

My Story Matters

Understanding young people's perceptions of abuse in their romantic relationships



Ending domestic abuse





About SafeLives

We are SafeLives, the UK-wide charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse, for everyone and for good.

We work with organisations across the UK to transform the response to domestic abuse. We want what you would want for your best friend. We listen to survivors, putting their voices at the heart of our thinking. We look at the whole picture for each individual and family to get the right help at the right time to make families everywhere safe and well. And we challenge perpetrators to change, asking ‘why doesn’t he stop?’ rather than ‘why doesn’t she leave?’ This applies whatever the gender of the victim or perpetrator and whatever the nature of their relationship.

Last year alone, nearly 11,000 professionals working on the frontline received our training. Over 65,000 adults at risk of serious harm or murder and more than 85,000 children received support through dedicated multi-agency support designed by us and delivered with partners. In the last three years, nearly 1,000 perpetrators have been challenged and supported to change by interventions we created with partners, and that’s just the start.

Together we can end domestic abuse. Forever. For everyone.

We want what you would want for your best friend

- Action taken before someone harms or is harmed
- Harmful behaviours identified and stopped
- Safety increased for all those at risk
- People able to live the lives they want after abuse has happened



About On Our Radar

We are a specialist group of journalists, technologists, digital storytellers and development practitioners. We work together to tackle voicelessness, surfacing stories from unheard groups worldwide.

Those on the frontlines of humanity’s toughest challenges hold incredible insight. We amplify unheard voices so that they can shape the future.

We build reporter networks, design innovative communications solutions, develop technology for connectivity and co-produce award-winning media.

Acknowledgments



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Key Findings

Young people do not use the term domestic abuse

If we are to include young people in the conversation around domestic abuse, we need to ensure we are using language they recognise and associate with. Few of the young people we interviewed knew or used the terms domestic abuse or domestic violence. Our survey of nearly 500 young people found that the least common words used to describe an unhealthy or harmful relationship were coercive (24%), intimate partner violence (31%) and domestic violence (36%). Instead, words such as toxic (69%), controlling (61%) and manipulative (55%) were more common.

Young people want support in understanding what is and isn't okay in their relationships

In both our workshops and the national survey we found the majority of young people wanted a tool or platform that would help them to understand where the line is between a healthy or unhealthy relationship. In the survey we found that a larger proportion of boys (63%) compared to girls (46%) preferred help in this area, while more girls (35% compared to 22%) preferred advice on getting out of an unsafe relationship.

Young people are unsure how to manage boundaries around technology

Across our research we found some behaviours within relationships that the young people we spoke to were unsure as to whether they were healthy or unhealthy. A lot of these behaviours revolved around technology, such as being told to give access to their phone, their partner reading messages or checking their location. Other negative behaviours young people were unsure on included being dependent on your partner, changing personalities for someone and their partner wanting them to spend all of their time with them.

Unwanted sexual behaviour was a common feature in the stories young people shared with us

In the national survey we asked if respondents would be willing to share their story with us and 20 did. Most stories were from females, with only one from a male. The most common type of abuse within the stories was sexual (30%), while two (10%) told us of physical abuse. Young people also shared stories of coercive and controlling behaviours, using words such as manipulated/ive (20%), controlling (15%), coercion (5%) and emotional blackmail (5%). This is a trend that has continued in the stories submitted by users of the platform.

Friends and family are young people's main support mechanism for their relationships

Across the interviews, workshops, and survey we found the most common place to go for relationship advice or support was either a friend or a family member, most commonly a parent. Two thirds (66%) of respondents in the survey said they would choose a friend and half (50%) said they would choose a family member. It is therefore important that friends and family are equipped to be able to provide effective help and support.

Young people want content to be diverse and inclusive

The young people we spoke to were very clear that any tool or guidance produced to support young people through their relationships should be inclusive of all sexualities, genders, abilities, ethnicities, and cultures. As one young person interviewed put it, you “need to make sure that it doesn’t seem like they are the first person”

Young people are happy to share their story, and see benefits in reading the stories of others

The majority of young people we interviewed would be happy to share their story, telling us that they would see it as a weight off their shoulders and welcome the opportunity for others to learn from their experiences. Similarly, most young people said they would benefit from hearing stories from their peers. They said it would help them to shape their understanding of their own relationships, and if they were going through a similar experience, they would not feel like they were the only one.

Young people prefer content that is clear and bold, with a limited colour palette

In the interviews young people told us any design should be clear and bold, with lots of pictures, “neatly presented”, “charming” but not “comedic”. There was a split over whether bright or “neutral” colours were preferred, but most agreed that they preferred designs that featured only a small number of different colours.

Introduction

This report brings together learning from the project SafeLives and On Our Radar undertook with Comic Relief as part of their Tech vs Abuse programme. Through this project we aimed to better understand how young people (aged 13-18) in the UK considered, discussed, and responded to harmful behaviour within their romantic relationships. We also aimed to understand how young people might better engage with support, and who they were likely to disclose worries and issues to. We would then use this understanding to answer the following design challenge: **How might we use technology to help teenagers recognise that they or their friend are in an intimate abusive relationship?**

We know from our Spotlights report Safe Young Lives¹, that young people are often overlooked and underrepresented in the national discussion on domestic abuse. There is limited current research about the needs of those experiencing abuse in teenage romantic relationships. We wanted to address that and help to develop a new narrative that can inform the national conversation.

By combining storytelling and research methods we worked closely with young people in the UK to explore the different forms of harmful behaviour within their romantic relationships and ways in which they might seek support or disclose worries and incidents.

The 12 month project has been split into three phases: **discovery**, **development**, and **learning & evaluation**. Within the discovery phase we reflected on our own assumptions and knowledge gaps in this area and then worked to test these by listening directly to young people's opinions and understanding of relationships. The aim at the end of this phase was to have a set of concepts to be taken forward into the development phase of the project, during which we would design a tool or platform aimed at answering our design challenge.

Co-production

We started with no preconceived plan for what the final product would be. Authenticity was essential, and we were determined to work through the best practices around co-production. There are many benefits to involving young people in research, not just to the project, but also to the young people themselves. These benefits include being given a chance to give their views on something important to them as well as gaining new skills and experience². To succeed, the project had to be designed, voiced, and championed by young people for young people. We aimed to explore the experiences of all young people in intimate relationships – those including abuse and those without. To reach a group who may not identify

¹ <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20Young%20Lives%20web.pdf>

² <https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/PEAR%20guidelines.pdf>

the abuse in their relationships, we needed to go beyond the realm of charity sites and traditional advisory platforms and find a compelling gateway to start a conversation.

This project is led by the Young People Steering Group (YP Steering Group), a small team of young people who have directed much of the design, language and creativity of the project. Their role from the start has been to represent their own experiences and reflections and draw on their knowledge to inform the discovery phase and take a leading role through co-creation during the development phase and beyond.

Those taking part in interviews and workshops (see below) were invited to join the group. There were initially ten members through the discovery phase of the project, rising to 18 during development.

“ I just feel like nobody wants to listen to the youth.

Interviewee

To keep the group informed and engaged we utilised the messaging service WhatsApp. We wanted a tool that promoted communication where young people were, and so the YP Steering Group chose WhatsApp as it was an app they were all already using confidently. A group text conversation was set up. This allowed us to ask for thoughts or feedback quickly and easily from the group, while also meaning that the group members retained an autonomy as to when they would like to contribute and share their thoughts and reflections. The YP Steering Group fed back positively, saying it was easy to use as it was familiar, and they had a sense of autonomy as to whether they replied in the group or by personal message. The group were also able to use emojis to respond quickly without using words, e.g. using a thumbs up to agree.

Feedback from the YP Steering Group has been extremely positive, with members enjoying being a part of the project for a variety of reasons. For some, it was educational and a chance to learn new skills. Others said it was being able to raise awareness and help others.

“ A great opportunity to learn new skills and engage with different people from different backgrounds.

“ Being able to put my views forward and see other people's point of view. I really liked the workshops and activities we did in Bristol.

“ It's been educational and fun.

“ A confidence booster. Definitely made me more aware of certain situations.

“ *It’s been a good experience to raise awareness.*

“ *Being able to educate other young people about toxic relationships.*

“ *It’s been good it got a little confusing near the end but overall good.*

All quotes from members of the YP Steering Group

We are delighted with the direction the young people have taken this and the whole team is excited to see how the platform is used and evolves over the live deployment.

Consultation

The discovery phase utilised interviews, workshops, and surveys to gather the voices of young people that would inform our understanding of how young people (aged 13-18) in the UK considered, discussed, and responded to harmful behaviour within their romantic relationships. The following outlines the research methods chosen and the reasoning behind it.

Interviews

We conducted initial interviews with young people with the aim of exploring themes related to our research objectives. These included their understanding of healthy and unhealthy relationships, language and terminology and help seeking behaviour. As the design challenge involved the use of technology, we also aimed to understand their use of technology and engagement with digital services such as those used for communication.

Interviews were conducted by a researcher from SafeLives, who carried out 20 interviews with young people. Peer led interviews were considered. Peer interviewing is an increasingly popular tool used as part of participatory action research, in which the interviewer is someone from the same peer group as the interviewee, rather than a professional researcher³. Those using it have seen several benefits including enhanced comfort and rapport between the interviewer and interviewee, leading to richer data⁴. However, it was decided that due to the nature of the questions and the possible disclosures that could be made, a trained professional would be more appropriate. The researcher who undertook the

³ Harding R, Whitefield G, Stillwell N. Service users as peer research interviewers: why bother? In: Greener I, Holden C, Kilkey M, editors. Social Policy Review 22: Analysis and Debate in Social Policy. Bristol: Policy Press; 2010:317–335

⁴ Devotta K, Woodhall-Melnik J.R., Pedersen C, Wendaferew A, Dowbor T.P., Guilcher S.J., Hamilton-Wright S, Ferentzy P, Hwang S.W., Matheson F.I. Enriching qualitative research by engaging peer interviewers: A case study. Qual. Res. 2016 (Advanced Online). DOI: 10.1177/1468794115626244

interviews is a safeguarding expert with years of experience working with young people. The researcher held an enhanced DBS and met with the parents of each participant beforehand to discuss what the interview would cover and to answer any questions or queries.

To find young people willing to be interviewed we used a snowball sampling technique, making use of personal and professional networks. The researcher also contacted a local school developing a relationship with the Duke of Edinburgh award (DofE) lead. A gift voucher was provided as a thank you for taking part.

Participants were from a variety of geographical locations across England. While not covering all regions, we heard voices representing both rural and urban communities including Welsh border, Southampton, Liverpool, and West Mercia. Participants were all between 13 and 18 years old, 14 were female and six were male. Each interview was around an hour in length and were conducted at locations known and safe to the young people. Interview audio was recorded, and then transcribed for analysis.

The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed for a guided conversation in which the researcher was able to cover the main question topics while also giving flexibility for the participants to provide additional information and for the researcher to probe deeper where appropriate. Interview questions were broad, covering communication and technology, relationships, terminology and language, advice seeking and sharing personal stories.

Interview participants were offered the opportunity to join the YP Steering Group. For those that did not join, we kept in touch with those that wanted us to, providing results of the survey (see below) as well as sharing the platform with them.

Workshops

Workshops were carried out after the interviews, using similar areas of enquiry to determine if the core themes would be the same. We decided to do this via workshops as they allow for greater discussion as well as providing the opportunity for those involved to be creative.

Workshops were held in Bristol, Nottingham, and Birmingham with a total of 28 young people, both male and female, with a range of different backgrounds and experiences. These consisted of activities designed to both test our own assumptions and explore some of the themes that came out of the interviews. As with the interviews, gift vouchers were given to participants as a thank you for taking part.

The workshops were designed with the aim of empowering the participants to share their voice. The activities were carefully chosen to be explorative and also emotive, ensuring that those taking part had autonomy over what they shared. It was important that a safe space was created for their voices to be heard and respected.

In workshop 1 we ran an activity in which the young people were split into two groups and asked to place six example behaviours on a line ranging from healthy to unhealthy to toxic. They were then invited to provide their own example

behaviours that could apply to their own or their peers' relationships. A similar activity was completed in workshop 2, this time with a scale range of positive to not sure to negative. The scale was placed out on the floor and as behaviours were read out the young people were asked to move to where in the scale they thought that behaviour sat.

Other activities across the workshops included discussions focused on social media, language and assumptions, as well as the drawing of trust lines and an exercise in which the young people were asked to imagine a situation or remember a time when they had experienced or witnessed abuse and asked to draw a storyboard to show what might happen and who they would go to for support.

National Survey

While the workshops were diverse in certain demographics, such as age and sexuality, we needed to ensure we were capturing diversity across the UK. We worked alongside our YP Steering Group to develop a short interactive survey for young people to complete. The title of the survey, 'TalkAboutToxic', was also chosen by the YP Steering Group. It was available online, and shared via social media, as well as through known organisations and contacts to share across their networks. Launched on Valentine's day, it was available for 6 weeks until the 31st March 2020.

A total of 460 responses were analysed. We received responses from young people aged 13 to 18, with an average age of 15. Two thirds (68%) of respondents were female and a quarter (27%) were male. A small proportion (2%) of respondents did not describe themselves as male or female. There were a small proportion (3%) of respondents who described themselves as transgender. Three quarters (74%) of respondents identified as being straight, with 9% identifying as bisexual, 2% as lesbian and 2% as gay. A further 3% described themselves as having sexuality not listed. Less than one in ten (8%) said that they live with a disability, while a third (31%) had experienced periods of poor mental health. A small proportion (4%) said they were in or had an experience of being in care. Respondents were asked how they would define their ethnicity. This was a free text box, so respondents were able to record any answer they wished. The most common response given was White British (22%), followed by White (16%), British (12%) and English (4%). One in five (20%) respondents gave an ethnicity that could be described as black or minority ethnic (BME). A small proportion of respondents (7%) said that English was not their first language.

For more detailed findings of the survey see our separate report 'My Story Matters: #TalkaboutToxic survey results'⁵.

We present below the findings of our analyses of the data obtained throughout the project. First we discuss findings in relation to the language used by young people to describe relationships and abuse, then we move on to whether young people see certain behaviours as healthy or unhealthy, and where they would go to for help and support with their relationships. We then look at findings in relation to the power of storytelling, young people's use of technology and finally what methods of self-care they utilise to aid in their well-being and recovery.

⁵ <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Talk%20about%20toxic%20survey%20results%20Report.pdf>



Visual representation of a toxic relationship. Female, Aged 15
YP Steering Group member

Findings

Language used by young people to describe relationships

We set out to discover what language young people currently use to describe the relationships they are in. We also wanted to test our assumption that young people do not identify with the term domestic abuse, and if this were true, what words or phrases would they use in its place.

From the interviews we found that most young people use the terms boyfriend/girlfriend. However, for some this would come later in the relationship. When describing relationships, there were several phrases used that referred to different phases of a relationship such as “talking”, “seeing” and “checking”. This was backed up in one of the workshops, in which the word “linking” was mentioned. This is used to describe when two people are seeing and talking to each other romantically but are not yet in a relationship. It was also felt within the workshop that young people do not go on dates, rather they ‘meet up’.

Two interviewees specifically said they do not use the word partner. As an ungendered word, partner is frequently used to be inclusive of different relationships. However, if it is not a word that young people associate with their own relationships then its use should be avoided.

Interviewees could describe an unhealthy/abusive relationship, but few knew or used the term domestic abuse. When asked what they thought domestic abuse meant, most felt it referred to physical abuse. Some also thought that it only related to those older than them. One interviewee who did have a good understanding of domestic abuse told us that most of their peers would “just think it is a boy hitting a girl”.

“ I see it as a married couple, I don't really see it as anyone else, so someone physically abusing someone or loads of shouting, screaming, crying, stuff like that.

Interviewee

This was also seen in the results of the Talk about Toxic quantitative survey. Respondents were asked what words or phrases felt most appropriate to describe teen relationships that they thought might be unhealthy or harmful. The most common words chosen from the list provided were toxic (69%), controlling (61%) and manipulative (55%). The least common were coercive (24%), intimate partner violence (31%) and domestic violence (36%), all words commonly used within the sector and in statutory guidance.

Another important aspect of language that came up in many of the interviews was while it was important to use language that young people understand, it is equally important not to “dumb down” or simplify language, and therefore come across as patronising.

“ You can be talking about sexual situations and they'd be like 'in private times', no just say the words.

Interviewee

Young people's understanding of abusive behaviours

As part of the discovery phase of the project we also wanted to explore young people's understanding of abusive behaviours. In the interviews young people were asked what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like. When describing a good relationship, the most common characteristic mentioned was trust. Trust and being trustworthy was mentioned by nearly all of those asked. Other characteristics that the young people thought were important in a good relationship were understanding, honesty, support, and cooperation. One young person also described a good relationship as “treating them like you'd treat your best friend”.

For negative or unhealthy relationships, all of those that responded mentioned behaviours that were either controlling or psychologically abusive. These included being called names or being rude, controlling what you do or who you see, making you feel bad or degrading you, or being overprotective. Half of the respondents also mentioned physical abuse, also describing it as violence, or hitting someone.

“ It's negativity in a relationship so them either hitting you or calling you names, yeah calling you names or saying you can't and can do certain things, taking your phone away from you and stuff like that, and making you feel really bad.

Interviewee

Interestingly, one young person also felt that a bad relationship would be one that you went into for the wrong reason.

“ Being in a relationship because it makes you popular or because it gets you attention, or because it gets you social value or because people accept you then.

Interviewee

In the interactive sessions on relationship behaviours conducted as part of the workshops, we found there was not always agreement over what was believed to be healthy or unhealthy. In workshop 1 two groups completed the task independently from each other. One group had a definite idea of what they felt were toxic behaviours while there was a blur between what was healthy and what was unhealthy. Interestingly the other group had a clear split between behaviours they saw as healthy, and then a blur between what they saw as unhealthy or toxic.

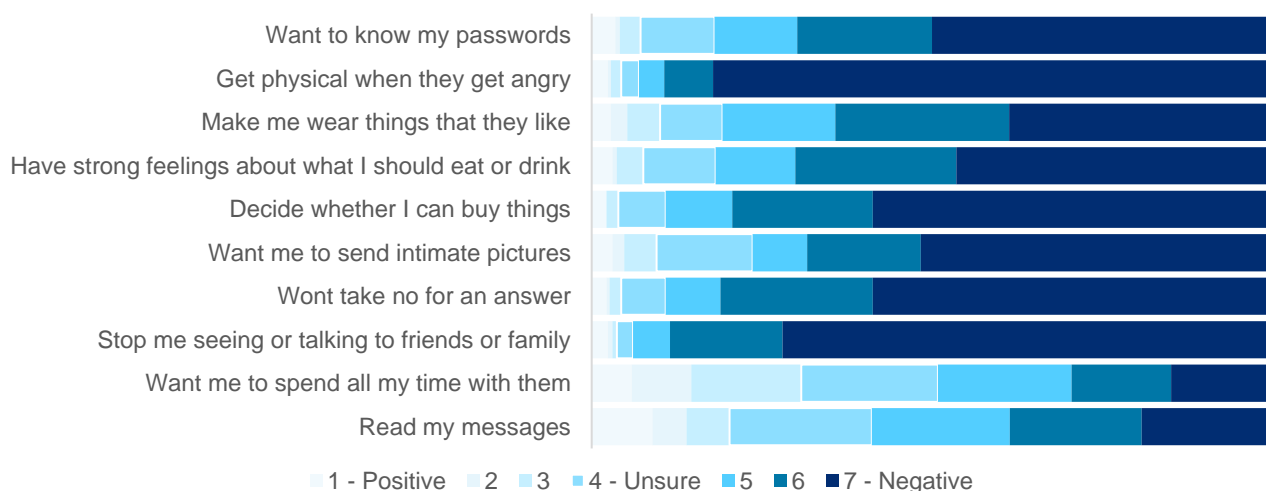
Both groups identified allowing personal space and independence as healthy behaviours. Other behaviours placed at the healthy end of the scale included feeling safe and respecting each other. There was some consensus that regularly 'worrying about your bf/gf leaving you' is healthy and a positive behaviour, as this

was equated with ‘caring about your relationship’. This points towards a quite normalized level of anxiety in young people, which could also be linked to controlling behaviour. Interestingly one group identified that as part of a healthy relationship you should be able to ‘share things with each other but also feel that you can keep some things private’ and then also said that having access to your boyfriend/girlfriend’s phone was a healthy behaviour, as restricting access was seen as a lack of trust or act of deception.

In the second workshop the groups were split by gender. There was consensus between the groups on what they felt to be positive behaviours. These included giving compliments, giving personal space, being able to share things but also keep things private, being able to talk about your feelings, and being protective but not possessive. There was one difference in that the boys all felt that doing things alone sometimes was a positive behaviour, whereas the majority of girls were unsure.

There was a general consensus on negative behaviours including constant anger, getting physical, manipulation, pressure and lack of privacy. However, there were some behaviours judged to be negative by all the boys, but all the girls were unsure. These included ‘your boyfriend or girlfriend not trusting you and checking your phone’, and ‘pressuring them to do something they aren’t comfortable with’. Although it should be noted that the girls were also asked about the behaviour ‘they won’t take no for an answer’ and to this all bar one said this was a negative behaviour. Across both groups there were behaviours that the young people were not sure about. More so for the girls, although this could be because the girls seemed less influenced by their peers’ decisions.

We also tested this in the Talk about Toxic survey. Respondents were given ten different negative behaviours potentially found within relationships and asked to rate them on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being positive and 7 being negative. For eight of the behaviours the most common score given was 7, showing that respondents felt these were negative behaviours. There were two behaviours where answers were more mixed for both males and females. These related to reading messages and wanting them to spend all their time together. For both behaviours there were slightly more answers around the unsure mark (score 4) (21% and 20% respectively) and both had the largest proportion of positive responses (score 1) (9% and 6% respectively).



“cos with a lot of relationships in high school they are just as fragile as the people that are in them.”

Interviewee

Where young people go for advice and support

We wanted to know where young people would go for advice or support, and who they would feel comfortable talking to about their own relationships. In the interviews, parents (particularly mum) and friends were most mentioned as someone that the young people would go to for advice. In one of the workshops there was a session on trust lines in which the young people were asked to draw themselves and add lines going out to the people in their lives that they trust. Again, parents and best friends were the most common chosen amongst both the girls and the boys.

The results of the Talk about Toxic survey agreed. When asked where they go for advice when they are not clear on what is healthy or not in a relationship, the most common answer was best friend, selected by two thirds (66%) of respondents. Family members were next with half (50%) of respondents selecting parent and a quarter (25%) saying they would go to a brother or sister. Only small percentages of respondents chose options outside of friends or family. Teacher was chosen by 15% and a member of a youth service was chosen by 12%.

“I feel like some young people don't care, they don't care until they're put in that situation but I feel like if they were put in that situation they'd want help because they'd want to know what to do and how to deal with it.”

Interviewee

In another workshop we discussed what you would want from your best friend if you were in a toxic relationship. Communication was important, with regular check-ups regardless of whether a response is sent. It was highlighted that SnapChat could be good for that as the conversations disappear. It was also suggested that songs or videos relating to their experience could be sent and then conversations could centre on that rather than about the individual's direct situation. Giving the person space to talk when they were ready was also important, as was not telling anyone else what had happened, but rather encouragement to talk to a trusted adult if needed.

We asked the YP Steering Group how they would describe a trusted adult and a good friend. Most felt that a trusted adult was someone who you could talk to, someone you could tell anything to. Two of the ten who responded felt that a trusted adult would not tell anyone what you have told them, while three felt that there may be times where the trusted adult would have to tell someone else, for example if safety was at risk. A trusted adult was also seen as someone who doesn't judge, who understands you and respects your decisions. Also, as someone who gives advice on what to do, will **get help** when needed and have your best interest at heart. A good friend was described by most as someone who would **support you** and is always there for you. Someone who is loyal and will always have your back.

Trusted
Adult



Good
Friend



The power of storytelling

Our assumption at the start of the project was that young people want to tell their story, people will react positively to others sharing their story, and that it may promote positive action.

In the Talk about Toxic survey we asked if any respondents would be willing to share their story with us. Out of the 460 responses, 20 young people shared a story. Most stories were from female respondents (75%), with one story from a male (5%) and one story from someone who gave their gender as other (5%). Those providing stories were a mix of ages, with 55% aged 13-15 and 45% aged 16-18. Two in five (40%) stories were from someone who identified as straight, while four (20%) were from someone who described themselves as bisexual and one (5%) as lesbian.

“ I thought we were in love and dating so went along with anything he wanted.

Survey respondent

Two thirds (65%) of the stories were about their own relationships, with three (15%) describing abuse within the family home and two (10%) telling us about a relationship their friend was in. The most common type of abuse within the stories was sexual (30%), while two (10%) told us of physical abuse. Young people also shared stories of coercive and controlling behaviours, using words such as manipulated/ive (20%), controlling (15%), coercion (5%) and emotional blackmail (5%).

“ it gave me panic attacks and every time I see him I feel like I can't breathe.

Survey respondent

When asked about sharing their story in the interviews, most of the young people taking part said they would be happy to share their story. One described it as potentially being “a weight off your chest” while another similarly described it as taking “a weight off your shoulders”. Others said that by sharing it then it may give an opportunity to someone with the same problem to learn from it.

“ I just wanna have my voice heard and people listen to me

Interviewee

“ I guess it's kind of like relief, that you're not hiding anything. If it's something that you have kept, then...it's just kind of gone and it's like a weight off your chest

Interviewee

“ I think it would be helpful cos I think if you put your story out there then it would help more kids if they read it and understand it then it might help them come out if they're feeling that way

Interviewee

Some were less sure, saying it would depend on the context. Reservations included “people are gonna wanna know...every last detail” and that “people don’t know other parts of your life around it”.

“ I feel like if you share your story people are gonna wanna know details. Like every last detail and sometimes you don't remember them or you don't want to remember them details

Interviewee

They were then asked how they would feel reading other people’s stories. Again, most young people interviewed saw this as a positive thing to do. Knowing that other young people had gone through similar experiences was seen as **empowering**, and a way of feeling part of something, rather than alone. The young people interviewed also highlighted the educational aspects of sharing stories, learning from the experiences of others, and helping to shape their understanding of what is happening in their own relationships.

“ Well if you were reading other stories it might make you feel less alone, like you're not the only one going through stuff.

Interviewee

“ I think it would help me understand problems if I know people have gone through the same thing.

Interviewee

“ People might wanna hear it to know the signs, the signs that you ignored they might want to know them just in case to learn from your mistakes.

Interviewee

“ So for me I've been through it and I know what it's like, so almost if I were to watch it, it would be 'there are other people out there' and it makes me feel very...part of something.

Interviewee

Another benefit brought up by two of those interviewed was **relatability**. The interviews suggest that more young people would engage with the stories if they involved real people their own age.

“ *Yes definitely if it's relatable I'd say that more people are going to read it cos they can easily imagine themselves in their shoes or wherever.*

Interviewee

In terms of any barriers to sharing their story, the main issues that came up revolved around anonymity and judgement. **Anonymity was important.** One young person highlighted that friends and family may not know and it could be difficult and upsetting explaining the details to them. Another highlighted issues if the abusive partner were to read it.

When asked about the ability to leave comments on the stories, those being interviewed were either unsure or against it. Those that were unsure could see the benefits of receiving positive messages but were concerned about the impact negative comments could have. Some suggested the comments could be optional or moderated to remove anything potentially harmful.

“ *it's not a piece of art that is to be critiqued, on the internet they're not going to critique it nicely, there'll be a few people out there who go 'Oh that's really sad that you've gone through that', I think perhaps maybe a way of messaging that person but it goes through someone first, or something first, to make sure it isn't a harmful thing.*

Interviewee

In the appendix we have included some of the stories submitted by young people. These include those shared via the Talk about Toxic survey as well as some that were submitted by users of the platform.

Young people's use of technology

A key part of our design challenge was the use of technology. We wanted to ensure that any product we designed would be used by as many young people as possible, and so we asked about their use of technology, and what draws them to particular online content.

At the end of workshop 1 we held a concluding session in which we asked the young people to define the mandate for what they would most like to gain from an app or online platform. This would help us to narrow down the design scope based on what the young people themselves wanted from the project. Three questions were developed and then voted on by the young people taking part.

How can I confidently be on my own?

Where's the line?

How to help a friend?

The most popular question with seven votes was 'Where's the line?', by which they wanted to know what behaviours or actions would differentiate a healthy relationship to an unhealthy or toxic relationship. Second was 'How to help a friend' with five votes and third was 'How can I confidently be on my own' which received two votes.

Respondents to the Talk about Toxic survey were given similar design options and asked which they would prefer to see. Half (51%) of respondents chose 'help understanding what is OK and not OK in a relationship', a third (31%) chose 'advice on getting out of a relationship that feels unsafe' and 18% chose 'guidance on what to do if you see a friend is being harmed by a relationship.'

Splitting responses by gender shows the same pattern for both male and female respondents although the proportion of males who would prefer help understanding what is and is not okay is greater than the proportion of girls (63% compared to 46%). Over a third (35%) of females would prefer advice on getting out of an unsafe relationship, which compared to less than a quarter (22%) of males.

In the interviews with young people we discussed how they currently use technology. The questions were about general use, to discover what technology is used, what it is used for, and for how long. Most screen time is spent on a phone, with other devices (iPads, laptops, PCs) mainly used for homework or study. Estimated screen time per day ranged from just under an hour to all day, with most between 4-6 hours, mostly after school or evening.

The most common apps used for communication with friends were Instagram, SnapChat, and WhatsApp. When asked why they had chosen a particular app, the most common reason given was because most of their friends were using it.

We wanted to know what draws young people to particular online content, so that we could use the insight gathered to design a product that would be engaging to young people. In the interviews young people told us any design should be clear and bold, with lots of pictures, "neatly presented", "charming" but not "comedic". There was a split over whether bright or "neutral" colours were preferred, but most agreed that they preferred designs that featured only a small number of different colours.

“ Make it clear, make it bold, make it easily understood cos I like reading but I think lots of people my age wouldn't want to just sit there and read for ages when they just want a quick and easy help guide.

Interviewee

When they have a specific question, young people want to get to the answer straight away, they don't want to have to go looking for it.

Of the 15 interviews analysed, slightly more would prefer to watch videos (seven) compared to read text (four). Five of those interviewed either mentioned or were asked if they prefer to see real people in videos or animation. Again, there was a split with three saying animation and two real people, with some on both sides saying strongly they would not watch the other, the actors being "cringy" and animation being "distracting" or "boring". When asked how long a video should be, the majority said no more than 5-10 minutes.

The young people told us that any content needs to be diverse, not just in terms of identities but also experience - it also needs to be inclusive, not split out by sexuality or any other identity.

“ *you need to make sure that it doesn't seem like they're the first person.*

Interviewee

Self-care

Self-care is an important aspect of recovery, and we wanted to explore with young people what do to look after their own wellbeing. Self-care was evident in some of the storyboards put together by the young people in workshop 2. It was seen particularly in those completed by the girls in the group, who included hugs, comfort food and taking friends out to distract them as suggestions of how to respond to abuse. This suggested that there was a sense that self-care is key to recovery.

Respondents of the Talk about Toxic survey were asked what they did for self-care. This was an open question, and the comments received were extremely varied. Comments were coded into 15 categories, the most common of which was relaxing (27%) which included sleeping, having a bath or some form of pampering or skin care. Watching something (22%) was also popular, as was listening to music (19%), eating/drinking (13%), exercise (10%) and gaming (7%).

Interestingly, one in five (18%) would talk. Most people that talked would do so with their friends (43%) or with one particular friend (9%). Family was also common (33%), which included parents (11%), mum (6%) and dad (1%). A small proportion would talk to someone they trust (4%).

Conclusion

We have found that young people do not associate themselves or their peers with the term domestic abuse. Instead they would recognise terms such as harmful or toxic. The least common were coercive, intimate partner violence, and domestic violence, all words commonly used within the sector and in statutory guidance. If services or practitioners want to include young people, for example in awareness campaigns, then it is vital that inclusive language is used.

Young people are often unsure where the line is between what is healthy in a relationship and what is not. This is particularly true of behaviours revolving around technology such as mobile phone access and location tracking. Young people were also unsure with more subtle controlling behaviours such as being dependent on your partner or their partner wanting to spend all of their time with them. Any educational material designed for young people should have at least some focus on these behaviours.

If young people do want help or advice with their relationships, they are unlikely to ask a professional and will instead look to their friends or family for support. Online and social media, while used for a significant proportion of the day for both entertainment and communication, are not natural places for relationship advice. This gives an opportunity to 'fill a gap' and create an informative space that is more relevant and appealing to this group.

Young people see the power of sharing their story, highlighting the benefits to them of having a weight taken off their shoulders as well as having the opportunity for others to learn from their experiences, and in turn learn from each other. For young people, knowing stories came from their peers made them more relatable and engaging. While young people should feel empowered to share, they also highlighted the importance of anonymity when doing so.

With these findings we were able to create well informed concept ideas to take through the development phase of the project. These concepts were refined alongside our YP Steering Group until we arrived at our final product, a digital platform that would enable young people to hear directly from other young people, anonymously, and learn from each other's real life experiences in order to better define and identify harmful behaviours. An interactive function invited users to draw a line through behaviour they believed toxic, and then toggle to see how other young people had interacted with that story and, critically, where safeguarding leads drew the line and why.

Appendix

The following are some of the stories shared with us. Please note some of the stories contain detail that may be experienced as distressing or traumatising to some audiences.

I'm 16 and my boyfriend only lets me talk to the 2 friends he approves of, makes me tell him exactly where I am at all times and call him god. I'm not allowed to text anyone but him and I can only wear clothes he chooses for me. If I don't, he puts me down and imposes various punishments and doesn't let me leave my house to see anyone, including him. I can't even post anything online without his approval, he controls my weight, my makeup and what music I can listen to.

I was 15 and he was 15. We were together for 2 years, got engaged and everything was perfect... when my family were around. He would shout at me and swear at me if I did something wrong. If I spoke to others he would complain and tell them its none of their business. He cheated on me a few times and when I called him up on it he'd bring up times I was drunk and where people forced me to do things and made me feel small.

I met my friends when I was nervous to go out alone due to being harassed. He found us and shouted in my face, humiliating me. He threatened to hit me. I did as I was told and went to where he was and he shouted "you never try hard enough". I was in love and didn't know any better. When he stayed at mine he always wanted to have sex. He'd guilt trip me until I said yes. I got severely depressed. I'm out of that relationship and in a new one and I've realised how toxic the relationship was. I'm still fighting depression but I'm much happier in myself.

I really liked him, I knew he didn't feel the same, I tried to be perfect. He would only meet up if he wanted sex, he used to be forceful and would make me do things. I thought if I did what he said even when I was frightened of him he might like me back. I haven't seen him in 7 months but the things he did still play in my mind. I am now in a happy healthy relationship and I understand what love and care really is. You shouldn't be forced or feel obliged to do as he says just because you want him to like you.

Me and my boyfriend had a loving relationship until he wanted to have sex but I wasn't ready. I told him I was because I thought he'd leave me if I didn't. When we were about to I stopped it and said I felt uncomfortable. He kept trying until I pushed him off. He said he didn't love me anymore and he never wanted to come over again. I broke up with him that evening and he would cry to me begging for me back but then said only if we had sex. I declined. Previously he'd been angry that I hadn't sent nudes.

I was dating this person and we started facetimeing and once I fell asleep and I woke up and he was watching me and taking photos. I felt so uncomfortable and I ended the relationship but we were both at the same school. He started chasing me trying to kiss me when I said no.

I had a boyfriend who would accidentally hit me and spend all his time with other girls and say they were just friends. He always wanted me to spend time with him and not my friends. Whenever he was stressed or annoyed he took it out on me but whenever we were with friends he would be nice and caring. He's yelled at me before so I got scared and ran off and he then grabbed my waist and refused to let me go and got in my face and told me off for running away from him. He always pressured me into doing things that I didn't want to do.

Last year on my way home from school I stopped by the shops to get my boyfriend presents for his birthday. I turned my location off on Snapchat beforehand to make it a surprise. He got suspicious as to where I was and began shouting thinking that I was doing something bad behind his back, he never believed that I was just getting him his birthday presents... It was my fault for making him suspicious in the first place I guess but he would also limit my contact with people because he didn't like me being around them...

I'm a girl who is 16. I realised I didn't like boys while dating one - when I tried to break the news to him, he told me I was wrong, that maybe I liked girls, but I HAD to like boys because we had done "stuff". I was scared and he was a year and a half older than me, taller than me, and I honestly thought he would hurt me if I tried to leave, given the ways he had acted before (grabbing my wrists, pulling me about, he hit me a few times). It took me a really long time to get away from him, I dated him for nearly 2 years out of fear.

When we were in the car I was alone with him, and when he was annoyed he would drive way over the limit and refuse to talk to me, one time he pulled over to fix a tyre and I was ready to run in case he did something. He made out like it was my fault for upsetting him. I eventually left him and got counselling.

I started dating this guy and he insisted on paying for everything. He would buy me things and take me on expensive dates. He started to belittle me, make me feel bad about my body and compare me to other women as a 'joke'. We would argue and he would apologise but continue doing it. He told me what to wear when we were going out. When I tried to leave he said I should feel bad about all the money he had spent on me. He got his friends to message me after I blocked his number

When I got with this lad, he was amazing but after a month, he started to guilt trip me. He made fun of what I did to remember my dad who passed away when I was little. He also unconsensually touched me on numerous occasions, when I said stop, he carried on. He made me lose all my friends as he said I couldn't have any as it'd ruin mine and his relationship. It really hurt me mentally and physically. Once he hit me around my face and made me cry. I'm now scared to get in another relationship in case it happens again

I was 12 when I got with my boyfriend, we were going to the same school. He started saying sexual things to me (he was also 12) and said "if you don't feel the same, we may need some time apart." I really loved him and told him I felt the same. He is kind of controlling but I don't really mind because he says he is only doing it because he loves me the way I am and doesn't want me to change, so he says that if I do things like wear makeup or dye my hair, he will dump me. I do as he says so that we can stay together and be happy.

I was 14, he was 16. I had other friends outside of the relationship, and any time I didn't hang out with him, he'd get mad and say stuff like "you love me right?" so I'd hang out with him. he'd constantly ask to "do stuff", and sometimes I just wasn't in the mood to do anything or at least I was uncomfortable, but if I said I didn't want to, he'd ignore me in his bedroom for hours, so I'd just sit there in silence until I gave in. He'd constantly pressure me saying things like "don't you love me? then do it"

He knew me for my entire life. When I was fourteen he started making advances, he was five years older. I liked the attention, and went along with it, and my parents didn't mind because our families were friends. He bought me things and was so nice to me, but now and then he'd get angry. It would be little things like spilling a drink, he would start yelling and swearing. After he would pretend it never happened, and went back to being nice. It was unpredictable, I became terrified of doing the slightest thing wrong.

He was my first, he constantly pursued me, telling me he loved me and he couldn't handle my rejection so I gave in and dated him, I fell for him straight away. He had another gf the whole time, broke up w me for her after a few months while using me for my body while he was with her. When I found out he begged for me back, telling me he's gonna kill himself. He went thru my phone and called/texted me nonstop till I answered or he'd turn up to my house. When I told his family he tried to turn it on me, telling them I was the one cheating on him.

I ended up calling the police after I broke up with him as he kept threatening me and my friends. The police turned up to his house and told him to leave me alone, a couple days later he was round the corner of my guy friend's house waiting for him and me, yelling at me from across the street.

He went through my phone and called/texted me nonstop till I answered or he'd turn up to my house if I didn't. Our entire relationship he controlled me, not letting me meet any of my friends without his consent or even hang out with my family especially if I already had plans with him or if he wanted plans. He always had to be with me or texting/calling me.

My boyfriend and I are in a long distance relationship. He says that I should always make sure that I cover my shoulders, don't show my legs and wear modest clothing. He doesn't want me speaking to any boys at school either and would like me to send pictures of what I wear so he can approve it before I leave the house. I love him though, and he says it's because he doesn't want boys staring and that he doesn't want to lose a good thing (me).

When I was 17 I got involved with a lad my age. He initially was sweet and kind. But he tried to distance me from my friend, saying that they disliked him and was trouble. I loved him so I did what he wanted. I started to miss college as he wanted to spend all his time with me. He'd wait outside college on breaks. When we went out he'd watch me constantly, I couldn't talk to another boy and on some occasions anyone at all! He made me feel stupid.

At the start everything was amazing getting to know each other, we got our own flat thinking we've found the one. One day everything changed and I was beaten up on a daily basis. I got back with him after splitting up and things didn't change; I got made to do things I didn't want to do. I was only allowed one meal a day which put me to 6 1/2 stone at 18. I lost family and friends for staying. I was scared but didn't want to show it. I've been out this relationship a month. The police are now dealing with the case.

He was everything I thought I wanted - kind, caring, loving, gave me everything I wanted. He treated me like an adult, I felt like a princess. It began to go down hill so fast. He would force me to do things to him, then he would tell me what I can wear, who I can go out with. I wasn't allowed to meet my friends. He wouldn't allow me to go on the pill or use any protection. He shouted in my face and one day he pushed me. He said "it was a joke" but he broke my shoulder.

I had a boyfriend and we would kiss and cuddle but we would ask each other before anything started. One day he asked if he could kiss me, I said no but he did it anyway. He said I said yes, but I know I didn't.

I had a long distance relationship. I was 15 he was 17. It was fine until he started trying to convince me to send pictures of myself, telling me he'd keep asking until I did and saying that if he were with me in real life I wouldn't be able to stop him from getting what he wanted. I left him and he would always try to guilt trip me, manipulate my friends into hating me and trying to get into my accounts. Thankfully I've been rid of him for 2 years now with no more random appearances

I started to feel trapped. We broke up, he kept contacting me upset, we ended up back together. I was scared to say how I felt, and spent my time reassuring him. It got to the point that he was convinced I was going to cheat on him, so would track my phone, get angry if I didn't respond to messages or spent my time with other people. He wouldn't even let me walk on the pavement with another person if he was there. I finally plucked up enough courage to break up with him, as I realised I was miserable and it was controlling.

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