



Practice briefing

Working with young people experiencing relationship abuse

This practice briefing is for professionals working with young people experiencing domestic abuse. This briefing offers information on the prevalence of relationship abuse. The briefing outlines the definition change and offers information on the prevalence of relationship abuse amongst young people. It gives guidance on how to engage and risk assess young people, and offers safety planning advice in relation to this client group.

Definition

The Government definition of domestic violence and abuse is:

'Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse:

- psychological
- physical
- sexual
- financial
- emotional

Controlling behaviour is: a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.

Coercive behaviour is: an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.'

Prevalence

- Just under half of young people exposed to domestic violence are being directly harmed by the family member
- A quarter of those exposed to domestic violence go on to demonstrate harmful behaviour within their own relationships and in 61% of cases the abuse is directed towards their mother.
- 94% of young people experiencing abuse within their intimate relationship are female
- Young victims are more likely to experience abuse from an intimate partner (61%) than an ex-intimate partner (30%).

¹ SafeLives. (2012). *A place of greater safety*. http://www.SafeLives.org.uk/policy/A_Place_of_greater_safety.pdf
More SafeLives research on teenage domestic abuse can be downloaded at: <http://www.SafeLives.org.uk/policy/SafeLives-Insights-Factsheet-Teenage-Domestic-Abuse-FINAL.pdf>

² Radford, L., Corral, S., Bradley, C., H, F., Bassett, C., Howat, N., & Collishaw, S. (2011). *Child abuse and neglect in the UK today*. NSPCC. http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/findings/child_abuse_neglect_research_PDF_wdf84181.pdf

Engagement

Young people engage with services in a different way to adults, and professionals will need to adapt their working practices to retain meaningful contact with them. Young people may have fluid relationships and specific preferences for communicating – e.g. texting - as well as different priorities to adult clients. A flexible working approach will be required to create engagement with this client group.

Practice pointers

Do:

- Draw on a variety of different techniques that improve engagement.
- Be prepared to spend time exploring what abuse is. The young people you work with may not identify their own experiences as abuse.
- Validate the seriousness of young people's relationships.
- Target your service at young people: for example, use relevant leaflets for referrals and signposting.
- Communicate with a young person on their terms; be comfortable using their terminology and language when necessary.
- Offer face-to-face and new technologies communication, rather than telephone contact alone.
- Be flexible on appointment length: be led by the client's wishes and consider sending reminders for meetings to improve engagement.
- Have established relationships with local statutory and voluntary services for young people, eg children's social care; child and adolescent mental health; the youth offending service; the SARC or equivalent.

Don't:

- Assume that the experience of abuse is less harmful if it is perpetrated or experienced by a young person.
- Try and be 'cool': young people need genuine, professional support rather than a friend.

Risk

Use the SafeLives Young Person's Risk Identification Checklist with young people aged 13-18. This will address the evidence-based risk factors associated with domestic abuse and it will provide a useful starting point to understand the risks faced by a client.

As with all risk assessment, a practitioner's professional judgement is crucial. Listen to the client carefully and explore their situation with them. Consider any additional vulnerabilities, the context for the abuse and the extent to which they may be minimising their experience to gain a fuller picture of the risks faced by your young client. The points below should also be explored carefully.

From the SafeLives-DASH Risk Identification Checklist

Escalation: Abuse in young people's relationships typically escalates more quickly than adults' and professionals should explore this carefully even when other risk factors are not present.

Pregnancy: Abuse and violence is disproportionately experienced by young pregnant women and mothers.

Separation: Post-separation abuse can occur, even when the relationship itself is relatively short.

Stalking and harassment: Stalking by young people tends to be significantly more violent than that carried out by adults and ¾ of stalking victims are targeted online.

More widely

Gang involvement and multiple perpetrators: Consider whether your client could be affected by gang activity, either directly or through friends or family, and be aware that this may broaden the number of potential perpetrators and also those at risk.

³ lbi

Normalisation: There is a high level of normalisation of abuse, violence and controlling behaviour amongst young people. A young client may not recognise the abuse and may minimise the harm they are experiencing.

Sexual abuse and exploitation: A young person can become a victim of exploitation, ranging from apparently 'consensual' relationships - which are in fact exchanges of sex for gifts, accommodation or every day necessities - through to organised crime.

There is also a normalisation of pornography and sexually explicit images amongst young people which can affect what sort of behaviour is perceived as 'normal' and acceptable, increasing vulnerability.

Young people may have limited knowledge and understanding around choice and consent.

First relationship: A person is most likely to experience domestic abuse in their first relationship and the majority of these will occur during teenage years.

Forced marriage: A young person who has recently turned 16 is at a high risk trigger point for forced marriage and, in cases where the concept of 'honour' is at stake, there is a significantly increased potential for multiple perpetrators.

Online abuse: Social networking sites provide perpetrators with opportunities for control and online tracking, and can limit a victim's ability to protect themselves. Young people's use of new technologies makes young victims more vulnerable to being controlled, e.g. through threats to circulate humiliating visual images.

Impact of family relationships: Young people with experience of family violence have increased vulnerability to experience abuse in a relationship, and at an earlier age, than young people with no history of family violence. Young victims of sexual abuse are vulnerable to repeat victimisation.

Safety planning

Wherever possible, safety planning should address or mitigate the risks identified. Idvas should consider the following within the safety planning process:

Consider the complexities associated with teen relationship abuse, as outlined above. This client group may also be experiencing gang involvement, be at risk of sexual exploitation, be experiencing abuse perpetrated through new technologies and be at risk of 'honour'-based abuse and forced marriage.

Link in with gangs experts working within your locality, including the police and any Ending Gang Violence funded initiatives. Local knowledge on gang structures is imperative when working with gang-affected young people; such groups will also have information on gang-related sexual exploitation.

The Marac is an effective forum to hear the cases of 16 and 17 year olds in abusive relationships and, as a result, agencies which provide expertise for young people should be invited to attend: for example, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), the Youth Offending Service and Children's Safeguarding representatives. It's important to recognise that these cases are best managed through an integrated response which combines child safeguarding and high risk domestic abuse expertise, particularly in relation to risk assessment and safety planning.

Young people are protected by child protection legislation until their 18th birthday. Professionals need to follow their agency's safeguarding children procedures (which should comply with the Local Safeguarding Children Board's child protection procedures). A best practice response for a young client is likely to reflect an integrated response which combines child safeguarding and high risk domestic abuse expertise, tailored to each young person's needs. It is important to involve the client in the process as much as possible.

Make links with **schools and colleges** and incorporate your client's education, training commitment and relationships into your safety planning work. They may attend school or college with the perpetrator and/or be part of a social circle which includes the perpetrator.

Consider the additional conflict the young person might be experiencing at home and whether the safety plan could involve rebuilding relationships with parents and siblings if appropriate. Your client's parents and carers may not approve of the young person's relationship and the young person may not be able to talk to them about the abuse.

Be sure to ascertain the **living arrangements** of your young client so that appropriate support can be offered. Do not assume that they live with their parents, they may be staying with friends or be of no fixed abode and may be able to access accommodation as a child in need.

The young person may have **limited access to funds** which could impact on their safety plan and ability to travel to and attend appointments. Consider this in safety planning and employ flexibility to retain engagement and encourage partner agencies to do the same.