

DATING ABUSE

Information Sheet for those who work with young people

One day at college he took my phone off me and told me to meet him after my lesson.he wouldn't let me on the bus and held me against some metal gates while I cried, and then he dragged me off down the road. ..so many people could see what was happening, but just ignored it and didn't try to help. Even one of my old teachers from school walked past and ignored my crying

Sophie 17 (the hideout.org.uk)

Dating abuse, or domestic abuse experienced by young people, affects as many as one in three young women (NSPCC 2009). Those who experience dating abuse are primarily girls and young women, and those who perpetrate it are primarily boys and young men (NSPCC 2009). Dating abuse is the physical, emotional, sexual or mental abuse of a young woman by someone with whom she is in or has been in a relationship with. It can sometimes be experienced by boys and young men. It is important to remember that whilst dating abuse is mainly perpetrated by young men, most young men are not abusive. Dating abuse has a damaging and destructive impact on the lives of all young people; those who perpetrate it, those who experience it, and the communities in which it takes place.

This information sheet has been put together to support those working with young people to explore what dating abuse is and to look at some of the ways in which it impacts on the lives of young people. A recent NSPCC survey found that whilst most young people told no-one about the abuse, those who did talk about their experiences to friends were often given advice that condoned violence and abuse. This information sheet will provide some ideas for challenging these attitudes within youth settings using national, local and international guidelines and legislation. This paper may also help workers to think about some of the ways in which they can respond to disclosures, challenge perpetrators and ensure their youth setting has a zero tolerance approach to dating abuse.

What is Dating Abuse?

Almost 25% of 14 year olds had been forced to have sex or do something else sexual they didn't want to do by someone they were dating

Bliss (2009)

Dating abuse is a sustained and ongoing pattern of abusive behaviour used to control someone and limit their choices. The points below outline some of the methods that may be used to achieve this:

- **Threats:** Making threats to hurt her, threatening to commit suicide/leave, threatening to tell teachers/parents/friends about the relationship or behaviour, threatening to “out” them about aspects of their sexuality
- **Intimidation:** Making them afraid, hurting them physically, destroying property, threatening or hurting pets or children
- **Using social status/societal expectations:** Making all the decisions, saying it’s a “man’s world” to control them, using music/TV to excuse name calling
- **Anger or emotional abuse:** Using instant messaging to harass them, putting them down, name calling, humiliating them, using guilt to control them
- **Peer pressure/community pressure:** Using religion as an excuse for abusive behaviour, spreading rumours and writing offensive graffiti, posting pictures online, forwarding sexually explicit text messages to friends, or making them do something they don’t want to, using popularity against them, trying to turn their friends against them
- **Controlling behaviour:** Hacking into e-accounts, taking away their phone, telling them what to wear, displaying compulsively jealous behaviour, checking their text messages/emails without their permission
- **Isolation/exclusion:** not allowing them to see their friends, the young person being worried if their partner finds out they have seen their friends
- **Sexual coercion:** Manipulating or making threats to get sex, refusing to use contraception, getting them drunk or drugged to have sex, being made to watch pornography, told they “should” do something sexual that they don’t want to do, making them do something sexual with friends
- **Minimising:** Making light of abuse, not taking responsibility, humiliating them

Dating abuse is part of the spectrum of violence against women, which is defined by the UN as

“Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”
(Unesco 1999:53)

The following section looks at how dating abuse manifests itself in the lives of young women who experience it directly, and will also explore how it can harm the wider community.

What is the impact of dating abuse?

Young people who are involved in violent or controlling relationships are significantly more likely to feel suicidal and stressed than those who are not

Young Voice (2008)

Dating abuse has many negative effects on the lives of young women, girls and the people in their communities. Practitioners working with young people play a vital role in their lives, and are often able to identify changes in behaviour that others may not. It is important to be mindful that dating abuse impacts on young women in different ways, and so the below list should not be used as a ‘checklist’:

For young women some of the impacts may be:

- Inappropriate behaviour
- Aggression
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Becoming quiet and withdrawn
- Truancy
- Theft
- Becoming homeless
- Physical injuries
- Sleeplessness
- Suicide
- Substance misuse
- Mental health issues

For the whole youth community some of the impacts may be:

- Young women unwilling to take part in particular activities
- Discrimination and sexual harassment becoming the norm
- Boys and young men unable to challenge sexist behaviour in peers
- Educational attainment affected
- Conflict
- Child protection issues from use of explicit images
- Negative understandings of relationships
- Practitioners may feel threatened by inappropriate behaviour and language
- Aspirations and expectations of men and women become more disparate

With so many damaging impacts, it is important to ensure that your youth setting has a zero tolerance approach to all forms of abuse and discrimination. The following section outlines some of the ways you could begin to do this.

A Zero-Tolerance Approach to Dating Abuse

40% of young women and girls surveyed would accept aggressive behaviour, and 31% thought cheating gives a boyfriend the right to be aggressive. 45% also stated that they had been groped against their will. Of the total surveyed, 43% said that the perpetrator was a boyfriend.

NSPCC (2006)

Often, young people experience dating abuse within the education or community setting. Social rules about proper and normal behaviour exist in different communities that can enable abuse to occur and be accepted. It may help to look at what 'rules' exist in your youth setting. For example, who has the most power? How do they express it? What aspirations and ideals exist? These social rules also feed into other equalities issues, such as racism, homophobia and ableism, and for many young people, these forms of discrimination intersect and have a real impact on their ability to be successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.

Most young men are not abusive, and supporting them to speak out and challenge their peers is an important part of ending all forms of violence against women. The White Ribbon Campaign looks at how to encourage men and boys to speak out and it might be useful to contact them to look at how you can work with the boys and young men in your youth setting.

There are many local, national and international guidelines and laws that can help schools and youth groups work to prevent and tackle dating abuse. The following section outlines some of these:

Local

All local authorities are required to produce a violence against women strategy. For some authorities, the strategy is within other documents, whereas for others, the strategy is a stand alone document. It may be useful to talk to your Domestic Abuse Multi-Agency Partnership co-ordinator to find out more about what is happening in your area. These local partnerships involve everyone from your local police force, schools, Women's Aid services and NHS workers. You can find more about these groups by logging onto your council's webpage and searching for violence against women.

National

The Curriculum for Excellence's aim of ensuring Scotland's children and young people are successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens can be achieved through creating peaceful learning environments and promoting positive behaviour in schools. Approaching dating abuse through the Health and Wellbeing Outcomes of the Curriculum for Excellence directly relates to the GIRFEC framework. By preventing gender based violence, we are ensuring that Scotland's young people are respected, responsible, achieving their potential, safe and nurtured. There are a variety of packs available to help teachers and youth workers integrate dating abuse into their lessons. Contact your local Women's Aid group to see if they are able to provide you with more information.

International

At an international level, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child situates dating abuse as a human rights issue. At the heart of the Convention is the belief that children, defined as everybody under the age of 18, require particular legal and social protection to ensure that their dignity, liberty and freedom are protected and promoted.

Many practitioners are familiar with the Convention and will use it within their work. You could explore how some of these rights relate to dating abuse, for example, those listed below.

Article 6.2. States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child

Article 19.1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

Article 29.1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:

(a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;

(d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;

Article 34 States Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.

Often, after youth communities have undertaken awareness raising on the issue of dating abuse, many young people will feel able to talk about their experiences and look for support. The following section briefly outlines ways in which to deal with disclosures.

Dealing with disclosures

“She’s [school mentor] really supportive, she undertands and knows what our lives are like”

Tanisha, (NSPCC 2009)

Dealing with disclosures can sometimes leave practitioners feeling helpless and anxious. There are many agencies where young people and staff can access support. Local Women’s Aid groups may provide advice and Scottish Women's Aid can provide training. If a young woman discloses to you, ensure your response is non-judgmental, supportive and that she understands it is not her fault. It is important to remember, however, that assault, rape and sexual exploitation are criminal acts, and Child Protection and other laws apply.

Perpetrators should be held to account, and as with bullying, victims should feel able to safely talk about their experiences without fear of retribution or blame. Anti-bullying policies which include dealing with dating abuse ensure that schools and youth settings are able to respond appropriately and quickly to any issues that arise.

Scottish Women's Aid and some local Women’s Aid groups are also registered Continuing Professional Development providers, and all local authorities have training consortiums that can provide training for practitioners on issues such as gender and abuse.

Points to consider

- Consider contacting your [local Women’s Aid group](#) for ideas for lesson plans, or ask them to come in to do a talk.
- Develop an awareness raising campaign with young people in your youth setting. What do they think it is? Using the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) you could discuss how dating abuse is a human rights issue. Be mindful that this may raise some issues for young people, and ensure that support is available.

- Create or develop your anti-bullying policy to include sexist/gender based bullying, Respectme has some great ideas for model policies, and [Womankind worldwide](#) has produced the excellent resource "Flirting Or Hurting" for use in Schools.
- Ensure that any school/group policy involves young people. The places where abuse takes place are often within specific youth cultures, such as "sexting" (using mobiles to capture and forward explicit pictures) or cyber bullying. Young people are the experts of these arenas.
- Ask what your local education authority is doing around dating abuse.
- Challenge sexist or homophobic language. [LGBT Youth Scotland](#) have produced an excellent resource for teachers around this. The words we use about our world are crucial in constructing how the world is. Ask your class how they feel about these words and why they use them as a springboard for further discussion around gender.
- Encourage the men and boys in your setting to get involved and challenge gender based violence. The [White Ribbon Campaign](#) has some ideas on how you can do this.

There are many websites and resources available for practitioners to use, specifically;

Love is Not Abuse : <http://www.loveisnotabuse.com/>

That's Not Cool: <http://www.thatsnotcool.com/>

Women's Aid Federation England (WAFE): <http://www.thehideout.org.uk/default.aspx>

Zero Tolerance: <http://www.vawpreventionscotland.org.uk/>

Family Violence Prevention Fund: <http://www.lessonsfromliterature.org/aboutprogram.html>

Equality Rules!: <http://www.equalityrules.ca/en/index.html>

Prevention Connection: <http://www.preventconnect.org/display/displayHome.cfm>

The White Ribbon Campaign: <http://www.whiteribbonscotland.org.uk/>

Sources:

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC): (2006)

http://www.nspcc.org.uk/whatwedo/mediacentre/pressreleases/22_may_2006_unwanted_sexual_experiences_wdn33559.html

NSPCC (2009): <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/news/2009/34.html>

WAFE: <http://www.womensaid.org.uk/>

Young Voice: <http://www.youngvoice.co.uk/sexbullyingresults.html>

Scottish Women's Aid is the lead organisation in Scotland working towards the prevention of domestic abuse. We play a vital role campaigning and lobbying for effective responses to domestic abuse. An important aspect of our work is ensuring that women and children with experience of domestic abuse get the services they need, both from local Women's Aid groups and from the agencies they are likely to contact.

Our members are local Women's Aid groups which provide specialist services to women, children and young people. These include safe refuge accommodation, information and support. We provide advice, information, training and publications to members and non-members.