



Spotlight 3: Episode 4

Podcast transcript

Spotlights is a series of online events and publications, focusing on a particular group of victim/survivors who are often hidden from services. As part of the SafeLive's Spotlight on domestic abuse and young people, this week my colleague Emma has gone to the University of Manchester to speak to professor David Gadd. Through his research project Boys to Men, David explores why some boys become abusive in their relationships and what professionals can do to support young men to recognise and stop abusive behaviour. We hope you find it interesting and informative, whether you're a practitioner, an academic or even an adult or young person who may relate to these experiences.

Emma: I've come to Manchester University this afternoon to meet with professor David Gadd who's done some work on a project called 'Boys to Men'. Welcome to SafeLives David, thank you very much for your time and joining us to create this podcast. Can you start off by telling us a little about yourself, how you came to be working or came to be developing your 'Boys to Men' project.

David: As you know, I'm a criminologist and much of my research over the last fifteen to twenty years has been focused around domestic violence. I actually started out my first work, my doctoral work; it was about men as perpetrators of domestic violence as well as men who were working in the sector. The question was: 'could the men who were on the perpetrator programmes become like the men who were doing anti-sexist work in the sector?'

And I guess having thought about that, I've wanted to take a step back and really ask the question 'what do we need to do to stop men actually needing these kinds of interventions?', 'how could we reduce the demand for what are quite often oversubscribed services?' And I think that means starting to look at younger groups in the population. If you do look at statistical information about this, particularly for victimisation, we know that the peak age for victimisation is somewhere in between mid-teens to mid-twenties. So that's when the problem is actually at its most acute or appears to be at its most acute. Of course we know some offenders will become worse than that as they get older and many people will leave abusive relationships there seems to be gained from looking at younger groups in the population.

Emma: Thank you. What were you hoping to find out when you started the Boys to Men project? What were the aims of the project?

David: The project was about trying to understand why young people become involved in abusive relationships, why some young men become abusive in their relationships and what can really be done to reduce that, bring it to an end or even to stop some young men from being violent at all. I can tell you a little bit about how we tried to research that. We adopted a mixed methods approach in the study over three key parts. The three parts were as follows: we did a survey of 1,200 young people who were aged 13-14 who were all in schools and that

was the quantity part of our work, measuring attitudes towards domestic violence. Following on from that, we did a series of focus groups with young people, some were school children who had experienced preventative education, some were perpetrators from perpetrator programmes, some were substance abusers, some were care leavers, some were kids in youth clubs and that kind of thing. Then we were interested about exploring issues around the meaning of domestic abuse for young people. And then the third and final part of the field work we tried to, and we did, interview thirty young men aged 16 and above and 16-21 they were, about their involvement in violence in relationships. It was quite difficult to separate them out from each other, many of them had been violent in relationships, some of them had just lived with violent parents, often there was overlap between the two. Some had experienced violence from a partner, although in many of those cases some of had also been abusive back. We interviewed those young people about their life stories and got them to tell their accounts of what happened to them. So the project then had the ambitious job of trying to join all those things together.

Emma: And what did you find?

David: We found lots of different things, and lots of different things in different parts of the project. In the first part of the project we found that a substantial number of young people, I think it was a third of young women and about half of young men, could think of circumstances where it would be ok, as they saw it, to hit a partner. And 'ok' was the term we used not that you had to, just that it could be ok. The circumstances in which young people tend to think it was ok would be if the partner had been unfaithful, or if they had been hit first. Both of those things kind of matter when you start to learn and explore like in the second part of the project, the meaning of domestic abuse which is obviously much bigger than just being hit to include emotional abuse, financial abuse, controlling behaviour, coercive behaviour in a sexual relationship. And so when we started to talk to young men particularly in the focus groups, almost universally they all said it was wrong. When they saw this video of a boy being aggressive towards his girlfriend they all said this was just really terrible and someone needed to challenge him about his behaviour. So you could say there's nothing more to do, they all got the message there, they all understand the things that everyone working in the sector is trying to get across to them. They know that it's wrong, but of course there are lots of shades of grey in that, many young men, including those who seem to have quite progressive views could come to an understanding of why it might be ok, or necessary to be controlling, in a relationship.

Lots of young men said if they felt insecure in a relationship, if their partner is going out and they didn't know if they were going to be faithful to them they can see why that person might feel the need to check up on their phone or behave in a controlling way. Within that population of young men, we have some men who would say 'well, if she became aggressive back to me, you might have to stand up for yourself then physical violence might be alright'. The other thing about those focus groups, is that one thing that young men – and we will come back to this later – one of those things that everybody must have in common is that they wanted trusting relationships, nobody wanted to be in a relationship where there was no trust. The difficulty is that most people don't actually have a sense of 'how' to establish trust in a relationship, and this – we will come back to what that means later in interventions – this is all sort of relevant to the young men we spoke to in the third phase of the project.

Emma: So moving on then from that David, what is your view about affective interventions to support these young men to change their behaviour?

David: I think they have to happen at several different levels, so if you think about the three phases of the project there's something to be done with the general population for young men and young women whilst the young men tended to – there were more young men in the general population that could think of circumstances where violence is ok there is also a substantial amount a third of young women in the project who could think of circumstances where it would be ok for there to be violence, so you know putting that together some of the boys sat next to some of the girls could share that view. I think there has to be something done just at the level of sort of primary education kind of level and often in schools we have sex education or we teach young people about respect or we tell them that sexism is wrong. I think the messages or the engagement that needs to come across needs to be a little bit more emotionally literate than that now. People don't go into a relationship for those reasons

particularly they go into relationships because they want somebody in their lives, somebody that understands them, or is close to them, often people looking for a soulmate, a partner or somebody special to make them feel special. So we need to talk to young people about issues around love and vulnerability and trust and it was interesting in the research that young men said that, there was nobody that talks to them about those things, and those are the things of course that hit you very hard when you enter a first relationship, they're the things that people are fearful of, a relationship ends, the loss of love, feelings of vulnerability, of course helping young people to understand that the sharing of vulnerability is something that makes a good relationship makes a closeness is part of the message and its very rare that you see that in domestic violence education programs.

The other thing to say about that is that these things need to be joined up, and they need to be joined up in at least two ways. They need to be joined up for young people who are already excluded or who are becoming excluded from main stream education. We did interview young men in the project who had been put in people referral units or taken out of mainstream education because their behaviour was becoming problematic. We have to really make sure that young men that are in the criminal justice system, or excluded from school, are being engaged with on this level. It's simply not acceptable particularly when you know the young person is being/has been violent and is not engaged with that subject. There may be a need for punishment at some level but it's important that the sentence actually takes the substantive issue in hand it can be really problematic where a criminal justice worker may say 'well lets focus on the drinking, or the shop lifting or the street fighting or the drug use'.

Emma: You touched on this when you were just answering my question before David, but what about interventions once young people have started to display or engage in abusive behaviours, what sort of interventions are effective at that point once those individuals have been identified?

David: I think we're at first base really with that, and that there are very few interventions that have lasted long enough directly young men that are being abusive to be properly evaluated and rolled out, so it's not like there's simply a manual of best practice out there waiting to be picked up. The big problem in the UK and probably most countries is that there are almost no services for young men aged sort of 15-21 who are starting to become abusive where they can actually self-refer without incriminating themselves. We did actually interview young men in this project who had sexually assaulted a partner. In one case, we interviewed a young man whose very first sexual experience was having sex with a woman who was too drunk to know, and to unconscious to know, he was doing it but he wasn't going to turn himself into the police and say 'I've got a problem here', so we do need to find a way in which young men who can see themselves and have a problem can seek some support for that, and that's really difficult because it's very difficult to make the case. People who [25:40 unclear] know it's very difficult to make the case for investment in dangerous people, the one thing I would say is that many of these dangerous people are also very vulnerable people and many of them have lived through lots of dangers themselves. Lots of young men in the research who had grown up with domestic violence who had been very afraid as infants and it was only as they became older men they say 'well I'm going to look after myself, I'm going to look after the people around me' and often that was a step into being quite paternalistic in their relationships with women. They wanted to protect the women in their lives, their mums, their sisters, their girlfriends, but of course that comes with a certain expectations and when women contravene those expectations that's when conflict arose and sometimes violence arose. I think service providers who are working in that area need to be alive to that complexity that may well follow, that there are going to be some really difficult and painful stories behind the behaviour of young men and the behaviour can be very dangerous and disturbing ways and it doesn't just come out of nowhere. While some of it is charged with sexism and some of it is justified through sexism, sexism in itself doesn't always simply cause violence, particularly more physical sadistic forms of it, you know people can hold sexist values but not behave in an aggressive way it's often more complicated than that. I think many of the young men really needed somebody to talk to, somebody to confide in, somebody to show them what a trusting relationship was. The relationship needed to be built with that young person, it could often be quite turbulent, it could often take quite a lot of time before the young person realised they needed to share something with that worker. Providing that contact I think is really difficult for teenagers who are starting to have problems with violence because they suddenly disappear

from school, they may get themselves involved in the criminal justice system, but there's no guarantee that there's going to be a caseworker that really has the time and space to probe what's going on there. Helping them realise that the things they have done have gone wrong don't necessarily need to be reproduced in the future. Helping them, as I said before, recognise that trust in a relationship is not going to come from managing and controlling a partner, it's actually about letting go to some degree and seeing what happens. Really kind of tough messages that have to get across but need to be done in careful, kind caring working relationships where the worker has some space to keep the young person in mind, that's really difficult in highly pressured service jobs these days.

Emma: Those are really useful messages for people who are working with young men and young women. So the project has concluded now, what resources what is available now for people who are working with young people and might be able to learn or use their research in their work?

David: From the boys to men website has all of the resources, or nearly all of the resources we've produced. Each phase of the project comes with its own practitioner-friendly report which is free to download, we've also produced a set of policy recommendations and some practice guidance there too. For those that want a more advanced read the project a book called 'young men and domestic abuse' with Routledge which is Taylor and Francis' UK outlet that people can buy if they wish, but for most the online resources is probably the best.

Emma: Fantastic. Thank you that's been fascinating David, thank you so much for your time.

David: You're very welcome.

Thank you for listening. If you'd like to find out more from SafeLives Spotlight on young people and domestic abuse, please go to our website SafeLives.org.uk, where we will be uploading new content every week-each exploring a different aspect of young people and domestic abuse. If you'd like to participate in the discussion, you can go to our website to sign up for the webinar on March 3 between 1pm-2pm, and also join in the Twitter Q&A conversation on March 15th between 1pm-2pm-just go to #SafeYoungLives.