

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Young teenagers' experiences of domestic abuse

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Abstract

This article reports on the first findings from the ESRC funded Boys to Men Project. In total, 1143 pupils aged 13-14 years completed a questionnaire to assess their experiences of domestic abuse as victims, witnesses and perpetrators. Overall, 45% of pupils who had been in a dating relationship reported having been victimised, 25% having perpetrated it, with the only difference in rates of victimisation and perpetration between boys and girls being in relation to sexual victimisation. Of the whole sample, 34% reported having witnessed it in their own family. There was a relationship between victimisation and perpetration with the vast majority of perpetrators (92%) also reporting experiencing abuse from a boyfriend/girlfriend. There was also a relationship between experiencing abuse and help seeking from adults, with those who have been victimised less likely to say they would seek help if they were hit by a partner than those who had yet to experience any abuse. The relationship between help seeking and experiences of abuse is further complicated by gender, with girls twice as likely to seek help than boys, but with girls who have previously hit a partner among the most reticent group. The paper concludes with highlighting the implications of these findings for those undertaking preventative work in schools.

Keywords: domestic abuse, teenagers, dating, violence, relationships

Introduction

There is increasing recognition that the problem of domestic abuse – the use of physical, sexual and/or psychological abuse to control a partner or ex-partner – affects young people as much as it does adults. The British Home Office, for example, has recently widened the definition the government uses to include abuse against those aged 16-17 as well as adults. From March 2013

any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, 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

is to be deemed ‘domestic violence and abuse’¹ by service providers working within England and Wales (Home Office 2012, p. 19). Consideration is currently being given to extending this definition to include younger teenagers and children too. There are good reasons for widening the definition in this way. National crime surveys consistently reveal that younger adults are at greater risk of victimisation than older adults. In 2009/10, for example, 12.7% of women aged 16-19, for example, indicated in the British Crime Survey that they had experienced at least one incident of domestic abuse in the last year, compared to 4.8% of women aged 55-59 (Smith *et al.* 2011, p. 88). In the US, studies of self-reported offending have suggested that the peak age for perpetrating domestic abuse may even be as young as 16, suggesting that most state intervention – the delivery of criminal justice responses to adult offenders and victims – is rather too little too late (Nocentini *et al.* 2010).

Such research raises an important question about when the onset of victimisation and offending against partners and ex-partners begins. But it also raises some difficult questions about whether the domestic abuse experienced by older groups of adults is the same as that

¹ Previously, the Home Office has preferred the term ‘domestic violence’ when referring to policy and research in England and Wales, whereas Scottish Government has used the term ‘domestic abuse’ to signal clearly that not all abuse involves assault. For consistency, we use the term ‘domestic abuse’ here.

experienced by young people. Perhaps the most consistent finding from national crime surveys is that it is women more often than men who are on the receiving end of abuse that is repeated, life-threatening and injurious, an observation that justifies the greater provision of support and refuge services for female victims and the wider conceptualization of the problem as ‘gender-based violence’ in many European countries (Gadd *et al.* 2003, Lombard, 2012). On the other hand, the vast majority of studies that address ‘interpersonal violence’ between couples tend to show that, if anything, women are a little more likely to use violence against a partner than men (Straus 1997, Moffitt *et al.* 2001). These studies, which utilise a method of gathering self-reported victimization and offending known as the Conflict Tactics Scale, are informed predominantly by samples of young adults drawn from college, university or armed services populations (Archer 2000). Conventionally these studies tend not to examine sexual assault, stalking or ‘coercive control’ (Swan and Snow 2006), forms of violence victim surveys suggest are more likely to be perpetrated by men against women.

Thus, there is still considerable debate in the literature as to whether domestic abuse remains a crime committed predominantly by men against women or whether ‘gender symmetry’ is the norm (Archer 2000, Gadd *et al.* 2003, Straus 2009, Dobash *et al.* 1998). Much depends on how abuse is defined and its impact measured. Prevalence rates vary considerably and there are mixed findings with respect to gender differences because of the definitions used, the type of instrument employed, the age of the sample, and the criteria used (e.g. frequency and time period considered).

The intellectual disagreements between those who regard domestic abuse as gender-based and those who argue it is not have been protracted and often focussed on the superiority of one methodology over another to address blind spots the other cannot see (Dobash and Dobash 2012). But a consensus does now seem to be emerging that different methods capture different forms of violence, with what some deem ‘common couple

violence' perhaps captured using self-report techniques applied to couples, and what Evan Stark (2009) dubs 'domestic terrorism' and 'coercive control', a form of abuse perpetrated mostly by men against women, most manifest among those who disclose repeat victimization to victim surveys (Johnson , 2006, 2008, Stark 2009).

Nevertheless, before either policy responses or academic conceptual frameworks developed in research with adults are applied to younger populations, there is a need to take stock of what we know about young people's experiences of domestic violence. In the UK, the evidence base is currently patchy. In Scotland, Burman and Cartmel's (2005) survey of 14-18 year olds found as many as 7% of girls reported having been slapped compared to 31% of boys. 16% of girls had been pushed/grabbed/shoved compared to 25% of boys, and 9% of girls had been kicked/bitten or hit compared to 19% of boys. 10% of girls and 8% of boys who participated in this study reported that their partner had tried to force them to have sex, and 6% of boys and 3% of girls said that they had been forced to have sex themselves.

A subsequent and more systematic study of abuse within teenage relationships in the UK has found higher prevalence rates still. Barter *et al.* (2009) surveyed 1,353 young people aged 13-17 from eight secondary schools across England, Wales and Scotland. 88% of participants reported having had at least one relationship experience. Among this 88% it was found that 22% had experienced moderate physical violence (i.e. pushing, slapping, hitting or holding down) and 8% had experienced more severe physical violence (i.e. punching, strangling, beating up, hitting you with an object). Overall, girls were more likely to have experienced physical violence than boys, and the violence girls experienced was more likely to have been repeated. High rates of emotional abuse among teenagers were also exposed by Barter *et al.* (2009). Three quarters of girls and 50% of boys had experienced this form of abuse, with the most common form being 'made fun of you'. Girls were also more likely than boys to have experienced this on a repeated basis. A sizeable minority - 31% of girls

compared to 16% of boys - reported having been pressured or forced to do something sexual such as 'kissing, touching or something else', and 18% of girls and 11% of boys reported having been pressured or forced to have sex.

Rates of emotional partner abuse between young people were roughly similar, 59% of girls and 50% of boys reportedly having engaged in this type of behaviour. Predictably, more boys than girls report having instigated sexual violence (12% of boys and 3% of girls), and for all types of abuse experienced, girls generally reported higher levels of negative impact compared to boys. But gender differences were not all in the direction of boys being more abusive than girls. Girls in this study were actually more likely than boys to admit to perpetrating physical violence; approximately a quarter of girls reported having perpetrated some form of physical violence, compared to 8% of boys, but in most cases this was rarely repeated. It tended to be not so much in experiences of abuse but in the willingness to seek help that gender differences were most pronounced. Only a minority of boys (36%) compared to the majority of girls (57%) had told anyone about the abuse they had experienced.

From Boys to Men ESRC funded project

We report here on the 'From Boys to Men' research project, a multi-method project funded by the ESRC, involving a survey of 1200 young people, 13 focus groups and 30 in-depth interviews with young men affected by domestic abuse. We present findings of the first phase of this research only here. This sought to assess the experiences of younger teenagers – those aged 13-14 years, an age-group that made up only one quarter of the sample in the NSPCC survey, described earlier. Four fifths of the admittedly small sample ($n= 118$) of 13 year olds who took part in that research had already been in a relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend, suggesting a need to explore in greater depth how common the experience of violence is among younger teenagers. This is what the study reported here attempted to do.

There were four main research questions: 1) What are the rates of domestic abuse among young teenagers – those aged 13-14 years? 2) What is the nature of the abuse at this age - is there any overlap between being a victim, witnessing abuse at home and perpetrating it against a partner? 3) What percentage of young people would seek help from an adult if it happened to them? and 4) In what ways do gender and experiences of abuse impact on the willingness to seek help?

Method

As part of an evaluation of a school-based domestic abuse prevention educational programme, young people in year 9 (ages 13-14 years) responded to questions about their experiences of domestic abuse, as victims, perpetrators and as witnesses of abuse in their own homes (for further details of this programme, see Fox *et al.* 2012). In direct contrast to the research by Barter and colleagues, we decided to use the term ‘dating’ in the questionnaire because young people aged 13-14 years in Staffordshire do use this term; furthermore they talk about ‘boyfriends’ and ‘girlfriends’ when referring to their own intimate relationships, rather than ‘partners’, and so using the term ‘partner exploitation and violence’ was not deemed appropriate. Through consulting with our local partner organisations and a group of young people through the local NSPCC, we asked the young people to think about ‘people you have dated, and past or current boyfriends or girlfriends’. Participants were then asked to consider the adults who look after them at home, ‘e.g. your parents, stepparents, guardians or foster carers’ and questions that are about ‘things that can happen between two partners in a relationship’.

The survey questions, procedures and ethical guidelines were developed through close consultation with user groups of young people, e.g. a local Youth Parliament and a group of people known to practitioners within the local NSPCC, and also with members of our multi-

agency steering group. We took, as our starting point, questions that were very similar to those used in the NSPCC survey regarding physical, sexual and emotional forms of abuse, and modified as we were advised by the young people and practitioners we consulted. The questionnaire was anonymous and the young people who undertook it were reassured that their responses would remain confidential. They were also told that they did not have to take part in the research if they did not want to, and could stop taking part at any time. It was stressed to all participants that some of the questions were quite ‘personal and sensitive’. Participants were therefore reassured that if they were willing to answer the questions their responses could not be traced back to them as individuals or to their family. However, they were told that if they said something to us face-to-face that suggested that they or someone else was at significant risk of harm, then we would have to pass on our concerns to one of their teachers. Young people participating in the research were asked to answer the questions in silence, to keep their answers to themselves and to not look at what the person next to them was doing. After they had completed the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and were appraised of sources of support they could access if they so wished.

In total, 1143 year 9 pupils (aged 13-14 years) took part in the research. The pupils were drawn from 13 schools across Staffordshire, seven of which received the programme (intervention group) and six of which did not (control group). Taking into account free school meals as a measure of social deprivation, five schools were classified as falling into highly deprived catchment areas, and eight schools were classified as falling into areas characterised by relatively low levels of social deprivation¹. Parental consent was sought using the ‘opt-out’ method. This meant that parents and guardians had to send a form back if they did not wish their child to take part; 19 children were opted out of the research by their parents/guardians (16 male, 3 female) and 28 participants opted themselves out (17 male and 11 female).

Of the 1143 13-14 year olds who took part at the pre-test, 541 were male and 568 were female (gender missing for 34); 584 pupils were in an intervention group school and 559 in a control group school. Separate analyses were conducted for those in the intervention group and those in the control group. The findings were identical and are thus presented for the sample as a whole in this article. It is also worth noting that rates of victimisation, perpetration and witnessing abuse did not differ depending on the type of school the child went to (high or low social deprivation).

In terms of ethnicity, 89% of the sample was white, 1% Black, 5% Asian, 3% Mixed, .3% Chinese, and .2% 'other' (1% missing). 95% of participants described themselves as British and 3% as non-British (2% missing). For the 501 boys who answered the question, 18% had never been on a date, or had a boyfriend/girlfriend, two had dated boys and three had dated boys and girls; 81% of the boys had dated girls. For the girls ($n=536$), 78% had dated boys, 17% had never been on a date or had a boyfriend/girlfriend, and 3% and 2% had dated girls ($n = 16$) or boys and girls ($n=11$). Due to the very small numbers reporting same-sex partners, the results are largely based on experiences in heterosexual relationships.

The pupils completed the questionnaire before and after the programme took place in the intervention schools. The data presented here relates to young people's personal experiences of domestic abuse – collected at pre-test only. Of the 1065 young people who answered the question, 82.6% reported that they had previously been in a dating relationship, a figure comparable to that reported in other studies of children in the UK (e.g. Barter *et al.* 2009). The findings presented below on victimisation and perpetration relate to those young people who said that they had been on a date or ever had a boyfriend/girlfriend. The findings on witnessing abuse relate to the entire sample of young people who completed the questionnaire. The sample size does vary from one section to the next, as well as within sections. 856-869 young people completed the questions about victimisation, 855-859

answered the questions about perpetration, and 1078-1085 completed the section of questions about witnessing domestic abuse in their home.

Results

Experiences of Victimisation

Participants were asked to: ‘Think about people you have dated, and past or current boyfriends or girlfriends’. They were then asked to consider ten different behaviours (see Table 1) in terms of whether this had happened to them: ‘Never’, ‘Once’ or ‘More than once’. Thus, the figures reported below are for those who indicated that they had been on a date or had a boyfriend/girlfriend.

45% of pupils – 44% of boys and 46% of girls who had been on a date reported having been on the receiving end of at least one of the types of domestic abuse listed in Table 1. The most commonly reported experiences of abuse related to emotional abuse and controlling behaviours, with 38% reporting at least one of these experiences (questions 6-9). Physical abuse was the next most common and was experienced by 17% of the sample (questions 1 and 2). This was followed by sexual victimisation (questions 4 and 5) reported by 14% of the sample of young people who had been on a date. If we extend physical abuse to include threatening behaviour and damage of property (including questions 3 and 10), this figure increases to 21%. See Table 1 for the percentage of participants who indicated that this had happened to them ‘once’ or ‘more than once’ for each question. For those who did indicate it had happened to them, they were also asked to indicate whether this had happened to them in the last year (yes or no).

Table 1 about here

Gender differences were examined for experiences of physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse/controlling behaviours using a series of Chi-Square analyses. Responses to questions were combined as above and responses of girls and boys were compared in terms of whether they reported it had happened 'Never' compared to 'Once' or 'More than once'. The only difference that was statistically significant was for sexual victimisation. Table 2 shows the frequencies and percentage of responses for questions 4 and 5 combined. The findings indicate that girls reported significantly more sexual victimisation compared to boys ($\chi^2 (1, N = 845) = 8.11, p < .01$). There were no differences between boys and girls for other forms of severe physical victimisation (questions 1 and 2) and physical victimisation overall (questions 1, 2, 3, and 10) or for being on the receiving end of emotional abuse/controlling behaviours. The number of children reporting abuse happening more than once were too small to enable meaningful comparisons between boys and girls. Combinations of experiences of physical and emotional abuse were examined, and it was found that a small number of boys and girls had been victims of physical abuse only (3.9%). Similar numbers had been victims of both emotional and physical abuse (17.6%) and emotional abuse only (21%) and there were no differences between boys and girls in terms of the combinations of abuse.

Table 2 about here

Perpetration of Domestic Abuse

Rates of self-reported perpetration of domestic abuse were predictably lower than those of self-reported victimisation. 25% of pupils – 25% of boys and 24% of girls - who had been on a date reported having carried out at least one of the behaviours listed in Table 3. 20% of respondents reported perpetrating emotional abuse and controlling behaviours, 7% had

perpetrated physical abuse and 4% had perpetrated sexual abuse. The figure for physical abuse rises to 8% if we take account of threatening physical abuse (question 3) and damaging property (question 10). Gender differences were examined for perpetration of physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse/controlling behaviours using a series of Chi-Square analyses. None of the differences were statistically significant. In terms of combinations of abuse, 15.1% had perpetrated emotional abuse only, with 5.2% perpetrating emotional *and* physical abuse and 3.3% physical abuse only, with no differences between boys and girls. With the data on victimisation, perpetration and witnessing abuse combined, 52.5% of the whole sample of 13-14 year olds had experienced some form of domestic abuse, whether as a victim, perpetrator or having witnessed abuse.

Table 3 about here

Witnessing Domestic Abuse

Participants were asked to, ‘Think about the adults who look after you at home – e.g. your parents, stepparents, guardians, foster carers (see Table 4). The questions below ask about things that can happen between two partners in a relationship. At any time in your life that you are aware of, has an adult who looks after you...’ 34% of pupils – 30% of boys and 39% of girls – reported witnessing at least one of the types of abuse involving an adult who looks after them. 27% of young people reported witnessing emotional abuse or controlling behaviours and 19% had witnessed severe physical abuse. When including questions 3 and 8, this figure for physical abuse rose to 24%.

Table 4 about here

Gender differences were examined for witnessing physical abuse and emotional abuse/controlling behaviours using a series of Chi-Square analyses. Girls reported witnessing more severe physical abuse (i.e. punching, kicking, choking, beating), physical abuse overall and more emotional abuse/controlling behaviours. Table 5 indicates that more girls than boys had witnessed severe physical abuse – 21.7% of girls compared to 16.6% of boys ($\chi^2 (1, N = 1052) = 4.15, p < .05$). Girls also reported witnessing more physical abuse overall than boys (26.8% of girls and 20.3% of boys, see Table X; $\chi^2 (1, N = 1046) = 5.75, p < .01$) and more emotional abuse/controlling behaviour (33.7% of girls and 21.6% of boys, see Table X; $\chi^2 (1, N = 1050) = 18.64, p < .001$). A very small number of boys and girls had witnessed physical abuse only (6%) with a much higher percentage reporting witnessing both emotional and physical abuse (19.5%) and emotional abuse only (10.9%).

Table 5 about here

Associations between Victimization, Perpetration and Witnessing Domestic Abuse

Associations between victimisation, perpetration of abuse and witnessing abuse were examined for boys and girls. Participants' responses were combined to yield a score representing their responses across all the questions in that scale. Thus, there were two categories for each section: 'Never' – they had never been a victim of or perpetrated any of the forms of abuse or 'Once or More than once' – they had been a victim of or perpetrated at least one of the forms of abuse. A three-way loglinear analysis with victimisation, perpetration and gender produced a model (Likelihood ratio of model = $\chi^2 (0, N = 828) = 0, p = 1$) with a significant two-way interaction between victimisation and perpetration ($\chi^2 (3, N = 828) = 280.97, p < .001$; $Z = 11.70, p < .001$) but no higher-order interaction between these two variables and gender. It was found that 51.2% of those who had been on the receiving

end of abuse also admitted to having been abusive; only 3.4% of non-victims reported having perpetrated abuse. Conversely, 92.3% of perpetrators reported that they had been victimised. For those who had perpetrated abuse, the odds of also being victimised were 32.14 times higher than the odds for those who had not been abusive. With the data on victimisation and perpetration combined, 19.5% were victims and perpetrators, 17.8% victims only, and 1.4% perpetrators only (61.3% not involved).

Loglinear analysis also identified a significant association between experiences of abuse from a boyfriend/girlfriend and witnessing abuse within the family (Likelihood ratio of model = $\chi^2(0, N = 815) = 0, p = 1$; two-way interaction = $\chi^2(3, N = 815) = 110.28, p < .001$; $Z = 9.57, p < .001$). 67% of those who have witnessed abuse had also been a victim of abuse in their own dating relationship; this is in comparison to 32% of those who had not witnessed abuse. The odds of being targeted for abuse for those who had witnessed abuse were 4.5 times higher than the odds for those who had not witnessed abuse.

In the same way, those who had witnessed abuse within the family were more likely to report having perpetrated it (Likelihood ratio of model = $\chi^2(0, N = 812) = 0, p = 1$; two-way interaction = $\chi^2(3, N = 812) = 85.71, p < .001$; $Z = 8.44, p < .001$) – 42% in comparison to 15% of those who had not witnessed it. The odds of perpetrating abuse for those who had witnessed abuse were 3.23 times higher than the odds for those who had not witnessed abuse. In sum, associations were identified between victimisation and perpetration, victimisation and witnessing, and perpetration and witnessing, and these did not vary by gender.

Help-seeking

There were two questions about help-seeking: ‘Suppose a boyfriend/girlfriend ever hit you, how likely would you be to seek help from an adult?’ and ‘Suppose you found out that an adult who looks after you was being hit by their partner, how likely would you be to seek

help from an adult outside of your friends and family? (e.g. a teacher, school nurse, social worker). For each question there were 4 response options: 1= Not at all likely, 2 = Not likely, 3 = Somewhat likely or 4 = Very Likely.

Combining the responses into Not Likely and Likely, 45.2% of respondents indicated that they would seek help about abuse in their own relationship and a larger percentage – 70.7% – reported that it was likely that they would seek help in relation to domestic abuse they witnessed. Associations between being a victim of domestic abuse and responses to the two help-seeking questions were examined along with gender. A three-way loglinear analysis with gender, victimisation, and help-seeking for abuse in one's own relationship produced a model (Likelihood ratio of model = $\chi^2(0, N = 825) = 0, p = 1$) with a significant two-way interaction ($\chi^2(3, N = 825) = 131.77, p < .001$) between victimisation and help-seeking ($Z = -4.89, p < .001$) and gender and help-seeking ($Z = 9.92, p < .001$) but no higher-order three-way interaction. More girls said they were likely to seek help about abuse in their own relationship than boys – 67.5% of girls, in comparison to 33.3% of boys. Those who had been victims of domestic abuse were *less* likely to seek help in comparison to those who said it had never happened to them (40% in comparison to 55.7%). The odds of seeking help for those who had been targeted for abuse were 1.33 times lower compared to non-victims.

The analysis was repeated to examine the associations between gender, victimisation and help-seeking in relation to *witnessing abuse*. The model identified no two-way or three-way interaction effects ($\chi^2(3, N = 803) = 5.45, p > .05$; $\chi^2(1, N = 803) = .00, p > .05$). This indicates that there are no gender differences for help-seeking in relation to witnessing abuse and no differences between victims and non-victims. 72.4% of girls and 69.4% of boys reported that they would seek help if they witnessed abuse.

Log-linear analyses were also performed to examine the associations between perpetrating and witnessing abuse and help-seeking. The model for gender, perpetration and

help-seeking for abuse in one's own relationship produced a significant three-way interaction (Likelihood ratio of model = $\chi^2(0, N = 819) = 0, p = 1$; three-way interaction = $\chi^2(1, N = 819) = 5.24, p < .05; Z = 2.31, p < .05$). Separate chi-square analyses for boys and girls indicated a significant association between perpetration and help-seeking for girls but not boys (girls: $\chi^2(1, N = 531) = 18.95, p < .001$, boys: $\chi^2(1, N = 390) = .70, p > .05$). For girls, if they had perpetrated abuse they were less likely to seek help (49.5%, in comparison to 72% of those who had not perpetrated abuse). The odds of seeking help for female perpetrators were 2.62 times lower compared to those females who had not been abusive. For boys, the rates of help-seeking were very similar – 30.7% of perpetrators would seek help and 28% of non-perpetrators. The analysis was repeated to examine the associations between gender, perpetration and help-seeking in relation to witnessing abuse. The model identified no two-way or three-way interactions ($\chi^2(3, N = 799) = 2.74, p > .05; \chi^2(1, N = 799) = .02, p > .05$).

Separate chi-square analyses were conducted to compare victims with those with the dual role of victim and perpetrator and this was done separately for males and females. For girls there was a difference between the groups in their willingness to seek help for abuse in their own relationship, with victim/perpetrators less likely to seek help compared to pure victims (47.5% compared to 60.6%, $\chi^2(1, N = 203) = 3.00, p < .05$).

A three-way loglinear analysis with gender, witnessing, and help-seeking for abuse in one's own relationship produced a model (Likelihood ratio of model = $\chi^2(0, N = 1002) = 0, p = 1$) with significant two-way interactions ($\chi^2(3, N = 1002) = 150.19, p < .001$) between witnessing and help-seeking ($Z = -4.21, p < .001$) and gender and help-seeking ($Z = 10.10, p < .001$) but no higher-order three-way interaction. Those who had witnessed abuse were less likely to seek help (44.2%) compared to those who had not witnessed abuse – 54.1%. The odds of seeking help were 1.49 times lower, compared to those who had not witnessed abuse.

For help-seeking in relation to witnessing abuse there was a significant three-way interaction (Likelihood ratio of model = $\chi^2(0, N = 1009) = 0, p = 1$; $\chi^2(3, N = 1009) = 6.37, p < .05$; $Z = 2.51, p < .05$). Separate Chi-square analyses for boys and girls indicated an association between witnessing abuse and help-seeking for girls ($\chi^2(1, N = 528) = 8.24, p < .01$), but not boys ($\chi^2(1, N = 481) = .36, p > .05$). For girls who had witnessed abuse they were less likely to seek help if they witnessed abuse, compared to those who had never witnessed abuse (65.9% in comparison to 77.6%).

Discussion

This is the first UK study to examine experiences of domestic abuse among a large sample of younger teenagers – those aged 13-14 years. In terms of the first research question, ‘What are the rates of domestic abuse among young teenagers – those aged 13-14 years?’ we found slightly lower rates compared to previous UK studies with teenagers but this is to be expected, given the age-range of the sample, most of whom, we can assume, had only recently started dating. A large percentage of both boys and girls had already been on a date or had a boyfriend or girlfriend (82.6%). Overall, 45% of pupils who had been in a dating relationship reported having been a victim of domestic abuse, 25% having perpetrated it and 34% of the whole sample reported having witnessed it in their own family. In combination, just over half of the whole sample of 13-14 year olds (52.5%) had experienced some form of domestic abuse, whether as a victim, perpetrator or having witnessed abuse. High rates of emotional abuse were reported; for example, the most common types of victimisation were emotional *and* physical (17.6%) and emotional only (21%) in line with previous studies of young people (e.g. Sears *et al.* 2007).

There were no differences between boys and girls in terms of being a victim of physical and emotional abuse. There were differences for sexual victimisation, with girls

more likely than boys to have been forced or pressured to have sex or do something else sexual. Our research suggests that there is a difference between what younger teenagers experience and what older teenagers experience. Some studies of older teenagers suggest that girls are more likely to be targeted for physical abuse and for the abuse they experience to be repeated. In our sample of younger teenagers, by contrast, the numbers reporting *repeated* abuse more than once were too small to yield any meaningful analyses. In the same way, the numbers reporting more *severe* physical abuse were few in number. Where studies, like those conducted by Barter *et al.* (2009), show that older teenage girls' experiences of physical abuse tend to be more acute than those of older teenage boys, what our study reveals is that for the majority of younger teenagers there is little difference in terms of gender with regard to rates of physical abuse.

Of course, all because rates of abuse are comparable between boys and girls does not mean that the impact of the abuse is the same. As some other studies of older teenagers and adults have shown, abuse within relationships appears to impact more negatively on girls compared to boys (e.g. Barter *et al.* 2009). Unfortunately, impact is difficult to examine using survey-type questions with the emotional impact of the abuse emerging from the in-depth interviews in the Barter *et al.* research. Future studies of the impact of abuse on younger teenagers will need to grapple with how best to measure impact in the short and long-term and also how to tap into the range of emotions abuse evokes, not just fear. We know that men more commonly react to crime with anger compared to women (Ditton *et al.* 1999). We know also that boys who grow up in abusive households are more likely to develop externalising problems than those who do not (Capaldi and Langhinrichsen-Rohling 2012). What our research suggests is that it may not be easy to disentangle one experience from another, for example, boys who have witnessed abuse, perpetrated it and been on the receiving end, are likely to experience a complex range of emotions, not easily assessed using a survey.

Similarly, a girl who has only recently found her boyfriend checking up on her, but has seen her mother abused over a number of years, could find this much more frightening than a young woman who has not witnessed coercive control over a longer period.

Similarly, we found no differences between girls and boys with regard to rates of self-reported perpetration, even when asked about sexual perpetration. One explanation for this may have to do with the onset of both sexual activity among boys and girls and specifically sexual aggression among boys. Barter *et al.*'s study indicates that it is girls who date boys several years their senior who are, statistically speaking, at most risk of all forms of domestic abuse. Four per cent of our sample admitted to pressuring or forcing someone else to have sex or do something else sexual (15 boys and 17 girls) a figure which, though numerically small, indicates that some of those well below the legal age of sexual consent are nonetheless navigating sexual relationships in ways that are coercive and unconsensual. We are not, however, entirely confident that rates of domestic abuse perpetration are relatively similar among 13-14 year old girls and boys. More girls than boys participated in our study because more boys than girls were opted out of the research by their parents or opted out themselves. The reasons for this can only be speculated about, but it is possible that some boys were opted out because they or their parents did not wish for them to disclose experiences of abuse perpetration they were known to have had.

In order to take forward the debate about gender symmetry with regard to younger teenagers, it will be necessary for future studies to ensure that non-completions are not skewing results in ways that underestimate rates of abuse perpetrated by boys and that impact is more adequately conceptualised and measured. Yet, the debate about symmetry is perhaps not the most pressing challenge to resolve.

With regard to the nature of abusive experiences, two of our findings are worthy of particular note. First, what male and female perpetrators tended to have in common was their

experiences of victimisation. The vast majority of perpetrators (92%) reported experiencing abuse from a boyfriend or girlfriend, and 51% of victims also reported being perpetrators. In short, at the age of 13-14, those who are only perpetrators are few and far between. The majority of boys and girls experiencing domestic abuse aged 13-14 have this *in common*. Of those who reported abuse in their own relationships, 50% were victims *and* perpetrators (46% victims and only 4% perpetrators). Second, where we did detect gender differences which were statistically significant was in the area of witnessing abuse. Girls were more likely to report having witnessed abuse between the adults who care for them than boys. This could be because domestic abuse is more hidden from boys, with adults being afraid that boys will retaliate to protect the abused parent. It could also be because girls more often perceive abusive behaviours perpetrated by adults as more harmful than boys do, and thus are more likely to define them as constituting violence (Barter *et al.* 2009). Either way, our data suggests that at the age of 13, a sizeable minority of teenagers' sensitivities to domestic abuse between adults – whether they notice it and how they define it - are beginning to be moulded in ways that are subtly gendered. All of this matters because what children notice and what they define as abuse, together with whether they perceive themselves to be in some way culpable, affects their willingness to seek help.

Our research shows that by this age, there are quite considerable differences between boys' and girls' willingness to seek help from adults. We found that 13-14 year old girls were twice as likely as boys to say they would seek help from an adult if they experienced abuse in their own relationships; there was no difference between girls' and boys' willingness to seek help from an adult if they witnessed abuse between adults in their household. Only 45% of participants said that they would seek help if they experienced abuse directly, but a much higher percentage said that they would seek help if they *witnessed abuse* between adults that care for them (71%). Of course, the benefits and risks of seeking help are likely to be

weighed up differently when an individual is seeking help for their own relationship as opposed to when appraising abuse between their parents.

We discovered that whether or not boys had perpetrated abuse seemed to make little difference to their willingness to seek help, should they find themselves victimised by a boyfriend or girlfriend. Plainly put, most boys said they would not seek help if they were abused. Conversely, girls who had perpetrated abuse were much less likely to seek help than girls who had not (45% in comparison to 72%); also, girls who had the dual role of victim and perpetrator were less likely to seek help compared to pure victims but for boys there was no difference between these groups. This may well reflect the greater stigma associated with violence for girls, and raises difficult questions about how best to encourage help-seeking among those young women who have experienced victimisation while having also hit back, however defensively, against partners who have abused them. Indeed, one reason given by girls for not seeking help is the fear of being blamed (Foshee *et al.* 1996). Other possible reasons for not seeking help among girls include the fear of not being believed (Wood *et al.* 2011), as well as the fear of escalating the violence and the fear of incriminating oneself where violence has been used in retaliation or in self-defence.

Victimisation was identified as an important factor in determining boys' and girls' willingness to seek help. Those who had already experienced abuse (40%) were *less likely* to seek help if they experienced it in their own relationship than those who had not experienced it (55.7%). This is perhaps not surprising given that non-victims were, by definition, thinking hypothetically. But it is also troubling in the context of prevention strategies that have at their heart the aim of encouraging those children at risk to seek support from adult service providers. Our research thus raises some difficult questions about how far schools-based interventions can actually increase rates of disclosure from young people who experience domestic abuse, as victims, perpetrators or witnesses. Research by Mullender *et al.* (2000)

found that many children who had witnessed domestic abuse felt overlooked by professionals and not always believed. Thus, professionals need to be aware that there are certain barriers to overcome when encouraging more children to seek help in relation to domestic abuse, and for some, this is shaped by their own previous experiences. Yet, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the single-item help-seeking measures which only captured intentions to seek help in the future (from an adult) and only if they would seek help and not who specifically or where they would seek help from. Subsequent studies will need to move beyond single-item help-seeking measures, in order to take forward the issues our research has raised.

What these findings tell us with regard to domestic abuse prevention is that if the aim is to reach children before domestic abuse begins to impact upon many of their lives, then, in the UK at least, interventions are going to need to target children before they reach the age of 13. Indeed, the vast majority of children want to receive education on domestic abuse – 84% of secondary age children and 52% of primary school children (Mullender *et al.* 2000). On the other hand, and with regard to how those undertaking preventative work should proceed with those in the 13-14 age bracket, it is clearly imperative to be responsive to the experiences of domestic abuse many pupils already have. For those at this age, domestic abuse is unlikely to look as overtly gendered as it does to many adults. Nor is it likely to be regarded as a repeat problem, by many. As a consequence, presenting the problem as one involving male perpetrators and female victims has the potential to alienate boys who argue that girls do these things too – clearly, such programmes need to be both tailored to young teenager's perceptions of the problem and acknowledge the way in which violence becomes a more overtly gendered problem in adult life.

Many young people of this age will have already had experiences of relationships at this age, some of which will have been sexual, and some which will have already turned

abusive. Within this context, those working with young people need to be alive to the possibility that in almost every class there will be a sizeable minority of young people who have experienced domestic abuse in a relationship. Some of these will have been abusive, and most of those who have been abusive will also have been victimised. In this context, and with this age group, polarising the issue in terms of victims and perpetrators could actually deter some from seeking help.

What needs to be better understood in both research and policy terms is how the issue of domestic abuse changes over the life course. We know that at some points during adolescence rates of abuse perpetration between boys and girls are relatively similar, but we also know that at some point in early adulthood some men become much more persistent offenders, when many of their peers, male and female, desist, or at least confine their aggression to forms that result in less serious harm and less medical and/or criminal justice attention (Moffitt *et al.* 2001). Longitudinal research by Nocentini *et al.* (2010) showed a decline in dating aggression from 16-18 years of age. Further longitudinal research is needed to explore when, how and why abuse emerges in dating relationships, and particularly how this relates to the bi-directional nature to be found among many teenagers, including consideration of the issue of self-defence. The distinction between ‘common couple violence’ and ‘coercive control’ also needs to be addressed in these studies (Johnson 2006, 2008, Stark 2009). In-depth qualitative research is also needed in order to understand the life worlds of young people negotiating abuse in their own relationships and home, often in ways that they feel would not benefit from the intervention of adult authority and/or professional help.

In conclusion, we have found high rates of domestic abuse among younger teenagers - it is therefore an important time for introducing domestic abuse prevention education. But getting the message right is the key to effectiveness. In this context this means being responsive to the fact that many teenagers as young as 13 have already experienced abuse

within their own relationships, or have witnessed it at home, and have experiences of dealing with it alone. Many will have both perpetrated it and also been on the receiving end. Such interventions need therefore to be sensitive to the possibility that individual young people's attitudes are often informed both by such experiences of dealing with abuse and by wider levels of peer acceptance. They need to be alive to gender differences, but not to the neglect of the considerable overlaps in teenage boys' and girls' experiences. Indeed, within the 13-14 year old age range the difference between girls and boys will more often lie less with what they have done or what has been done to them, and more in their relative willingness to engage adult authority in problems in their own relationships; a willingness that tends to be infrequently manifest among young men, and is often diminished among those young women who have already experienced, perpetrated or witnessed domestic abuse at home or in their own dating relationships.

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Table 1. Responses to the question: ‘Think about people you have dated, and past or current boyfriends or girlfriends’ (Victimisation)

Have they....	Once (%)	More than Once (%)	% in the last year*
1) Ever pushed, slapped or grabbed you? (n=868)	12.0	4.6	58.5 (n=130)
2) Ever punched, kicked or choked you, or beaten you up? (n=865)	3.5	1.0	72.2 (n=36)
3) Ever threatened to physically hurt you? (n=869)	3.9	3.0	49.2 (n=59)
4) Ever pressured or forced you to have sex? (n=869)	3.5	0.9	73.8 (n=42)
5) Ever pressured or forced you to do anything else sexual, including kissing, hugging and touching? (n=866)	9.0	4.4	78.2 (n=110)
6) Ever called you nasty names to put you down? (n=865)	14.2	10.9	63.1 (n=203)
7) Ever stopped you from seeing your friends or family? (n=865)	2.8	2.7	67.4 (n=43)
8) Ever told you who you can’t speak to? (n=867)	13.3	5.4	68.5 (n=143)
9) Ever checked up on who you have phoned or sent messages to? (n=866)	10.7	6.6	73.2 (n=127)
10) Ever damaged something of yours on purpose? (n=868)	3.8	2.0	55.1 (n=49)

*These percentages relate to those who answered “once” or “more than once” and who also gave a response to “in the last year”. The number of pupils who answered this question is indicated next to the percentage.

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of boys and girls who had experienced sexual abuse

Sexual Victimization	Gender		Total N
	Male	Female	
Never	365(89.5%)	360(82.4%)	725
Once or More than once	43(10.6%)	77(17.6%)	120
Total N	408	437	

Table 3. Responses to the question: ‘Think about people you have dated, and past or current boyfriends or girlfriends’ (Perpetration)

Have you ...	Once (%)	More than Once (%)	In the last year*
1) Ever pushed, slapped or grabbed them? (n=859)	5.0	1.4	58.3 (n=48)
2) Ever punched, kicked or choked them, or beaten them up? (n=858)	1.7	0.2	73.3 (n=15)
3) Ever threatened to physically hurt them? (n=857)	1.4	0.5	64.3 (n=14)
4) Ever pressured or forced them to have sex? (n=858)	0.8	0.2	85.7 (n=7)
5) Ever pressured or forced them to do anything else sexual, including kissing, hugging and touching? (n=856)	2.9	0.7	72.0 (n=25)
6) Ever called them nasty names to put them down? (n=857)	8.3	2.5	58.1 (n=86)
7) Ever stopped them from seeing their friends or family? (n=858)	1.2	0.5	33.3 (n=12)
8) Ever told them who they can’t speak to? (n=857)	5.4	1.3	64.2 (n=53)
9) Ever checked up on who they have phoned or sent messages to? (n=855)	9.2	3.0	67.4 (n=86)
10) Ever damaged something of theirs on purpose? (n=857)	1.6	0.5	68.8 (n=16)

*These percentages relate to those who answered “once” or “more than once” and who also gave a response to “in the last year”. The number of children who answered this question is indicated next to the percentage.

Table 4. Responses to the question: ‘Think about the adults who look after you at home – e.g. your parents, stepparents, guardians, foster carers. The questions below ask about things that can happen between two partners in a relationship. At any time in your life that you are aware of, has an adult who looks after you...’ (Witnessing)

	Once (%)	More than Once (%)	In the last year (%)*
1) Ever been pushed, slapped or grabbed by their partner? (n=1085)	9.2	9.6	36.5 (n=167)
2) Ever been punched, kicked, choked, or beaten up by their partner? (n=1084)	4.2	3.7	41.4 (n=70)
3) Ever been threatened to be physically hurt by their partner? (n=1082)	5.4	4.9	47.8 (n=90)
4) Ever been called nasty names by their partner to put them down? (n=1081)	9.3	11.8	50.8 (n=189)
5) Ever been stopped by their partner from seeing their friends or family? (n=1084)	3.9	4.1	50.7 (n=75)
6) Ever been told by their partner who they can’t speak to? (n=1084)	5.1	4.7	49.4 (n=87)
7) Ever been checked up on by their partner - who they have phoned or sent messages to? (n=1084)	6.5	7.5	58.2 (n=122)
8) Ever had something of theirs damaged by their partner on purpose? (n=1078)	6.1	4.7	37.9 (n=95)

*These percentages relate to those who answered “once” or “more than once” and who also gave a response to “in the last year”. The number of children who answered this question is indicated next to the percentage.

Table 5. Percentage of boys and girls who had witnessed domestic abuse

	Gender		Total N
	Male	Female	
Severe physical abuse			
Never	428(83.4%)	422(78.3%)	850
Once or More than once	85(16.6%)	117(21.7%)	202
Total N	513	539	
Overall physical abuse			
Never	405(79.7%)	394(73.2%)	799
Once or More than Once	103(20.3%)	144(26.8%)	247
Total N	508	538	
Emotional abuse/Controlling behaviours			
Never	400(78.4%)	358(66.3%)	758
Once or More than Once	110(21.6)	182(33.7%)	292
Total N	510	540	

ⁱThe results of this study must be interpreted in the context of our sample population – 13-14 year olds, all attending school, predominantly white, British, and most living in Stoke-on-Trent, an area characterised by high social deprivation. Although our findings are in line with similar studies in the UK and the US, studies of intimate partner violence among disadvantaged groups have found higher rates of abuse among the most socially excluded young women (Wood *et al.* 2011).