



What does *healthy* look like?

Starting conversations with young people about relationships

Hello!

- We are SafeLives, a UK-wide charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse, for everyone and for good.
- We want to make sure that everyone working with young people feels confident starting conversations about relationships and that the right support is there when a young person is worried.
- We're going to talk about when young people might need help, where they might look for support and what they might need from you.

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SafeLives Voice of Men & Boys Research 2019

In Summer 2019, SafeLives gathered the voices and perspectives of men and boys aged 11 and over, asking them about abuse, masculinity and what a 'healthy' relationship looks like

A survey was distributed as widely as possible via social media, external stakeholders, friends and family. A total of 1,158 responses were used in the analysis

SafeLives researchers then spoke to 9 respondents who wished to share their views and experiences.

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Awareness and Attitudes – what did we find?

- 95% of men who completed the survey agreed they were confident they knew what domestic abuse is, with 54% strongly agreeing
- Men completing the survey felt that domestic abuse is a major issue in society, with 49% strongly agreeing with the statement and 38% agreeing
- Men were also asked if they agreed that domestic abuse can seriously impact a person's mental and emotional health and 87% strongly agreed with this statement.

Awareness and Attitudes – what did we find?

- 28% of Respondents said they had demonstrated behaviour within a relationship that they regretted

64% of these relationships occurred between the ages of 16 and 29. When comparing to the age of respondents, we see that two thirds of these relationships were historic, while 13% were current.

- When asked how the behaviour affected them, the most common answers were that they felt bad about it (83%), they felt shame or embarrassment (57%), they felt less respect for themselves (55%), they felt down (43%) and the behaviour scared them (38%).

Awareness and Attitudes – what did we find?

- 64% of men and boys agreed with the statement:

“Society tells us men should be tough and that 'real men' don't cry”

- 84% of men and boys agreed with the statement:

“Society's view of masculinity can have a negative effect on the mental health of men and boys”

- 23% of men and boys agreed with the statement:

“Traditional gender roles improve family values”

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Awareness and Attitudes – what did we find?

“As a young man, I never understood relationships, so it was just... like, in wildlife... just like... as many girls as you can have – breed as many... have as many kids... that was the mentality, like, having as many different baby mothers as... as... and just enjoy your life...but then, as I got a bit more mature, and started to realise, like, what would it actually be like to settle down with someone and be 100% for real with them, there, which... it's... it's... in society how I was born, it wasn't the... erm... cool thing to do – it was unheard of!”

Awareness and Attitudes – what did we find?

“When it comes to relationships earlier on, there was much more of an expectation of what the other party should give, and what I deserve, as opposed to now – growing up a little bit more – you realise that actually, erm... which... it’s much more on compromise, and care for each other, and allowing people to be who they want to be.”

Awareness and Attitudes – further research

Masculinity

- Cultural standards of masculinity can result in men and boy's perception of violence and harassment. A study exploring gender-based violence with youths aged 14 – 22 found it to be a complex set of connections between power, violence and love.
- Male teenagers suggested they would use violence to maintain power and were often unsure of the boundaries between playing, harassment and abuse, whereas females reported they often saw the use of violence as a reflection of their love (McLeod, Jones and Cramer, 2015).
- Men and boys subscribe to these social norms and if they do not meet the standards expected, it can lead to stress, anxiety and negative emotions such as anger, therefore displays of aggression is one way of gaining back their social dominance (Banyard et al, 2019).

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Awareness and Attitudes – further research

Harmful Sexual Behaviours – Pre-adolescents

- Harmful Sexual Behaviours (HSB) is a term used to describe developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour which is displayed by children and young people and which may be harmful or abusive (Hackett 2014).
- A UK study found two-thirds of contact sexual abuse of children and young people (CYP) was committed by other CYP.
- Pre-adolescent children's behaviour may be viewed as problematic rather than abusive. These children may have been victims of abuse or exposed to age-inappropriate sexual experiences such as pornography.
- HSB in pre-adolescents can also be an indirect response to early trauma and neglect (McNeish, Scott and Research, 2018).

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Awareness and Attitudes – further research

Harmful Sexual Behaviours – Adolescents

- More males display HSB than females and it is suggested it is highly likely to happen in the early teenage years.
- Sometimes it can be an isolated incident and can be problematic as opposed to intentionally abusive.
- It is suggested young people who commit sexually abusive acts may have their own difficulties such as experiencing physical or sexual abuse, neglect, experiencing domestic abuse within their homes, lack of positive male role models or having parents with mental health or substance misuse issues.
- Adolescents who commit peer-on-peer abuse may show higher levels of anti-social behaviours and delinquency (McNeish, Scott and Research, 2018).

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Awareness and Attitudes – further research

Young People's Relationships

- Nearly 75% of girls and 50% of boys have reported some sort of emotional abuse by a partner
- 33% of girls and 16% of boys reported some form of sexual abuse.
- 25% of girls (the same proportion as adult women) and 18% of boys reported some form of physical abuse in an intimate relationship.
- Most commonly reported forms of emotional abuse, irrespective of gender, were 'being made fun of' and 'constantly being checked up on by partner'.
- Younger participants (aged 13 to 15 years old) were as likely as older adolescents (aged 16 and over) to experience some forms of relationship abuse.
- Risk factors which may increase a teenager's susceptibility to relationship abuse can include previous experiences of parental domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse and violent peer groups

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(NSPCC and the University of Bristol 2009).

Help Seeking - What did we find?

- 59% of men said they would know where to seek help if they or someone they knew were in an abusive or unhealthy relationship.
 - 19% said they would not
- When asked where they would get help:
 - 84% said a domestic abuse service
 - 69% said the police
 - 55% said a family or relative
- For those aged under 20:
 - 80% would tell a family member or relative

Help Seeking – what did we find?

- When asked “Who would you talk to if you weren’t sure your relationship was healthy?” young people said:
- 66% would talk to their best friend
- 50% would talk to their parent
- 25% would talk to a sibling
- 15% would talk to their teacher

Talk about Toxic Survey (2020)

Help Seeking – what did we find?

- Trust is vital to young people when deciding where, or if, to seek support.
- This was seen particularly in our work on violence affecting young people. Here young people we spoke to highlighted a youth worker as someone who they would likely go to for support.
- Youth workers were seen as trustworthy, and someone from the community who understands what the young person is going through, potentially because they have been through it themselves. Youth workers were also seen to be removed from the statutory services/process, and so it was felt there would be less chance of a negative consequence to disclosure.

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Help Seeking – further research

- We must be careful not to stigmatise young people as sex offenders if we are to help them manage HSB and reduce the likelihood of the young person reoffending.
- Responses should be proportionate with the HSB displayed and take into context the young person's age, developmental stage and their whole situation.
- Young people are likely to seek help from friends, but the response can be counter-productive, e.g. if friends do not recognise the abusive behaviours, or may see controlling behaviours as a sign of love.
- Peer group behaviour has been identified as a strong influence on behaviour in intimate relationships, both positive and negative.
- Bystander intervention research has highlighted that young people are less likely to intervene in a friend's intimate relationship, particularly if the abuse is severe.

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Five Key Things to Remember

- Think about **language**
- Consider your **approach**
- Build the **relationship**
- See the **whole person**
- Understand the role of **peers**

Think about language

- Is it inclusive?
- Not judgemental
- Not victim blaming or labelling
- Relatable and jargon-free
- Allow young people to use their own terms

Consider your approach

- Should be education or information-based, rather than based on judgement
- Take into account the young person's identity or background
- Ensure it is culturally sensitive/competent
- Tailored to the individual young person
- Flexible in terms of structure, timescales etc

Build the relationship

- Think about the role of trust in the work we do
- Takes time, need to work at their pace
- Must be led by the young person
- Consider what activities they enjoy and start there
- Model congruence, transparency and clear boundaries
- Clear around confidentiality and disclosures

See the whole person

- Consider the context of their current situation and early experiences
- Behaviour and attitudes are connected to sources of influence – what is their ‘normal’? Why?
- Link to contextual safeguarding
- Is safeguarding possible if they disclose risk of harm?

Role of peers

- Peers can be a source of support as well as of risk
- We can work with groups to build culture of challenging harmful attitudes and behaviours, encouraging bystanders to intervene when safe and appropriate
- Working with groups may allow us to connect with young people that will not engage with us 1:1
- Allows us to build understanding that we are someone it would be safe to approach, if a young person needed to talk

Key points to remember

- Use a trauma-informed approach and understand that although behaviour may not be seen as right, it is the behaviour that has become normalised in that young person's world.
- Trusting relationships and creation of safe spaces can facilitate space for honest conversations about behaviour and feelings is vital. Normalise talking about feelings, boys and young men especially may not feel it is ok for them to do that.
- Be clear about confidentiality and what you will do with information shared by the young person.
- Understand that negative or challenging behaviours are often a trauma response. Initiate conversations to find out what is happening with the young person rather than asking why they did a particular thing.

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References

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