānau, opening presents, or going on holiday can overstimulate an already hypervigilant (easily overwhelmed) nervous system. This can cause a child - including an adult child - to become unable to control themselves (dysregulated) and, at times, violent. This kind of behaviour is a **brain- and body-based response to overwhelm**.

Most families instinctively adapt to meet their child's needs and are skilled in their parenting approach.

- Parents and caregivers in our peer support group often use **low-demand parenting** to support their child.
 - Demands can include giving instructions, setting rules, offering choices, or telling the child what to do.

- Parents recognise that their child may not be able to meet these expectations, even when they want to - due to cognitive differences (brain-based differences) or sensory sensitivities (being easily overwhelmed).

Low-demand parenting can be difficult for others to understand, as children often mask their behaviour around others.

- Many families are told by friends, relatives, or professionals to be firmer or use consequences — **advice that, while well-intentioned, can be harmful.**
- Implementing **such strategies can increase the risk of violence** at an already heightened time of year.

Being realistic

Parents and caregivers are often juggling a wide range of needs within their families.

- When siblings are present, reducing social interactions isn't always possible.
- Siblings are sometimes referred to as *glass children* — their needs can become invisible when their brother or sister has complex behavioural challenges.
- Many parents feel guilt and shame about not being able to meet everyone's needs, adding to emotional exhaustion.
- While advice to withdraw from Christmas events may temporarily reduce stress, it is often unrealistic for the whānau (family) and can heighten feelings of isolation and resentment.
- Every family member's needs matter.

How whānau and friends can help

If you have a relative living with CPVA, think about how you can show **manaakitanga** - genuine care, respect, and support - in ways that feel safe and empowering to them.

It's not helpful to offer parenting advice, as this can come across as patronising or dismissive.

- **Be non-judgemental** and offer a listening ear.
- **Be positive and complimentary** about them as a parent, and about their child.
- **Show manaakitanga** by taking a plate of food or something to share.
- **Include the family** in the day, rather than excluding them because of potential challenges.
- **Ask what you can do** to make the event less stressful for the child and family.
- **Be understanding** if the visit needs to end early, due to escalating behaviour.
- **If visiting isn't possible**, make a video call or check in by phone or message.
- **Be led by the family** — they know what feels right and manageable for them.

For Professionals: Building Whakamana

Even though many professionals take a well-earned break over Christmas, it's important to check in with families first. Supporting families in ways that build **whakamana** -empowerment and respect - can make a real difference. As most organisations aren't skilled in recognising CPVA, families are frequently managing complex behaviours with little to no support.

- **Recognise that every family member's wellbeing matters.** Keep kōrero realistic and compassionate, acknowledging that it's sometimes impossible to accommodate every need within the family.
- **Acknowledge that parents/caregivers are the experts on their children.** Respect their knowledge and insights when discussing care and safety.
- **Ensure safety plans are current** and clear for all whānau members.
- **Remind families** that they can contact the Police if they feel unsafe.
- **Affirm parents/caregivers.** Remind them they are doing a great job and that they do not need to be superheroes in their attempts to please everyone.

For Parents and Caregivers

Christmas and the holidays can be incredibly difficult and exhausting times to navigate. As well as the calm moments, things **will** sometimes escalate and plans will go out of the window. You're doing an amazing job caring for your child in often challenging circumstances.

- **It's okay to decline invitations** if attending would be overwhelming for you or your child, or if others don't understand your child's needs.
- **It's okay to create a different kind of Christmas** that suits your family.
- **Everyone in the family is important.** It's okay to sometimes prioritise the needs of others — including yourself or your other children. Your wellbeing matters too.
- **Be gentle with yourself.** This time of year can bring up feelings of grief, loss, or disappointment about how your child's life and yours have turned out. These feelings are normal - acknowledge them and allow space to process them.

Continue to use **low-demand parenting techniques** (see page 1).
It's okay to call the police if you feel unsafe or threatened.

Think about some simple ways of helping yourself stay calm – take a few minutes to write down what works for you, and put it somewhere visible, as a reminder when things are tough.

Practise some breathing techniques for use in high-pressure moments. Here are two good ones to try:

Nourishing our nervous system

Breathwork - Slow, deep breathing makes a difference. It helps to ease anxiety, refocus the mind, and ground the body.

Scientific fact: It activates the vagus nerve and the parasympathetic (rest and digest) nervous system, helping you feel calmer.

In contrast, fast, shallow breathing activates the sympathetic (stress response) nervous system - and can increase stress if the body is already stuck in an immobilized state (i.e. the “freeze” in human beings’ typical “flight, fight or freeze” responses to danger).

Physiological Sigh - This technique lowers carbon dioxide levels in the blood, calms the nervous system, and activates the parasympathetic (rest and digest) state.

What it is: The physiological sigh is a natural, double inhale followed by a long exhale.

How to do it:

1. Take a deep inhale through your nose.
2. Immediately take a second, shorter inhale through your nose.
3. Exhale slowly and fully through your mouth.
4. Repeat 3–5 times.

Why it works: This lowers carbon dioxide levels, calms the nervous system, and triggers a parasympathetic (rest and digest) response. Andre Huberman, a neuroscientist at Stanford University, highlights this as one of the fastest ways to reduce stress.

References

- Tempest, L. (2024). *Child to parent violence and abuse: New Zealand’s invisible family violence*. VisAble.
- Churchill Fellowship Findings: *UK and Australian Approaches to Child and Adolescent-to-Parent Violence Informing Aotearoa New Zealand’s Family Violence Response*, Sarah Townsend, Year of Travel: 2024, Report Submitted: December 2024

About VisAble

VisAble is a disabled-person-led organisation based in Aotearoa New Zealand.

We work to strengthen national capabilities across agencies and sectors to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, and neglect affecting disabled people and their whānau.

Our focus includes tāngata whaikaha Māori and their whānau, tagata sa'ilimalo and āiga-tele, d/Deaf, neurodivergent, and Adults at Risk.

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